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'Theodor': 'The audience has never experienced an opera like this'

Haggai Hitron

The new Israeli opera "Theodor," named for the father of modern Zionism Theodor Herzl, is daring, to say the least. It depicts Herzl as a talented young journalist with ideas for solving Jewish society's problems, but still a mere mortal – long before his Zionist revolution and later fame. The production by the Israeli Opera refrains from attempting to predict that the young Herzl would within a few years become a leader and set in motion an enormous political process resulting in the country in which we now live. Instead, the opera, staged at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center, focuses on awkward and sometimes embarrassing aspects of Herzl's ideological and family history. According to the plot, Herzl started on his path out of a strong desire – not unusual among educated Jews in the German cultural milieu in the second half of the 19th century – to be a German and to be accepted as such. The opera ends when Herzl becomes a Zionist.

The structural trick of the opera is splitting the portrayal of Herzl into two people, sung by two baritone. Noam Heinz sings the part of a 21-year-old Herzl in Vienna, while Oded Reich takes the role of the figure 14 years later in Paris, in 1895, the period of the Dreyfus trial.

According to composer Yonatan Cnaan, this part of the opera is presented "a battle against all the odds, a counterpoint to Herzl, who is quietly writing his trailblazing book against a chorus trying to dissuade him from

doing so." The sentence with which Herzl ends the opera is a historical quote of his: "I believe that this is the end of my life. From this moment onward history begins."

As is usual during production processes, the words to "Theodor," written by Ido Ricklin, who is also the opera's director, are already known. It's an outstanding libretto, in my opinion, touching on critical issues using simple and precise language. But judging a libretto separately is problematic. What really should be examined is the libretto and the music together.

Those principally involved in the musical rendition – against the backdrop of the set, designed by Alexander Lisianski – are conductor Nimrod David Pfeffer and orchestrator Eran Zehavi (Cnaan wrote a score for singers with piano).

The characters, in addition to the two Herzls, are Julie, Herzl's wife and the mother of his three children, sung by mezzo-soprano Anat Czarny; Louisa, an antisemitic Viennese waitress sung by soprano Tali Ketzeif; antisemitic student Hermann Bahr, sung by baritone Yair Polishook; Paul, Herzl's friend in Vienna, sung by soprano Shaked Strul in a "trouser role" – a woman playing a man.

Opera is liberating

Last week, Cnaan was a guest at a lecture by Israeli pianist Astrith Baltsan as part of the Cathedra lecture series. The 45-year-old composer, who has academic classical music training and much experience in musicals and rock – and as a singer-artist – praised his work and recommended coming to see "Theodor."



A scene in "Theodor" starring Oded Reich, center, as the eponymous Herzl.

Yossi Zwecker

In an interview with musicologist and critic Yossi Schiffman, Cnaan said that because he himself isn't "classical," the "Israeli opera audience has never experienced such an opera." In his conversation with Baltsan he noted that the medium of opera enables him to express himself fully musically, liberated from the limitations dictated by the musical genre.

Cnaan's previous achievements were summed up eight years ago by the judges who awarded him the Prime Minister's Prize for Composers. Mira Zakai, Tomer Yariv and Yuval Zoran wrote that Cnaan is "a fresh and very original voice in the field of local classical music," with an ability to engage in "impressive forays to other genres, to maneuver among styles with relative ease and to maintain high quality in all of them."

This week, I sat down

with Cnaan.

How many relatively long arias are there in "Theodor"?

"There are 10. Five of them last for over two minutes, the others are short. Incidentally, I made every effort, in cooperation with Ido Ricklin, so that each word would be understood without having to glance at the subtitles." The opera is sung in Hebrew, with English and Hebrew surtitles.

There's an important part of the plot dealing with the enthusiasm of Theodor and of young men in his circle in Vienna about the operas of Wagner. Does the music composed for that scene really quote Wagner?

"No, but there's a reference to Wagner's 'Tannhauser,' a musical expression of my feeling about this work. Not a quotation from it but some type of echoing of the subject of 'Tannhauser.' Mainly I fol-

Adams. From the moment I began performing this tonal opera I felt that I was participating in a powerful experience. A second contemporary opera that made an impression on me, that was many years later, is 'Akhnaten' by Philip Glass."

I also asked Cnaan about the degree of Israeliness in his music in "Theodor."

Would an Israeli listener who (in a hypothetical experiment) heard this music sung in gibberish rather than Hebrew, immediately say that the composer is suspected of being an Israeli?

"Definitely. Without a doubt, highly suspected."

German homeland, I'm yours

The opera's main plot takes place in Paris, with Herzl appearing with his familiar beard. The scenes that take place in Vienna are "flashbacks" of sorts. In one, young Herzl experiences an incident of antisemitism when a Viennese waitress, Louisa, mocks the efforts of young Jews to join a German students' union, saying Jews are by nature afraid to engage in duels that could leave the dueler with an "honorable" scar.

Louisa sings an aria about her romantic preferences – she will probably only love a man "who fought, who was stabbed, who attacked, who didn't stop, and who was sewn up, deliberately, as badly as possible."

Still in Vienna, after a sword duel – an essential bloody ritual required to be accepted into a German students' union – with his friend, Herzl declares, "I'm a member of the union, I belong! German homeland, I'm yours."

Years later in Paris, Julie (a character Ido Ricklin added depth to – there is limited historical information on her), mocks her husband Theodor's proposal to solve "the Jewish question" by means of an organized mass conversion to Christianity. "You had an attack of megalomania; I'm redeeming you from the ostracism, from the false accusations, from the cruel commandment to cut into the flesh of infants," she says.

Later she adds, "You're not a statesman, you're just a journalist, an orphaned and isolated failure. Disappointment, humiliation, disregard, that's how you'll live and that's how you'll die."

The prediction of Julie Herzl, the rejected, disap-

pointed, humiliated wife, didn't come to pass. Herzl chose Zionism, and the rest is history – a history that the opera touches on with a quotation of a historical, liberal very Herzl-ian statement, which is still greatly relevant in contemporary Israel.

The subject is the character of the Jewish state: "And if it should occur that men of other creeds and different nationalities come to live amongst us, we should accord them honorable protection and equality before the law."

In the opera, this line is sung by Oded Reich as Herzl. He will be singing in a very quiet voice, in contrast with most of his other lines. A whisper that is also a shout.