ALTERNATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY OPERA STAGING. *HÄNSEL AND GRETEL* BY ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK AND THE INPUT OF THE TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

DIANA TODEA[1]

SUMMARY. Until around 1940, the complex work of opera staging was divided between orchestra conductors, designers and technical directors. Gradually, however, staging became "a passion (...) for critics, aesthetes, and scholars, an ambition for leading actors, and an incessant problem for the directors of opera houses."[2] There was a constant need for the emergence of directing specialists in the artistic environment, and their role became increasingly flexible in the period immediately following World War II. Nowadays, opera directors are virtual creators having multiple options at hand with regard to staging. They can choose from classical, traditional staging, where observing the intentions of the author is a prerequisite, to a contemporary, more up-to-date directing approach, where the subject of the opera is transposed into a different time and space, implying, at the same time, a reinterpretation and adaptation of codes. They can also resort to the so-called "modern", radical directing, where opera itself becomes a mere tool used to comply with the director's intentions. We consider the staging of the opera Hänsel and Gretel at the Romanian National Opera House in Cluj-Napoca between 2006 and 2015 as our personal follow out to the traditional staging practice, as a technical director.

Keywords: opera, staging, opera staging director, traditional view on staging, technical director

1. The Art of Staging and the Opera Staging Director

In 1937, in Milan, on theatre posters issued by the famous theatre La Scala, the term *direttore di scena* was replaced by the term *regista.* Terms such as *regia* (staging) and *regista* (stage director) have been sanctioned and acknowledged by the Italian linguist Bruno Migliorini, in 1932, in an

---

[1] *Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences at Babeş-Bolyai University, E-mail: diana.todea22@gmail.com.*
[2] Lorenzo Bianconi, Giorgio Pestelli, ed., *Opera on stage,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 154.

open letter he wrote at the request of Silvio d'Amico. The letter entitled *Varo di due vocaboli* was published in the first issue of Scenario magazine*.* As Gerardo Guccini stated,

> This fortunate lexical innovation stemmed the growing tide of would-be neologism such as *corago* (Anton Giulio Bragaglia), *regissore* (Ettore Petrolini), *superdirettore,* and *mettinscena* and provided specific and generally accepted terms for the ideas and activities of the various artistic personalities who are referred to as the "fathers of early-twentieth-century stage direction": André Antoine (1858-1943), Jaques Copeau (1879-1949, Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), Konstantin S. Stanislavski (1863-1938), Evgheni B. Vakhtangov (1883-1922) and Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874-1940).[3]

The biographies written up until the second half of the twentieth century with regard to personalities who assumed the role of *regista* in opera indicate the fact that this job involves a wide range of skills. It is, therefore, understandable why opera staging was entrusted to people who demonstrate a series of complex knowledge and skills that enable them to practice their role more appropriately and maintain a balance between the various levels of staging. Among the personalities who held the position of stage director during the last couple of centuries, we find Luigi Sapelli (1865-1936), Antonio Lega (1884-?), Marcello Govoni (1885-1944), Giovacchino Forzano (1884-1970) and Guido Salvini (1893-1964).

Once the opera houses reopened after World War II, a new set of practices in opera staging emerged and started to be implemented. A fundamental change was the gradual suppression of permanent positions for directors and the hiring of independent directors for each new production. However, they are rather inclined to a miscellaneous approach towards their own functioning and training, as opposed to specialisation, so the old staging practices seemed slow off the mark. The transformation of their role occurred through the encounter between lyrical performance, theatre and film staging and choreography. Thus, in the period immediately after World War II, a series of innovative directors like Giorgio Strehler (1921-1997), Margherita Wallman (1901-1902), Luchino Visconti (1906-1976), Franco Zeffirelli (born in 1923), Luca Ronconi (born in 1933) or Pier Luigi Pizzi (born in 1930), started their work in opera houses.

The interaction between music and the theatrical innovations of spoken drama lead to the theatricalisation of opera performance, as a result

---

[3] Gerardo Guccini, „*Directing Opera*", in *Opera on stage,* Lorenzo Bianconi, Giorgio Pestelli, ed.,The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 125.

of the work these directors carried out in the opera staging environment. All these made possible the openness to the future artistic profile of the profession of staging director and to other staging practices.

According to Gerardo Guccini, during the first opera staging reform initiated by Visconti, Zeffirelli and Strehler, "the directors did not focus on the events to be performed, but rather on their representation, which they shaped through proper management and combination of staging means"[4], such as stylized sets; natural reciting or, in its absence, pantomime and the expressivity of immobility. Stage directors can also use stage symbols that point up the show and emphasize the meaning of the story by combining it with music, etc. This innovation brought into the opera environment is so subtle that it is difficult to say what exactly does it consist in, since it has not been made obvious through specially designed moments, but rather through the way all the elements are linked, as well as through the way a director is able to bring out the best of their representation potential. One of these directors is Luchino Visconti, who was particularly interested in staging romantic works: *La sonnambula* (Bellini), *La Traviata* (Verdi), *Anna Bollena* (Donizetti), *Don Carlo* (Verdi), etc. Visconti's main staging purpose is, as Guccini stated, to recover the "obliterated values" of opera, that is, "the original dramatic values inherent in the musical text that had hitherto been ignored and thus "erased" by those in charge of turning an opera into a reality on stage."[5]

Anna Bolena, the opera directed by Visconti, is universally appreciated by critics through the way the director makes sense from a score with no apparent theatrical value, through representation, while the staging of *La sonnambula* (1955) shows Visconti's deliberate intention of evoking a faded era of opera through scenic conventions which, are thus „no longer an inert perpetuation of customary practice"[6]. In an interview he did back in 1966, when making reference to his work with singer actors and to the results he achieved in this respect, Visconti confessed: "In opera I believe that the most successful productions where those I did with Callas (...)*.* When I first met Callas, over eleven years ago, she was certainly a great singer, but she still was not a great actress."[7]

Although at an early stage of his career as a scenographer, with his debut as an opera director, Franco Zeffirelli managed to successfully

---

[4] Gerardo Guccini, *La regìa lirica, livello contemporaneo della regìa teatrale*, (*The Opera direction, the level of contemporary theatrical directing)* p. 18, accessed online at: http://www.turindamsreview.unito.it/link/regia_lirica_guccini.pdf (12.05.2013).
[5] Gerardo Guccini, „*Directing Opera*", in *op. cit.*, p. 161.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 160.
[7] *Ibidem,* p.146-147.

combine both roles. Therefore, it is no coincidence, in this context, that the director has such a good eye for the theatrical environment and that his staged works are effective historical reconstructions, focused on realistic details and creating specific ambiences. In this type of staging, „the situations and emotional realities described in the score are translated into easily digested visual contrivances that favour individual effects more than an overall conceptual reading of the work."[8] Just like Zeffirelli, Pier Luigi Pizzi had already gained some experience as a scenographer when he first approached opera staging, in 1977. He is among those directors who made possible the recent revival of the baroque opera, by translating the visual requirements of such works into original performances, with a powerful impact on the public.

Giorgio Strehler, on the other hand, lead opera staging towards a new trend: critical staging (r*egìa critica*), where the director can take the liberty of giving a personal interpretation to a particular work. Strehler made a series of remarks about the inherent compromises opera implies (music, word, voice, singers, spaces, etc.) and ever since the beginning of his career as a director, expressed his concerns about the way conventions and mentalities in the opera environment (in other words, constraints), impacted on his artistic vision, thus limiting the recreation of the play with each new performance, "the singer actors being in a position where they have to face the original instructions", as Strehler says,

> and get more weary than a child who learns to use his hands for the first time. Then, when actors realize that they learned things the wrong way, they still have to learn the new manner of acting; the difficulty is now double, as well as the effort to overcome it. In addition, we only have a few, short rehearsals ... and there is never enough time to accomplish what we envisaged.[9]

Among his staging projects, the works of Mozart particularly stand out, due to Strehler's perception of some archetypes of human destiny in the feelings and situations characters find themselves in.

With Luca Ronconi, opera staging enters a new phase of reform. The "critical" trend, based on translating the author's intentions, is replaced by Ronconi with what opera itself expresses as a cultural event above its narrative dimensions. Opera performances begin to unfold more coexistent

---

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 166.
[9] In Gerardo Guccini, „*Direzione scenica e regìa*", *(Stage direction and Directing),* in Lorenzo Bianconi, Giorgio Pestelli, ed., *Storia dell' Opera Italiana. La spettacolarità,* (*History of Italian Opera. The spectacularity*), vol. V, E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, Torino, 1988, p. 167.

stories concerning "contexts of dramatic events and of their artistic creation, the structures of the libretto and the expressive conception of the composer, the expectations of contemporary and past audiences, the symbolic values of the work itself and the values of its contemporary reinterpretation".[10] From this perspective, Gounod's *Faust* (staged at Teatro Comunale in Bologna, on 18 February 1975) became „an "amusement" for the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie,"[11] and Verdi's *Nabucco* (staged at the same Teatro Comunale in Florence, on 5 May, 1977) is viewed „as a product of the "vulgar, pretentious, and provincial culture" of the bourgeoisie of the Risorgimento."[12] Strehler had actually placed this bourgeoisie on a lower level onstage, dressed them appropriately, while they were conveying through mimic „abhorrence for Abigail's imperialist designs, pity for the Jewish people, and enthusiastic support for the insurrection of the protagonist, who appears in the last scene in a costume of the sort King Vittorio Emanuele II would have worn"[13] (e.g. 1).

E.g. 1

Verdi's *Nabucco*, directed by Giorgio Strehler (Florence, 1977)[14]

---

[10] Gerardo Guccini, *La regìa lirica, livello contemporaneo della regìa teatrale* (*The Opera direction, the level of contemporary theatrical directing*), in *op.cit.,* p. 18.

[11] Gerardo Guccini, „*Directing Opera*", in *op.cit.*, p. 168.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 146.

[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] *Ibidem.*

All these directors and others who succeeded them brought a permanent, long-lasting change in the elements and functions of staging, with respect to the two fundamental paths of the performance, that is scenography and the acting of operatic actors. The various directions in theatre staging have thus been adapted to the requirements of opera staging, whose process of "regeneration" still continues today.

Even nowadays, the desire to bring opera performance in line with staging in theatre motivates many opera houses to prefer hiring famous theatre directors. Compared to the fifth decade of the last century, on the other hand, now we have opera directors who specialize in this profession and who completed higher education studies in music, theatre, or performing arts. In Romania, "Gheorghe Dima" Academy of Music from Cluj-Napoca is one of the institutions of higher education offering such courses and training students who specialise in musical and theatre staging or in the arts of musical performance. During the undergraduate taught courses on musical and theatre staging I attended here at the Academy, I had the chance of designing the staging concept and of directing the opera "Hänsel and Gretel" by Engelbert Humperdinck, on the stage of the Romanian Opera House in Cluj-Napoca. This performance is the result of my "apprenticeship" in directing and staging, and it is an example of classical, traditional staging, where the stage director functions as a "technical director", as a virtual mediator between the public, the opera itself and the author's intentions.

2. The Technical Director. "Hänsel and Gretel" by Engelbert Humperdinck

The opera "Hänsel und Gretel", by Engelbert Humperdinck was premiered at the Romanian Opera House in Cluj-Napoca in June 2006 and remained in the repertoire until 2015, being staged about three times a year.

In designing the concept of this performance we opted for a traditional staging. There are a few reasons behind our decision: on the one hand, we wanted to make it easier for the children's audience to accept the fact that opera characters sing instead of speaking, on the other hand, we were trying to recreate the story in the spirit of "once upon a time..." and finally, we wanted to provide a natural, simple and real image of the universe of childhood (that of Hänsel and Gretel), with game and playing at its very core. However, taking into account the preoccupations and activities of nowadays children and the fact that most television programmes addressing them are extremely attractive visually, we tried to respond to current directions in spectacular arts by designing the performance as an **animated image**.

This staging project was unfolded as a three-steps-process, involving the drafting of the staging book, working with the operatic actors and finally, the actual performance on the stage of the Romanian National Opera House in Cluj-Napoca. We used Stanislavski's system of directing and acting, as well as the staging guidelines and methods of Vincent Liotta[15], as reference points in designing opera staging[16] and in working with the performers. In order to explain the work we carried out in the process of designing a traditional staging style, we shall provide a detailed account of the staging book.

A. THE DOCUMENTING PHASE

The Initial Response. In designing the opera staging for "Hänsel and Gretel", we based our approach on our desire to stage a children's opera. We initially made documenting inquiries on the subgenre, having the "Opera Guide" as a backup[17]. We first made contact with the story, followed by a simple hearing, which contributed greatly to gaining a mental perspective on the first staging images. Since, at this stage, we had not yet followed the translated text, the first impressions were mainly limited to the musical atmosphere, to the suggested images and colours, for which we tried to find the equivalent in paintings, drawings or other visual sources that were ultimately used in the scenographic design of the opera. Subsequently, these impressions were completed after the translation of the libretto and stage directions. In this first stage of our work, we avoided watching recorded videos of the opera, so that the first projections of our imagination to be personal, stemming from and being influenced only by the dramaturgical and musical discourse.

- **Data on the composer, librettist, on the context of opera composition, on the premiere, etc.** From the abundant information compiled in the staging book with regard to this aspect, it is worth mentioning some facts that relate directly to the opera and to our approach towards it:

---

[15] During my first year of studies, I had the chance of attending Vincent Liotta's directing classes at "Gheorghe Dima" Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca. Vincent Liotta is the co-founder of *Utah Festival Opera* and held the position of stage director in productions of *Chicago Lyric Opera*, *San Francisco Opera*, *Houston Grand Opera, Canadian Opera, Teatro Colon, Viena Staatsoper, Santa Fe Opera* and *Los Angeles Music Centre*.

[16] The main phases of staging, according to Liotta, are the following: the initial response, the documenting stage, analysis, planning and the critical assessment.

[17] Gabriela Constantinescu, Daniela Caraman-Fotea, Grigore Constantinescu, Iosif Sava, *Ghid de operă, (Opera's Guide),* Editura Muzicală (Musical Publishing House), București, 1971.

- between 1881 and 1882, Humperdinck helped Wagner in preparing the staging of "Parcifal", and his main occupation was to copy the score, while making himself useful to his master in other activities, as well. Moreover, the stage music in the third act of Parcifal changes and includes parts composed by Humperdinck himself, for the premiere. This period seems to have had an obvious influence on his composing style that is to be found in "Hänsel and Gretel", especially in the harmonic treatment.

- the librettist of the opera was the composer's sister, Adelheid Wette, who adapted Grimm Brothers' story to turn it into a play she would perform with her children.

- at the beginning, "Hänsel and Gretel" was only designed as a series of songs written for the composer's sister's theatre in 1890, later became a singspiel and only in 1893 did it develop into its full form as an opera.

- the opera was performed on December 23, 1893, under the direction of Richard Strauss and was an immediate and indisputable success; even today, the tradition of staging "Hänsel and Gretel" around Christmas Eve is kept alive, like back in 1931, when it became the first Saturday matinée at the Metropolitan Opera.

- in the first year after the premiere, the opera was performed in over 50 theatres; a theatre company called "Hänsel and Gretel" was even established, who was to go on tours in order to give performances.

- The libretto: **sources of inspiration, adaptation, critical considerations**. When the composer's sister decided to adapt the Grimm Brothers' story, she made some changes in order for it to become more realistic and, probably, more religious. In the original story, the stepmother sends her children into the forest to get rid of them. In Adelheid Wette's musical adaptation, on the other hand, the "stepmother" was actually the biological mother. While their mother was off to the market to sell brooms, the children were restless and playing, and they forgot about the tasks they had to fulfil around the house. So, when the mother returned home without having sold any brooms, after noticing the mess, and spilling the milk that was the only food left in the house, she lost her temper and sent the children into the woods to gather wild strawberries for dinner.

When Peter, their father, came home with some food he managed to buy with the money he got after having a good day at selling brooms, he learned that Gertrude, his wife, sent their children into the forest to get some wild strawberries. Then Peter reminded his wife of the wicked witch who lived there and used to eat children. Both parents flee into the woods to save their children (act I).

More magic is brought into Grimm Brothers' story by two elements: the introducing of the fairy tale characters Sandman and The Morning Fairy and the bewitching of Hänsel. Gretel is yet again the one who saves him and pushes the witch into the hot oven, but in the end, the parents find their children and together they glorify God: "When we're in the greatest pains/ The hand of God with us remains" (act II-III).

Another direction in documenting that was especially taken into account in shaping the staging conception of the opera was the studying of the symbolism of the elements on which the story of Grimm Brothers was based. Among the most important symbols we herein mention the following[18]:

- The woodcutter: since cutting wood was one of the most attractive, yet most poorly paid jobs, from this perspective, the story represents the triumph of the working class over the high society (the witch).

- Hunger: this element was introduced by the Grimm Brothers in the fifth edition of the story, to justify the parents' behaviour.

- The forest: a common image in German stories. In the Grimm Brothers' story, the forest is a supernatural world, where anything can happen and is even happening for real.

- „God will not forsake us": apparently, the religious theme of the Grimm Brothers' story stems from the context of the religious culture in which the story was orally created and transmitted. The religious elements were included once religion became a central aspect of life. The Grimm Brothers appeal to a scenario where, from the second the earthly father "abandons" his children, the Father in Heaven takes them under his protective wing and saves them.

B. ANALYSIS

The translated libretto. Since the staging of "Hänsel and Gretel" was mainly addressed to children of Cluj-Napoca as an audience, the entire libretto had to be adapted in Romanian. This work took several months and involved adapting of the libretto already translated from German to a versified version in Romanian we found in the library archives of the National Opera House in Cluj-Napoca. We used this version more as a support rather than as a viable alternative, since that staging it was translated for dated back in the 1970s and in the meantime, certain common words passed to the archaic vocabulary.

---

[18] Source: http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/hanselgretel/notes.html (accessed on 22 September 2014).

Drafting the stage management handbook. This staging tool was created based on the score of the opera in order to emphasize its structure (acts, scenes), to clarify which characters were involved in a certain scene and/or musical performance, as well as to highlight the relationship between musical elements (tempo, measure, tone), acting performance and stage directions (didascalia). This tool was meant to provide an overview of the structural components of the opera, the pillars around which we have subsequently built our staging concept (e.g. 2)

E.g. 2

Acts/ scenes	Characters	Lines	Tempo. Beat	Stage directions
Overture		-	Andante con motto 4/4 Allegro non troppo 2/2	-
Act I HOME Scene 1	Gretel Hänsel	*Eia, popeia, what rustles in the straw?*	Leicht bewegt 6/8 Ziemlich rasch 2/4 Erstes Zeitmass 6/8 Ziemlich rasch 2/4	A shabby little room. In the background, a low door next to a little window with a view towards the forest. On the left, a kitchen stove with chimney. Brooms of different sizes hang on the walls. Hänsel is near the door, with a few broom binding strings in his hands. Gretel seats by the stove, knitting a sock. They seat facing each other.
Scene 2	The Mother (Gertrude) Gretel Hänsel	*What happens here?*	Rasch. 2/4 Erste Zeitmass	Suddenly, the door opens and their mother enters the room, carrying a basket strapped to her

				back. She comes in, unfastens the straps of her basket and puts it down.
Scene 3	The Father (Peter) The Mother	*Ra la la la ... Look, Mom, I come!*	Gemächlich 4/4 Beschleuningtes Zeitmass 3/4 Etwas mässiger 4/4 Noch schneller Etwas zurückhaltend 6/8 Im zeitmass	The father can be heard singing from a distance. Then closer and louder. He enters the room . very cheerfully, carrying a basket on his back.

Stage script for act II

C. The Staging Concept

Defining the general objective of the opera. The entire staging concept of "Hänsel and Gretel" was guided by the following motto: *A pure and faithful soul will overcome any danger.* We created this message from Gretel's words to her brother, when she says: "When we're in the greatest pains / The hand of God with us remains" (PT[19] p.15), which expresses, in fact, the faith of the whole family, as it is confessed by the four of them, in the final act. When trying to illustrate this message, we were also guided by a sacred painting, namely an image that we had in mind since childhood, depicting a situation where two children lost in the forest, like Hänsel and Gretel, can face any danger if they have faith that ultimately brings their guardian Angel beside them (e.g. 3).

---

[19] The score we used in our staging work was: Engelbert Humperdinck, *Hänsel und Gretel,* B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1895. All references in the analysis with regard to the quotes we extracted from the score have been noted with PT, followed by the page number where we identified the quote or the musical example.

E.g. 3

Children in the forest and their guardian angel[20]

Setting up the scenography, costumes, lighting, staging and technical effects. The planning phase where scenography and the costumes were also to be settled, consisted in gathering some suggestive images (e.g. 4). Implementing these initial images was later adapted to the staging possibilities and resources of the National Opera House in Cluj-Napoca, therefore many of the sets, costumes and stage items used in "Hänsel and Gretel" were scraped together from the existing resources.

---

[20] Source: http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/hanselgretel/notes.html (accessed on 2 August 2014).

E.g. 4

**Images used as an inspiration for staging sets
and costumes**

In constructing the staging composition, we relied on the staging directions set out in the score to a fairly large extent. Act I, HOME: "A shabby little room. In the background, a low door next to a little window with a view towards the forest. On the left, a kitchen stove with chimney. Brooms of different sizes hang on the walls" (PT, p. 12)

In our version, the staging set of the first act was preserved: a shabby little room. On the other hand, the arrangement of the setting elements changed as follows: in the middle of the room a table with a few chairs around it. At the bottom of the table, on the right[21], several brooms and towards the back of the room, a kitchen stove. On the left, near the

---

[21] View from the auditorium towards the stage.

side wall of the house, a bench chest and in front of it, a smaller bench. To the back of the set, a rear wall of the house, with a door on the left side. On this wall, two shelves with pots, cups and jars. On the left of the stage, to the forefront, a chair (e.g. 5).

E.g. 5

Stage setting for act I

Act II, In the Woods: "thick forest. In the background, Ilsa's Stone, surrounded by dense fir trees. On the right, a tall fir tree and beneath it, Gretel sitting on its mossy roots, making a rose hip wreath; beside her, a bouquet of flowers. To the left, in the bushes, Hänsel is looking for wild strawberries. The sun is setting" (PT p.72).

This act was initially meant to sketch the image of a fairy tale forests with all the elements implied. Due to shortage of materials and resources, though, we resorted to the use of a stage curtain painted with a forest landscape over which several "rag nets" were lowered so that it creates the image of a thicket. In front of it, wooden stumps and rocks made of papier-mâché were placed here and there on the stage floor. The result was a short set, reduced to the forefront of the stage (e.g. 6). We tried to create the atmosphere of twilight by using dark blue, orange and yellow light shades and the atmosphere of a magic forest where fantastic things happen and wonderful characters can appear, was created using elements like the smoke enwrapping Sandman or the bright, glittering grains of sand he blows into the eyes of children to make them fall asleep (e.g. 6). With the same intention Humperdinck had when he created a "living forest" by introducing the vocal and musical echo that responds back ("Who is it?" PT p.87), we also introduced the sound effect of a whistling wind (overlapping achieved by using a recorded sound). This was to give credibility to Hänsel's reply: „Ah, what rustles in the straw?! / Do you know what the thick

forest is saying?" It says: "Hänsel, Gretel, / Are you not afraid?" (PT p.83). In the view of creating the appropriate atmosphere and compensate as much as possible for the absence of varied instrumental tonalities, since the opera was performed only with a piano background, we resorted to the use of a blockflöte to render a cuckoo's lines inserted within the dialogue between Hänsel and Gretel. The latter also played the role of a cuckoo herself.

   Hänsel: "*Cuckoo, cuckoo, how are you?*"
   Gretel: "*Eating strawberries, fine, thank you!*" (PT p. 77)

E.g. 6
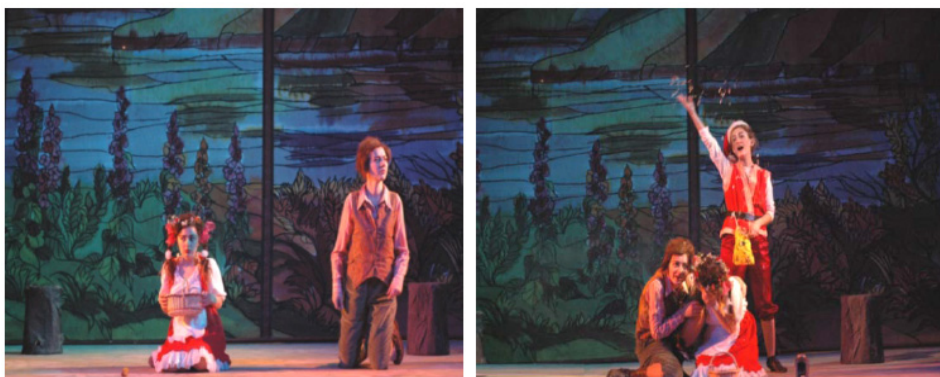
Stage setting for act II: Hänsel, Gretel and Sandman spreading stardust over the children

   Act III, The Gingerbread Cottage: "the foggy background is slowly rising (...) Hänsel turns towards the background. At that moment, the fog completely disappears and instead of the fir trees forest, the shining gingerbread cottage of Ilsa's Stone emerges into the rising sun. On its left side, at a certain distance, there is an oven and a large cage to the right; both the oven and the cage are linked to the house through a fence of gingerbread little people" (PT p.114).

   On the score, the last scene of act II is the pantomime of a dream (Traumpantomime) in which Hänsel and Gretel were surrounded by fourteen pairs of angels who sat around, watching them. In our version, we did not manage to stage neither this scene, nor the intervention of the gingerbread children's choir. Therefore, the IInd and the IIIrd act got shorter and merged, with no pause between them. The pantomime was thus used to make the transition from the forest settting to the witch's gingerbread cottage, by raising the painted curtain and allowing the view to the in-depth part of the stage, while Hänsel and Gretel are sleeping. We also chose to

make the transition between night and day by reducing and then intensifying the lighting, while Hänsel and Gretel were dreaming. The curtain was erected during the blackout time, then LEDs were turned on, being lowered from the stage tower behind the transparent background, to create the image of a starry sky.

The stage setting for the IIIrd act was an adaptation of Gheorghe Codrea's scenography, from which we took over the witch's gingerbread cottage, the oven and the cage. This setting was completed with a tree (on the right side), tree trunks scattered here and there on the stage floor, a curtain of lights placed on top of the towers of the cottage to give a little brightness to the outdated decor and some stage items and props to help creating the image of cottage full of goodies: cakes, fruits (made of papier-mâché), candies, gingerbread, biscuits, raisins, etc. (supplies) (e.g. 7).

The stage and technical effects used in the staging of "Hänsel and Gretel" were smoke (for the furnace), red light (eyes of the oven), strobe lights (for the magic spell moment and the dancing of the witch), thunder (for the moment the witch was thrown into the oven - recorded sound), the lowering of the cage during the spell, from the stage tower, the witch flying (during the blackout, the light strobe was turned on and we had a mannequin-witch fly from the left to the right side of the stage, with the gingerbread cottage in the background). The echo voice effect was used for the first interventions of the witch and was produced by singing into a microphone, so that her words seem just an illusion to the children:

The witch: "*Hey, mousy, mouse, who's eating my house?*"

Hänsel and Gretel: *"The wind, the wind, the Holy Kid!"* (PT p.123)

E.g. 7
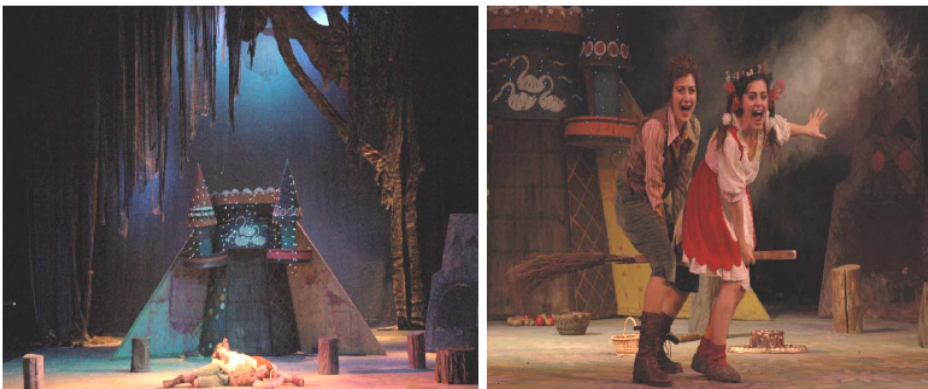
Stage setting for act III

Character analysis. In what the portrayal of characters is concerned, we tried to stick to the story as close as we could and highlight the traits characters have been endowed by the authors (the Grimm Brothers and Adelheid Wette). Especially the roles of fantastic, fairy tale-like figures of the story were created taking into account the typology specific to them and their actions:

- Sandman is a popular, mysterious character who travels in silence, with a bag full of sweet dreams for children who sleep. In "Hänsel and Gretel", Sandman is the first fairy tale character the two children interact with. Although in traditional story telling they say nobody ever saw him, he makes his appearance before the children get to say their good night prayer. At first, they are frightened, but Sandman is there to **comfort them and diminish their fear of the unknown**.

- The Dew Dwarf or the Morning Fairy is a magical character who appears at dawn, similarly to Sandman's appearance, having the task to **awake children and prepare them for a new day**, using dew droplets as a special "ingredient".

- The Witch is one of the essential roles in the opera. We have preserved the specific body traits and clothing features like the hat, a crooked nose, the hump in the back. **Her main purpose is to provide herself with young children, the food that makes her immortal**. To this end, she resorts to different tactics: she first attracts children with awesome sweets and goodies, then tries to gain their confidence by concealing her real character, and finally, she keeps to her malicious plan by trying to remove all obstacles arising in her way.

- The four members of the family are included in the other category of real characters of the story. We mention a few defining elements in their biography:

1. Gertrude - the mother: the biggest differences between the story of the Grimm Brothers and Adelheid Wette's version are to be found in the character of the mother, in her relationship with her children, in the reason she sends them into the woods, in the fact that she goes in the woods to look for them, etc. It's the maternal feeling inside her that we wanted to emphasize in recent staging of the opera, as the same actor playing the protective Morning Fairy also plays the mother. **Her main concern is to preserve her family's welfare**.

2. Peter, her husband, is a responsible father who wakes up every day thinking of the daily bread for his family, but conceals his anxiety with a cheerful attitude and jokes. **His purpose is to make his family forget about worries and believe in the goodness and protection of God above**.

3. Gretel: although the youngest child, she is more responsible than her brother and is always trying to temper him. **Her aim is to keep Hänsel on the right track and not let him loose his way**.

4. Hänsel: he is the prankish child of the family, always dissatisfied with something, always cheerful and playing tricks. For him, more than Gretel, the path to the forest and the events that followed are an initiating road, the process of passing from childhood to adulthood. **His purpose in the opera is to live cakes and ale.**

The stage management handbook – *blocking*[22]. The staging concept was initially drafted in the form of a book-score, that is a sort of staging book comprising pages of score (right) and white pages (left). There are numbers on the score, equivalent to every detailed action occurring on the white pages. This phase is important in order to synchronize as best as possible the actions of operatic actors with the musical accompaniment. If the opera is long in duration and the book-score becomes too thick, one can use other versions, the libretto-notebook, for instance, comprising pages with two columns: in the left column, the characters' lines and in the right column, staging direction.

We believe an opera staging director cannot eliminate the planning phase, be it even schematic, since the professional training of operatic actors is primarily focused on the musical aspects, and only to a small extent, on acting. For an operatic actor to be able to achieve the flexibility of a theatre actor, for instance, and naturally submit to the "orders directly imposed to them by the life enclosed in the score"[23], they need the director to provide them with support points, and this was confirmed to us especially when staging "Hänsel and Gretel". In our work with the operatic actors, we started with a few basic, guiding elements, gradually trying to guide them towards body disinhibition and the use of playing as a basic method in building and shaping characters and situations. Only after several performances of the

---

[22] "In theatre, *blocking* stands for the precise movement and the arrangement of actors on the stage, in order to ease the performance of a theatre play, ballet, film or opera performance". Online source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blocking_%28stage%29 (accessed on3 October 2014)

[23] Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, University of Miami Press, Florida, 1962, p. 19.

opera where actors based their acting on these guiding criteria, which they explicitly requested, we could see a greater confidence in interpreting (singing and acting), and after a while, they felt confident enough to even improvise.

When drafting the stage management handbook, we first started by trying to decode the authors' intentions. By developing this staging concept, we also aimed at properly highlighting these intentions and above all, making them as comprehensible as possible, mostly from a visual perspective, for the children in the audience. In addition, we tried to create an intertwining between a fantasy world and the real world, an interactive action involving opera characters and the children in the audience, using a series of methods, like the father's entrance on stage through the auditorium, a series of improvised interactive dialogue between the witch and children in the auditorium, the witch flying on the pit, as close to the children as possible, the throwing of Gretel's ragged sock in the audience, the animated and authentic performance of operatic actors.

3. Conclusions

We believe the role of opera directors nowadays, more than in the past, is to mediate between the initial hermeneutical idea and the way the audience perceives and understands opera. In previous centuries, when opera was performed subsequently to its composition, the contemporary audience was able to understand the codes of the interpretation, the cultural aspects specific to that period of time and only expected a coherent performance, faithful to the ideas recorded in the score. Over time, however, operas ceased to be staged in the same cultural context they were created, therefore the codes and the conventions embedded in them are to be deciphered. Nowadays, the current culture is very diverse for a spectator who does not specialise in the field of opera to understand the references the opera composer and the librettist encoded in their work. This is why opera directors became the main entities able to mediate in this process. We have asked ourselves, though, how far can this mediating freedom go in opera staging?

Modern theatre staging is definitely a source of inspiration for opera staging directors, but opera was meant to be a syncretic performance. In this syncretism, the performance and musical elements are constantly creating, intertwining with and conditioning one other. It would be enough just to draw attention to the fact that the acting of operating actors must be done in a given time and on a certain musical rhythm. The effort of bringing the opera performance in the same line with theatre staging brought the

need for increasing professionalism and diversity in the lyrical performance, but also led to many excesses, especially through the eclecticism specific to postmodernism. This sometimes led to an overall and ill-founded rejection of the director's role in opera performance and the identifying of excess with the idea of staging, which happens even today.

As we discovered when staging "Hänsel and Gretel", opera can attract large audience both by choosing a traditional staging approach and an updated staging, as well as through modern staging, when the director assuming this task is approaching opera being constantly curious and eager to explore and capitalize both roots and tradition, and the possibilities and opportunities brought by innovation. We believe an opera director must be especially aware of the fact that opera in itself is not an individual creation, but a performance that never did and never will exist but for the benefit and due to its public, since opera is fundamentally a sociological phenomenon implying the existence of an auditorium and of an audience.

REFERENCES

Books:

Appia, Adolphe, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, University of Miami Press, Florida, 1962.

Bianconi, Lorenzo and Giorgio Pestelli, ed., *Opera on stage*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002.

Brunell, Pierre and Stéphane Wolff, coordinator, *L'opéra,* (*The Opera),* Bordas, Paris, 1980.

Constantinescu, Gabriela - Caraman-Fotea, Daniela – Constantinescu, Grigore and Sava, Iosif, *Ghid de operă*, *(Opera's Guide),* Editura Muzicală (Musical Publishing House), Bucharest, 1971.

Gorceakov, Nicolai, *K.S.'s Directing Classes Stanislavski, (Stanislavski Directs),* Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă (The State Publishing House for Literature and Art), Bucharest, 1975.

Grout, Donald Jay and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera,* Columbia University Press, New-York, 2003.

Humperdinck, Engelbert, *Hänsel und Gretel, (Hansel and Gretel),* B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1895.

Radice, Mark A., *Opera in Context. Essays on Historical Staging from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini,* Amadeus Press, Portland, 1998.

Spolin, Viola, *Improvizaţia pentru teatru, (Theater Improvisation*) UNATC Press, Bucureşti, 2008.

Stanislavski, Konstantin Sergheevici, *Munca actorului cu sine însuşi, (An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary),* vol. I, Nemira, Bucureşti, 2013.

Stanislavski, Konstantin Sergheevici, *Munca actorului cu sine însuşi, (An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary),* vol. II, Nemira, Bucureşti, 2014.

Stanislavski, Constantin and Rumyantseu, Pavel, *Stanislavski on Opera,* edited and translated by Elisabeth Reynolds Hapgood, Routledge, New-York and London, 1998.

Articles in monographs:

Guccini, Gerardo, „*Directing Opera*", in *Opera on stage,* Lorenzo Bianconi, Giorgio Pestelli, ed.,The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 125.

Guccini, Gerardo, „*Direzione scenica e regìa*", *(Stage direction and Directing)* in Bianconi, Lorenzo - Pestelli, Giorgio ed., *Storia dell' Opera Italiana. La spettacolarità,* (*History of Italian Opera. The spectacularity*) vol. V, E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, Torino, 1988, p. 123-174.

Online sources:

Guccini, Gerardo, *La regìa lirica, livello contemporaneo della regìa teatrale (The opera direction, the level of contemporary theatrical directing):*
http://www.turindamsreview.unito.it/link/regia_lirica_guccini.pdf (12 May 2013).
http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/hanselgretel/notes.html (22 September 2014).
http://www.pinterest.com/pin/80994493269633870/ (2 August 2014).
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Blocking_% 28stage%29 (3 October 2014).