

Verdi's *Macbeth* at La Scala in Milan: The opera of the year—an inspirational experience for millions of viewers

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The murderers are dressed in business suits with ties, conspirators are catapulted up or down in lifts, the scenery is dominated by the office towers of Wall Street, or some other world financial centre, which then alternately turn upside down.

The new production of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Macbeth* at La Scala in Milan, which launched the country's 2021-22 opera season on December 7, can justifiably be called the "opera of the year." At the beginning of a third year of the coronavirus pandemic, Italian director Davide Livermore has transposed Shakespeare's parable of power and greed to the present, a time when the power and greed of a super-rich minority threatens the lives of the majority of the population with disease, misery and death.

The opera premiere featured a remarkable cast, led by Russian soprano Anna Netrebko (Lady Macbeth), Italian baritone Luca Salsi (Macbeth), Italian tenor Francesco Meli (Macduff) and Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov (Banco), accompanied by the outstanding Scala orchestra, chorus and ballet conducted by Riccardo Chailly. The viewer has the impression that everyone involved was particularly committed to ensuring the message of the opera was properly put across.

Even more significant is the fact that the director employed pioneering multimedia technology to bring the topicality of Verdi's *Macbeth* to life and turn it into an inspiring experience for millions via cinema and television outlets.

The usual premiere audience of political celebrities, Italy's business elite and wealthy aristocracy, including outgoing Italian president Sergio Mattarella, who filled the extortionately priced 2,000 seats at La Scala in Milan, represented only a tiny minority of the opera's total audience.

The Italian RAI television broadcast the premiere to 2.2 million viewers, while hundreds of thousands were able to watch the opera in Germany and France via the European channel ARTE. Cinema screenings of the premiere also took place in Britain, Spain and other European countries.

In fact, the new production in Milan was aimed primarily at making the opera accessible to an audience of millions. Concern that the pandemic will make it difficult or impossible to attend opera in the longer term may have played a role, under conditions where the Omicron variant has led to soaring infection rates in Italy.

Davide Livermore, however, was known long before the coronavirus pandemic as a keen exponent of experimental musical theatre as a means to attract broad popular audiences to major cultural events.

Livermore was born in the industrial city of Turin in 1966 and for many years was artistic director of the Teatro Baretto and its attendant drama school. In addition to his work as a director, he is also a singer, actor, stage and costume designer, writes scripts for theatre and television and is involved in the training of young artists.

Livermore is regarded by music critics as an innovator on the opera scene. His production of Verdi's *I vespri siciliani* (The Sicilian Vespers,

1855), when Turin celebrated the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy, was singled out by *Musical America* as one of the 10 best opera performances of 2011. Since 2015 Livermore has directed the famed opera house Palau de les Arts in Valencia, Spain, with which Plácido Domingo is also closely associated. Domingo was in the audience at the Milan premiere and expressed his enthusiasm for the performance afterwards.

After two years of the pandemic, Livermore's new *Macbeth* aims to appeal to a mass audience hungry for culture and which is much more directly involved in this opera event than the local audience in Milan. Only the television and cinema audience can really experience the rapid changes of perspective, different levels, video inserts and camera pans, for example, from above onto the barred lift. This lift, which is prominently set up in the middle of the stage, but is open at the top and leads nowhere, transports the protagonists of the play's murderous intrigues up and down.

Only the "distant" audience is up close when Lady Macbeth celebrates her successful murder plot with a vulgar jig in a lift, or when she sneeringly looks down on those assembled at the bottom from a dizzy height. The audience at La Scala in Milan, on the other hand is restricted to what they can see from their seats.

The opening of the opera puts one in the cinema and is enough to make many a die-hard operagoer cringe. We see the two commanders of the King of Scotland, Macbeth and Banco—in suit and tie—slaughtering enemy soldiers in the gloom of a forest, then getting into a car and exchanging messages with the play's witches, who look more like office typists. They set off in their car and then drive head-on towards the audience, as if in a Hollywood thriller. Behind them, the misty forest of the witches transforms into the skyline of a banking centre, featured on an LED wall that takes the place of a classical stage.

Such modernisation is very much in the spirit of Verdi, just as the plot in general remains close to the composer's version. The witches prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor (a Scottish noble) and then King of Scotland, and Banco will be the father of kings. When messengers bring news that King Duncan has appointed Macbeth Thane of Cawdor after the previous Thane had been executed for rebellion, Lady Macbeth decides that the second part of the prophecy should also be realised, and urges her husband to assassinate the king.

Even before her husband returns, Lady Macbeth sings of her cold-blooded plan in her luxurious chamber with its spiral staircase (translated from the libretto by Francesco Maria Piave):

You are an
ambitious soul, Macbeth. You long for greatness,
but will you be wicked enough?
The road to power
is filled with crimes, and woe to him

who sets an uncertain foot upon it and retreats!

Using her magnificent soprano voice to the full, Netrebko, who lives in Vienna, is thoroughly convincing as the ice-cold and calculating Lady Macbeth. In a glittering red costume, waving a cigarette and a whiskey glass, she embodies all the ruthlessness of the ruling circles of society, then and now.

Macbeth carries out the murder of Duncan, who looks like a modern-day chancellor or president with a lectern and microphones, and makes himself king. Lady Macbeth washes off the blood and soils the guards' clothes with it. Macbeth then denounces Duncan's own son Malcolm as the murderer.

The first murder is followed by the next: Macbeth instructs his allies in the court—with their black suits and ties they resemble the members of a right-wing party—to murder Banco and his son Fleanzio. Banco dies, but his son escapes. At the banquet, the murdered Banco appears in the form of a giant head and Macbeth has to be calmed down by his icy wife. He then again seeks advice from the witches.

They warn him about Macduff, the Thane of Fife and Macbeth's adversary, and tell him no one can defeat him who is born of woman, and that he can only be defeated when Birnam Wood uproots itself and advances towards him. Macbeth thinks he is safe, but has Macduff's children killed. The latter has fled and joins forces with Malcolm's army. Soon afterwards Macbeth witnesses the forest advancing towards him: Malcolm has camouflaged his army with branches and bushes. Macbeth is ultimately killed by Macduff—who was born by Caesarean section, i.e., "not born of woman."

Macbeth is one of Verdi's earlier operas. The first version was commissioned by the Teatro della Pergola in Florence in 1846-47 and represented the composer's first engagement with a Shakespeare play. *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893, based largely on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) followed later. At the same time, Verdi broke new ground in the opera world and distanced himself from the romantic opera popular at the time. Instead of love stories adorned with beautiful singing, he developed a more realistic musical theatre dealing with the corruption of man driven by greed and a striving for power. He demanded his singers focus on dramatic expression and, for example, portray the ugly side in the character of Lady Macbeth. In 1865, Verdi produced a revised version for the opera's first performance in Paris, reworking the finale in particular. This version became the basis for most later productions, including Livermore's.

Verdi was born in 1813 in poor circumstances in the small town of Le Roncole in the Parma region—his father was an innkeeper and small farmer. Today he is the most popular opera composer in Italy and far beyond. He was not only a composer and musician, he also participated in the revolutionary-democratic struggles of his time, the Risorgimento for the unity of Italy and for the overthrow of the feudal dynasties of the Bourbons and Habsburgs who ruled the country's collection of small states.

It is to Livermore's credit that he transposes Verdi's own concerns into a form that directly addresses those oppressed today. It is the people behind a lattice fence who cheer on Macduff as a liberator and advance against Macbeth bearing branches from the trees of Birnam Wood, beautifully accompanied by the La Scala chorus.

"The great choral scenes ... create goose bump moments with the finest nuances and mighty fortissimi," noted *Bayerischer Rundfunk* in its review. "The twitching flashes and blood-red accents in the constantly changing video stage set are precisely matched to the music." In the end, Macbeth's "entire empire goes down in mighty explosions."

At the premiere there were some boos and whistling for the director and also a few for Netrebko. Some media reports made a meal of this. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) wrote that "Netrebko inspires, but we cannot warm to her." The paper's criticism refers to the disintegrating and

eventually insane Lady Macbeth, who ends up sleepwalking on a skyscraper.

Netrebko communicates little of the demonic energy that drives this character, the NZZ complained. "Netrebko does not surrender herself to the dark forces that dominate her, the dominator. Even the Lady's developing madness remains controlled, technically balanced down to the last note." She therefore represents a "technocratic epoch in which man dares to control everything, although he could lose everything in the process," the reviewer ends.

In fact the NZZ reveals its own tendency to side with the super-rich, whom Livermore's opera production characterises so legitimately. According to the NZZ, they should not be portrayed as ice-cold, repulsively greedy characters, but rather as "warmer" tragic figures driven by dark forces. The review's distaste for the "technocratic epoch" and thus ultimately of the Enlightenment, which underlies mankind's endeavour to dominate nature, fits in with this.

The sleepwalking scene must be seen in relation to the comment of her husband Macbeth, who is completely indifferent to his wife's fate. Commenting on her suicide, he remarks: "What means one life?" This is the prevailing view of the criminal upper class. Any trace of humanity or compassion expresses weakness and therefore ruin.

Livermore reacted calmly to the criticism, according to Italian media reports. "Verdi was not afraid of boos and censorship. We are proud of the performance. The birth of something new is always a little painful," the director said.

The fact that *Macbeth* is not abstractly about yielding "to dark forces" was also addressed by Netrebko, who herself is wealthy and close to the oligarchs of the Putin regime. In an interview with the Roman daily *La Repubblica*, she maintained Verdi's opera is still relevant today. "The world has not changed. We are surrounded by terrible events and we try to make that clear in this performance."

The expressions of displeasure from some of the opening night audience should ultimately be taken as praise for the director and cast. Clearly, Livermore hit the mark with his transposition of the material into the present day. Many of the celebrities in the audience may have felt the spotlight being turned on them. Millions of virtual opera-goers, on the other hand, will be thrilled and inspired by Verdi's optimism that one day there will be an end to all the Macbeths of this world.

The premiere of Macbeth at La Scala in Milan can be seen in the ARTE media library until 6 June 2022 (or on YouTube)



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