



Man Behind *the Curtain.*

Director **Phelim McDermott** brings a new Coney Island-inspired *Così* to the Met.



► **THIS MONTH**, Phelim McDermott, the director and founder of the British theater troupe Improbable, brings his staging of *Così Fan Tutte* to the Met, following the show's 2014 premiere at English National Opera. Other *Così* productions have grappled with the work's knotty sexual politics and emotional malice, but McDermott's breezier interpretation of the Mozart-da Ponte masterwork swaps eighteenth-century Naples for the Coney Island boardwalk in the early 1950s and features an ensemble of sideshow freaks—sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, bearded ladies and tattooed strongmen—to advance the farce. “I certainly thought the way to make this work well was to make it as funny as possible,” McDermott says via Skype from London. “That doesn’t mean putting funny jokes in. It’s making the emotional story work—that’s what makes people laugh and connect.”

—
McDermott working on *Lost without Words* at the National Theatre, London, 2017

McDermott’s fantastical angle on *Così* also helped the director get past the opera’s theatrical stumbling blocks. “The challenge in the piece is that people go, ‘Oh, how would they ever be convinced that those dodgy Albanians were actually not their boyfriends in disguise?’ For me, it needed to be like a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* thing. They’ve all gone into the wood, and a spell is cast on them—a spell about love, deception and disguise. The principals are in an altered state, and our ensemble of freaks are like Oberon’s fairies. The thing about Coney Island is that it’s a place of dreams, and if you scratch the surface, underneath, the dreams are actually quite tacky and slightly transgressive. It’s a dream where, when the lights come back on, you say, ‘Agh! What did I see in this guy?!’”

McDermott’s *Così* is his first foray into Mozart, and while his list of credits in opera may be brief, his productions are some of the most potent theatrical spectacles that one is likely to encounter on the international stage. He directed his first opera eleven years ago—the London premiere of the Met-ENO coproduction of Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha*, the composer’s 1980 meditation on the life of Mahatma Gandhi, featuring an episodic libretto fashioned from the Bhagavad Gita. McDermott’s

staging, cocreated with his former improbable colleague Julian Crouch as designer, combined puppetry, reclaimed materials, projected text and a distillation of movement to create something mesmerizing.

“A lot of the work that we had been doing through puppetry, building imagery through making things, seemed to connect to what that opera was about, which was large groups of people working together as an ensemble to create something powerful, a single image,” he recalls. The success of *Satyagraha* signaled that McDermott and his team had discovered a gestural vocabulary as effective as Robert Wilson’s for addressing Glass’s operas. “The director and the performers have to find a way to change time, in the way that I think a Noh drama or Butoh performer has to do,” he says of his approach. “For the performers, there might be bits where they’re moving faster, but actually the main palette has to be a deep movement that taps into the music’s inner rhythm—where they are moving slowly, but there is a lot going on inside them.”

Since *Satyagraha*, McDermott has staged the Met’s Baroque pasticcio, *The Enchanted Island*, as well as two other Glass operas, *The Perfect American* and *Akhnaten*. The director’s production of the latter was unveiled to rapturous notices at



been put off from further explorations of the standard repertoire: he’s been tapped to direct a new Metropolitan Opera–Bolshoi coproduction of *Lohengrin*, featuring Anna Netrebko’s Elsa. Offered the production, he says, “I found myself thinking, I don’t know where this is going to lead, but it’s a conversation I want to have. If I’m going to really find out about this journey in opera, to do that piece is a good place to start.”

While audiences may walk away from McDermott’s shows most captivated by big stage pictures and coups de théâtre, hearing him describe his process in the rehearsal room makes plain



From top: working on *Satyagraha* at the Met, 2008; with Bob Holland, ENO programming director, receiving the Olivier Award for Best New Opera Production, *Akhnaten*, 2017

His process in the rehearsal room makes plain *his approach begins* with each performer.

ENO in March 2016 and traveled to LA Opera the following November; it won an Olivier Award for best new opera production and is slated to arrive at the Met in 2019. His production of *Aida* opened the current ENO season to lukewarm reviews, though McDermott has not

that his approach begins with each performer. “Sometimes I’ll say, ‘Look, actually, I want to see you all do some really big, bad acting—over the top, operatic gestures.’ And what’s interesting about that is immediately the storytelling gets clearer, and the quality of the acting

gets better,” he says. “That’s a counterintuitive thing. But the thing about old-fashioned stock gestures—it’s not actually that style that doesn’t work. It’s that people aren’t doing it fully, or that they aren’t using the vocabulary as well as they might. I’ve noticed that when performers are against it in themselves—because a director has given them a hard time about it—that is when the audiences wonder why they’re not enjoying watching that person. I’m more likely to say, if there’s something you’ve been told that you shouldn’t do, do it *more* rather than less, so you’ve got choice around it. I won’t throw anything out. If it works and it tells the story well, I will use it.” ■