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**“I want people to understand my stories”**

The last performances of Gounod's FAUST in John Dew's Production at the Deutsche Oper Berlin took place in February 2001. The show had been in the repertory for thirteen years. “The Berlin Dew museum is sometimes open” commented the producer in an interview he gave DER SPIEGEL in 1998 the constant presence, with LES HUGUENOTS and FAUST two pieces he produced in the 1980's, in the Berlin repertory. Behind this one must ask the question why his present work, in which the magazine finds a reluctance to use his former shock tactics, has distanced itself so far from his earlier work.

In 1988 the year that of the FAUST production, the Editor in chief of OPERN WELT called on the German parliament to enact legislation to protect opera goers, and named John Dew's work as his prime evidence. “This has nothing to do with artistic freedom..... this is fraud” A decade later, the visitor to Dew's Berlin museum is hard put to understand the excitement of the 80's. What the visitor sees is truly a classic of the music- theatre. Clearly, from another age, this FAUST appears oddly moving, fresh, and up to date. Not the sentimental FAUST this, but a FAUST full of the comedy and sarcasms Gounod acquired from Goethe. Behind the colourful Video and Neon aesthetic, we find the well-grounded analysis of the Catholic aspect of the piece with, with a constant use of symbols from the medieval mystery plays. Here we find the basic tenants of Dew's work regardless of how modern the optic may be: The desire to tell a story as precisely and as understandably as possible, to translate and communicate a message with simple artistic tools and do it as entertainingly as possible. The talent for finding surprisingly simple metaphors that can carry a hole evening, a precise way of working with singing actors developed out of the musical structures and the abundance of scenic effects born out of an seemingly endless creativity are the basic elements of his often extremely diverse oeuvre.

“In Germany, people think that confused and veiled thought is automatically profound and therefore intelligent. Anglo-Saxons hold defuse thought to be badly formulated thought. I want people to understand my stories. And I do not like these productions where the producer shows off his neuroses and proves to the audience how uneducated they are” It would be difficult to imagine a Dew production without humour, sarcasm and elements of entertainment that in there point of resolution can clarify serious thoughts better than any amount of ponderous intellectualism. However, in Germany this often leads to the accusation of shallow flippancy.

The many pictures, motives and ideas that subsequently appeared in other director's work substantiate the classic suture of his FAUST. How often have we, since then, encountered ballroom dancers, electro guitarist, and many other of his images in productions that only have a superficial veneer of actuality. The use of images from our daily lives, even when they are plainly only stylistic tricks no longer come under critical attack. On the contrary: when John Dew occasionally sets a piece in the time prescribed by the Libretto, he is treated as an eccentric in need of an explanation of his deeds.

With ANDREA CHENIER and especially with Carlisle Floyd's SUSANNAH, the Berlin audience was presented with a different John Dew than the one superficial viewers of his first

Berlin productions believed to know. Gone were the much discussed images filled with refrigerators, television sets and street clothes which had often, in Dew's work, been denounced as a superficial provocation. Much used many produces; these metaphors have now become a degraded vocabulary of scenic clichés. Especially the much praised series of unknown French operas that Dew produced in Dortmund during the last six years, including the German premiers of operas by Bloch, Roussel and Gustave Charpentier were initially viewed by the Press with irritation. These productions are now understood to have been a field of experimentation in a period of personal development leading up to the PELLEAS that he produced at the Leipzig Opera with Mark Minkowski as conductor. This production astounded those who remembered his colourful Mozart cycle of the early 90s in the same city. In strong and moving yet minutely choreographed scenes, Debussy's piece appeared close to the world of Ibsen and Strindberg. The characters depression, the circular movements in a black set seemed to show a changed producer. And yet: in LES HUGUENOTS as well as SUSANNAH, in the scandal causing Krefeld RING of the early 1980's much as in PELLEAS we find the same characteristics mentioned above, the very core of the producers work. Although an Avant Garde, he has always remained a conservative in his insistence on production technique, in the translation of the work eminent dramaturgy and his intention to enlighten the public and yet entertain. "I abstain willingly from many set pieces of modern stage direction and submerge my handwriting under the needs of the work at hand. My very conservative artistic standpoint misunderstood. By lovingly reforming and explaining, I can relate the social basics of our society to the next generation." quote the "scandalous" director in 1987. Dew is far from changing fashion, progressive in his insistence on always seeing a work in a new light and always changing this way of working to speak the language of an ever-changing world. This culminates in his inability to copy himself. More and more, he believes that Opera must augment places of learning as a tool to keep our collective memories alive, and his realisation that the attempt to give the tradition bound audience new ways of seeing opera has become a self delusion of theatre makers. Few in the audience under the age of forty has experienced traditional productions and opera, as an art form, is being questioned by people who have no sense of what the tradition of a piece is.

The son of a Cuban and an Englishman, born in Cuba and brought up in New York, he comes to Germany in the 1960's after studying art history. He wants to be a set designer and his and his aesthetic standard is set by the countless evenings spent at the Metropolitan Opera. One of his first experiences in Europe IL TROVATORE at the Komischen Oper in Goetz Friedrichs production comes as a shock, which will form him in the future. Felsenstein, whose rehearsals he is allowed to watch, impresses the apprentice with the almost cinematographic realism of his work, which bring perfect Musical productions to mind. However his method of training singers to minutely follow his direction, does not convince Dew. He is often reminded of Marionettes and quickly understands that even six months of rehearsals cannot make an actor out of an untalented singer. Moving singers to be creative, often with an astonishing minimum of concrete signs, becomes a distinctive part of his rehearsal work. The produce, who plans the lighting while reading the score for the first time, never defines the movement of the singers in advance. The apprentice next goes to Wieland Wagner in Bayreuth; new and fascinating, his discovery of the German municipal theatre, which he learns to love at Wupertal where Kurt Hores presents a repertory, filled with world premiers and unknown works. After working as an assistant producer in Osnabrueck and Ulm, in which city he makes his directorial début with THE RAKES PROGRESS. After that he receives many offers of work, especially for Operettas. Not knowing the works and there artistic and historical background, he automatically learns how to develop ways of telling the stories with pictures developed out of his fantasies which are automatically far from the traditional performance practice. Dew becomes suddenly famous with his production of DER RING DER NIBELUNGEN, conducted by Lothar Zagrosek, at Krefeld, where they had

already collaborated on TRISTAN UND ISOLDE and DIE MERISTERSINGER. Naturally, the grand story and thought lines are what fascinate Dew and his designer Pilz. The kitchen sink drama at constable Hunding's home, Wotan's skyscraper executive suite, automobiles, tanks, Hagen's palace marble clad splendour, Loge in Albert Einstein's famous pose, and the iron curtain long before it's appearance in LES HUGENOTS: For the first time, images of the twentieth century had been used consequently in a production of this work. The Süddeutsche Zeitung noted that the desperate storylines had been bound together by optical Leitmotives. What at the beginning seemed to be the product of an undisciplined fantasy playing with motives from contemporary politics, aesthetics, and cultural history, soon manifested itself as a well thought out concept that took us logically and directly to the closing inferno.

While working on the RING, Dew had already taken on a new position as head of productions at the Municipal Opera of the city of Bielefeld. Together with Intendant Heiner Bruns and Chefdramaturg Alexander Gruber he developed a programmatic repertoire of unparalleled consequence. With numerous rediscoveries of forgotten works of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with works that had been forbidden in Germany, and then forgotten, as well as with many world premiers Bielefeld developed into one of Europe's most exciting opera houses. Dew, who directs works by Schreker, Brand: Korngold, Delius, Hindermith, Antheil, Halévy and Meyerbeer, rarities by Gretiy through to Boito and new works by Adaams, Moore;and Bernstein, soon becomes known as an expert for the unknown. The Bielefeld repertory gives him a way out of an almost insurmountable artistic crisis: not yet forty, he has already directed most of the classical repertory and is dependent on the challenge new works offer. "The real crisis is the shrinking repertory. When fewer and fewer pieces are produced again and again and the time in which they were written vanishes further in to the past directors are no longer primarily required to make the pieces plausible to the audience. They now have also to fight the boredom that inevitably occurs when the all to well known is constantly repeated. This is how the dependency upon a novel interpretation at any price is born." Half dozen productions a year is the rule for the much sort after producer. Work on one production releases creative energy for the next production and prevents the much feared "Burn out" effect.

After his success with Meyerbeer's PROPHET in Bielefeld Goetz Friedrich brings him then to Berlin to work at the Deutsche Oper. LES HUGENOTS is a success in Berlin and Dew is invited to work in Hamburg, Zurich, Leipzig, Paris and Vienna. "A sensation: Dew and the ensemble of the Deutsche Oper, led by Jesus Lopez Cobos, had given back to the musical world a colossal piece that had been thought to have been lost. More than that, they had made the work understandable." Not only Die Welt rejoices the rediscovery of Meyerbeer's opera as political theatre with the now famous scene at the Berlin wall.

The unique archaeological work at Bielefeld has led to similar developments in German theatres. That the HUGENOTS were a milestone in Meyerbeer's rehabilitation is now even recognised by those that objected to the cuts and the use of the German language translation, the use of which helped the audience to accept the unknown, and was part of the aim of making Meyerbeer's work living theatre. Reticent tactics are not what Dew uses on unknown works: and only by trying out pieces on stage can the stage worthiness be tested. Trying to finding solutions that will have eternal value is, in his opinion, one of the greatest problems plaguing opera production and composition today. Dew agrees that composers should in the spirit of the "Zeit Oper" of the 1920's look for stories about our lives and not always search for historical or literary subjects. Consequently, Goetz Fiedrich brought him back to Berlin to Direct the world premier of Mark Neikrugs LOS ALAMOS. Los Alamos was the sight where the first atomic bomb had been developed. At the same time, it is also the home of the Pueblo Native Americans with their deeply anchored cosmic world- view. The project floundered on what not only Zeit Magazine called "common music" but this did not stop the producer from firmly believing in the correctness of such a theme for an opera. Did not every new

development in the history of opera produce many such works with “common music” before a masterpiece appeared which the was the cause of many more pieces of “common music”? Only by producing very many operas can we hope to find a masterpiece. This thesis was in his thoughts when he became Artistic director of Dortmund’s Municipal Opera. In this capacity he commissioned several works, conscious of the fact that mastery of an art form can only be arrived at with practice.

Dew sees his occasional flops, as in his Berlin CANDIDE, because of his avowed interest in going new ways, fearing nothing more than sterile perfectionism. The knowledge that his work must be in permanent flux, that new images must be found for the theatre of the 21Century that are completely different to the images of the past decades, imbues his present work. But he will always be primarily concerned with the clarity of the story telling its meaning, with out giving a thought about becoming part of the Operatic Museum.