

Lillian Groag's *The Magic Fire at the Shaw Festival*: an unusually perceptive piece

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The Magic Fire, by Lillian Groag, directed by Jackie Maxwell, at the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, June 11 to October 8

Ontario's Shaw Festival, founded in 1962, has traditionally performed the works of its namesake, George Bernard Shaw, as well as others written during his lifetime. In 2000, the festival's mandate was expanded to include plays set during the lengthy 1856-1950 Shaw era.

One such piece, *The Magic Fire*, by Argentinean-born, American playwright Lillian Groag, first staged in 1997, is currently being performed at the festival.

Intense and poetic, the play focuses on an immigrant family living in politically volatile Buenos Aires in 1952 under the regime of Juan Perón.

Otto Berg (Ric Reid) is a refugee from Nazified Austria, Viennese through and through (his daughter Lise says, "Papa wasn't just born in Vienna: he was born in the goddamn *Vienna Woods*. He *walked* in three-quarter time"), who uses culture as a sophisticated retreat from the threatening outside world. His wife, Amalia (Sharry Flett), is a member of the Guarneri clan, headed by the militantly anti-Mussolini matriarch Nonna (Jennifer Phipps), age 98, who arrived with her husband in the new world in 1890.

Her son, Gianni (Michael Ball), Amalia's father, his sister Paula (Donna Belleville), "a somewhat startled shipwreck of the 1910s" and the proud possessor of a fan autographed by Brahms, and Amalia's sister Elena (Goldie Semple), an elegant stage actress whose career has been cut short by her refusal to join Perón's political party, round out the garrulous tribe. Looking back at her childhood, an older Lise Berg (Tara Rosling) acts as narrator, providing commentary and perspective on the rapidly unfolding events.

Considered the "Paris of South America," Buenos Aires offers the Berg-Guarneris access to a European-style cultural life. The family collectively thrives on music, theater and dance. The lines are drawn between Otto, from a family of assimilated Jews, who lives for Wagner, ironically, and the Italian side of the household, strongly favoring Verdi and Puccini (including in performances by a Greek-American 'newcomer'—i.e., Maria Callas).

Many of the cultural opportunities, among them, for example, performances of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, are made possible by the Bergs' neighbor, Henri Fontannes (Dan Chameroy), a charming but sinister army general, whose involvement in operations against political dissidents becomes clear as the play

unfolds.

Beyond the family's protective cocoon, Eva Perón (known to the family only as "That woman") lies dying, while police sirens disrupt the night.

Her husband, then a colonel in the Argentine military, first came to prominence as a result of the military coup in 1943 that briefly installed General Pedro Ramirez. Perón, as chief of labor relations under Ramirez, presented himself as the populist champion of the masses, entering into an alliance with a section of the trade unions. After his victory in the 1946 presidential elections, he set up his own party, which co-opted the Confederation of Labor (CGT) bureaucracy, transforming it into a major base of support.

Perón and his wife Eva had run their election campaign promising labor and social reform, but repression launched against a strike wave produced by the post-war economic downturn exposed the class character of the regime. Inspiration for many of Perón's social policies and corporatist schemes came, in fact, from Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini.

Eva's death in 1952 foreshadowed the end for Peronism, fundamentally a pragmatic attempt by a section of the Argentine ruling class to maneuver in a Bonapartist fashion within the domestic situation and balance itself between the Argentine masses and imperialism—an effort doomed to failure. In 1955, Perón was forced into exile after a military uprising.

This tumult finds reflection in the Berg-Guarneri household. Tension invades the domicile when family friend Alberto Barcos (Jay Turvey) informs the Bergs that Santo, the brother of their housekeeper Rosa (Waneta Storms), has gone missing since his union walked out in defiance of the Peronist trade unions. Alberto runs a newspaper that he views as countering the "political indoctrination of the masses," a process he likens to the making of goose pâté, which involves securing geese in place to "stuff garbage down their throats."

Critical of the Berg-Guarneris' friendly relations with Henri Fontannes, Alberto denounces the family for "wallowing in Old World *schmaltz* while the country is going to hell." Gianni replies cynically, "Dead people don't run anything!" This mood prevails, as Otto and the rest of the family wait too long before deciding to help the hunted Santo evade the authorities.

Contemplating his hesitation and indecision, Otto remorsefully declares, "In Vienna too, we, all *good people*, thought we could sit it out—the advancing disaster, the 'house painter' [Hitler]—playing Schubert and sipping *Kaffee mit Schlag* Windows and doors

locked airtight. And then the *boogeyman* came calling at the gate and nothing was ever familiar again.”

The Magic Fire is a full-bodied, well-written piece, whose author has eschewed a minimalist approach. Committed to accurately dramatizing the historical and personal record, Groag, in her notes, takes issue with the presently fashionable claim “that history can never be factual.” This is belied, she asserts, by “a body count that would contradict *any* possible defence of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Perón and their dismal cohorts in the demagoguery of ‘populism.’”

The subjective component of the equation, what Groag dubs the “*Rashomon* problem,” is represented in the play by Lise (on stage in both her 7-year-old and her grown-up selves), the “wildly unreliable” narrator. Understandably, the girl is clouded in her remembrances, unable to fully comprehend a complex upbringing. Groag’s stage directions inform that “all the important information is tucked away under the chatter” and that the characters “are most in trouble when they least appear to be.”

Shaw’s ensemble cast under the direction of the festival’s artistic director Jackie Maxwell performs with intelligence, deftly rendering intricate personalities who respond in vastly different and convincing ways to a looming political maelstrom.

The playwright richly sets the relationship of culture to politics as the problem that connects the various threads of *The Magic Fire*. Groag revisits a time when “going to *Aida* was rollicking fun and reading *Moby Dick* not an exotic occupation.” Even the characters’ names make reference to the cultural sphere: Berg, after avant-garde Viennese composer Alban Berg, and the Guarneris, after a family of renowned Italian violin makers.

The drama’s demanding theatrics present a challenge, best explained by its author: “Music is a character in the play, and it is composed almost on a Wagnerian model of leitmotif; there are crescendos and decrescendos, and it all has to be choreographed very carefully.” The play’s title derives from *Die Walküre*, the second opera in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle. In that piece, Wotan sentences his daughter Brunhilde to an enchanted sleep, but protects her with a magic flame from which only the bravest hero can rescue her.

In the family’s case, creating an isolating ring out of art’s magic fire is intended to shelter them from a terrible reality. The desire is perhaps understandable, after the traumas of fascist Germany and Italy. For Otto in particular, having fled totalitarianism in Europe, he now confronts its emergence in the new world. Nonetheless, the play criticizes the tendency to stand aloof, to turn away from the truth by misusing art’s civilizing qualities.

Ranging themselves behind art’s magic flame is a comforting solution, but one that provides only temporary solace as the household’s chronic anxiety suggests. Why so? A fixation with art’s inner workings or its merely formal qualities is a betrayal of art and its essential function as a form of cognition, of coming closer and closer to reality. Hiding behind their justifiable love and appreciation of culture, the Berg/Guarneris use it not to grasp, but to insulate themselves from the world. Otto at one point proclaims, “I am not a political individual. I don’t want to change the world. I want to live *privately* and in peace.”

The play raises a question: are art and culture necessarily

opposed to political struggle? The populist agitator Alberto, intensely ‘political’ in the narrow sense, would perhaps answer in the affirmative, exhibiting impatience both toward the family and the mass of the population. He accuses General Fontannes of befriending the Bergs because their home is a sanctuary from politics. (“Here one talks only of the diminished seventh and the iambic pentameter!”)

Otto Berg too might see things this way, wanting his enjoyment of culture to go undisturbed. Here, however, the play makes an important point. Otto’s artistically sensitized nature, in the end, makes it difficult and even tormenting to live with the inhuman—with “devils” such as Fontannes. Art separate from life withers and dies, or enters the sterile service of the elite. Examining the complicated relations between art and politics in the traumatic 20th century (and 21st), *The Magic Fire* provokes thought.

On this note, it is significant that Groag’s play, in an important fashion, revolves around the outlaw worker Santo. While never making an appearance on stage, he nevertheless functions as a central figure in the drama. For her social understanding or at least intuition, the playwright deserves to be congratulated. First of all, like all serious artists, she strays from her immediate subject, the fate of the Berg-Guarneris, to treat an even more compelling—albeit related—and socially revealing tragedy, the fate of an ordinary worker who defies both the government and the official labor organizations.

Second, by dramatizing Santo’s persecution, Groag points a finger at the essential social fact driving the Peronist regime toward dictatorship: the threat “from below,” a militant working class.

Santo’s arrest prompts Alberto, whose newspaper is shut down, to launch a tirade against a “regime which routinely uses clandestine arrest, torture and murder against *any* opposition in the name of national security and social progress.”

Chilling and familiar circumstances.

This is rare theater in our day and age in North America, and it is to the credit of Maxwell and the Shaw Festival that they have effectively and seriously taken on the play.



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