

# Spell of Fire and Darkness

## Yefim Maizel directs “Il Trovatore” in Kazan

Anna Naumova 10/12/2015



*“Baptized with the baptism of fire ...”* Alexander Blok

An American director staged “Il Trovatore” in Kazan last week. By strange circumstances, the September 25th premiere in Kazan coincided with the premiere of the same opera at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Although the budgets of these performances are not at all comparable, comparing them in other ways may be quite appropriate.

### **A Russian American**

The Tatar Academic Opera and Ballet Company opened the new season at the M. Jalil Theater traditionally – with the premiere of a new production. This time it was “Il Trovatore” by Verdi, directed by Yefim Maizel with sets by Viktor Gerasimenko. While the famous Russian set designer Gerasimenko needs no introduction, it is necessary to introduce Mr. Maizel.

Yefim Maizel graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, but soon immigrated to the United States. He truly proves that we achieve that to which we dare to aspire. Maizel was not going to work just anywhere and thus join the ranks of unpromising immigrants.

### **A goal to work at the Metropolitan Opera**

Mr. Maizel set a goal to work at the New York Metropolitan Opera, and over time, made it happen, taking on the role of assistant stage director there. Showing his experience in both Russia and New York, the “Il Trovatore” production in Kazan is tightly organized and yet blended with classic elements of the Russian psychological school. By the way, Maizel is not entirely content with the role of an assistant--he has directed more than enough of his own productions in the New World.

When asked his interpretation of the “Il Trovatore” production in Kazan, Maizel replied quite specifically, “We cannot respond to evil with evil; we must interrupt generational chains of revenge and violence.”



Respectfully treating the original source, Yefim Maizel allowed himself only one small liberty, transferring the setting of the story to the end of the nineteenth century. Everything else is as originated by the composer and as written in the libretto. It

should be noted that it is a very complicated libretto, but in Kazan's "Il Trovatore" there is no sense of this complexity.

### **The production is extremely clear and logical**

In this particular case, the vision of the stage director is supported by Vasily Valitov, the production's Music Director, on loan from the "New Opera" in Moscow. Valitov interprets Verdi's score with maximum drama, wonderfully blended with the traditional beauty of the melodies.

Valitov's pathway was smooth. The orchestra, headed by Principal Conductor Renat Salavatov, is in great shape. The Kazan theater produced "Il Trovatore" with another director in 2010, and so the material is well known to theater musicians. Thus, from the first minute of this performance, the music unfolds effortlessly, capturing the audience with its drama.

### **The mysticism of the Fates**

Yefim Maizel and Victor Gerasimenko created a beautiful and mysterious production. On stage, in addition to the traditional characters of the libretto, roam two shadows - that of the deceased Count di Luna, and that of a gypsy woman burnt alive at the stake. The opera begins with the woman wandering on the edges of a barely lit stage; we do not see her face, we do not even know who she is.



The unknown figure makes its way to the center of the stage, and the audience startles from a deafening scream. Synchronized with the scream, an immense video projection of a fire appears on the backdrop with a terrifying figure “dancing” in pain and despair -- a gypsy woman being burnt alive.

### **Shadows and crimes from the past haunt the living**

An invisible flame is burning the life of the innocent Leonora (Anna Printseva, a silvertongued soprano, is better known in Europe than Russia); Count di Luna Jr. (Evez Abdullah) is plunged into the abyss of dark revenge; Manrico (George Oniani) is torn between his love for Leonora and duty to his mother. Manrico’s mother, the gypsy Azucena (Dina Khamzina), is the daughter and psychological double of the burned gypsy, much as Count di Luna is the corollary of his own father.

The fates of the heroes are mystically intertwined. Count di Luna and Manrico are actually brothers, unrecognized and unknown to each other. They are both attracted to Leonora and separated by Azucena. Leonora is the innocent victim of fate as is Manrico, who is ultimately living someone else’s life.

### **Victor Gerasimenko created concise and effective scenery**



Whether the outlines of a Gothic castle, or the church where Leonora is about to take monastic vows, the visual expression is done in dark tones, as if to deliberately emphasize the tragedy. And it is a tragedy that has been going on for the lifetimes of the heroes: from the moment the gypsy was engulfed by flames at the stake and the son of Count di Luna was kidnapped. The bitter taste of revenge visually fills the air.

However, sometimes the dark imagery is dramatically broken and the stage fills with the red light of fire, a reminder of the distant episode which became the starting point of this tragic history. The masterful video projections were done by Daniel Gerasimenko.

### **Without Angels**

Yefim Maizel juxtaposes two worlds and two ideologies in this production. On one hand is the cruelty and rigidity of Count di Luna representing the established order. On the other is the poetry and free world of the gypsies, now embraced by Manrico. Di Luna is a hostage of retaliation. Manrico is free, he can create, and he can give Leonora the true love she desires.



Both performers of the roles of Manrico do not deserve any criticism vocally, but Giorgi Oniani is less artistic than the second performer of the same role, Ahmed Agadi. Yefim Maizel's dramatic vision requires a more organic expression on stage.

### **As always, in this Verdi opera, the chorus is extremely important**

One of the many strong points of the Kazan Opera is the excellent chorus, led by Lyubov' Draznina. In "Il Trovatore", the chorus members are never static, and each singer is playing a role. After all, Maizel is a representative of the St. Petersburg stage director's school. There, it is considered an important goal to have the chorus, as a collection of unique individuals, characterize and carry the major themes of the production.

The last decade and a half for the TGAT Opera and Ballet Theatre has been marked by very strong directorial work both in ballet and in opera. But the production of Yefim Maizel probably stands slightly apart from the other super successful productions. Perhaps the uniqueness is because of the combination of both the Russian psychological school of stage direction, where the character is perfectly developed both vocally and dramatically, and of the ironclad logic of story development, characteristic of the West.

### **"Il Trovatore" is a successful synthesis**

"Il Trovatore" is a successful synthesis of the stage director's musical interpretation and theatrical ideas, plus a successful selection of artists for all roles. Performers had fresh voices and strong acting ability.

Kazan's "Il Trovatore" leaves a somewhat dark aftertaste. When you come out of the auditorium, the story of these people, so affected by the spell of fire and darkness in their souls, does not leave us alone. One thinks about it later and for a very long time. And that is very valuable in the theater.

Perhaps someone will consider it a paradox, but Kazan's "Il Trovatore" can really and truly be put next to the same program at the Metropolitan Opera, which later I succeeded in watching as a recording.

And let's repeat ourselves: with equal artistic merits, these productions are very different in budgets. Well, just fundamentally different. But anything can happen in Russia ...

