

Key Change Episode 4: Making Theatre Magic

SPEAKERS

Julie McIsaac, Robyn Grant-Moran, The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Sandra Corazza, Michael Levine

Julie McIsaac 00:00

Welcome to Key Change, the COC's new podcast exploring everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:23

Welcome to our fourth episode. We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran...

Julie McIsaac 00:26

...and Julie McIsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:29

It's hard to believe that our first season is almost coming to a close – it's really been flying by.

Julie McIsaac 00:35

And we're very excited that we'll be back in the winter with a new round of episodes to share with you. We've so much loved this journey through the opera experience and we'd love to hear from you, our listeners, about your own experiences, thoughts that you might have about the show, and even if you have ideas for future episodes – it'd be great to hear them.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:52

You can find us on social media @CanadianOpera, all one word, or send us an email at audiences@coc.ca. We'd love to hear from you.

Julie McIsaac 01:05

Now, as a stage director, I'm really excited about today's episode, particularly the opportunity that it's going to give us to gain some insight into how different opera practitioners approach developing the concept and design for a new production. So today we'll be focusing on visual storytelling and the collaborative process that brings a production to the stage, as well as those magical moments on stage that really wow us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:36

I'm really looking forward to sharing what our next guests had to say about these moments of theatre magic. First, we'll hear from former Governor General of Canada, the Right Honorable Adrienne Clarkson, for an audience members perspective. Madame Clarkson is a leading figure in Canada's

cultural life, she's had a rich and distinguished career in broadcasting, journalism, the arts and public service. She's also a major fan and a longtime supporter of the Canadian Opera Company.

Julie McIsaac 02:05

Absolutely. We're very grateful for her support of the art form and we're delighted that she was able to spend some time in conversation with us. She's a huge "Wagnerite", big fan, and was wowed by The Met's recent live stream of Parsifal – it's the Wagner opera that she's actually seen more so than any other – and, like many of us, she wishes she could have seen it at the COC this past fall as originally planned, and she'll tell us about that. She actually has a lot of stories and experience with Wagner productions. And she happens to be a big fan of productions by Michael Levine, so we obviously had to speak to him about how he goes about creating such magic on stage. Michael is an internationally acclaimed Canadian set and costume designer and, COC audiences, you may remember him from his collaborations with director Robert Carsen, like productions of Eugene Onegin, and Dialogues of the Carmelites, among others, as well as Bluebeard's Castle and Erwartung in collaboration with Robert Lepage. But, first, let's hear from Madame Clarkson.

Robyn Grant-Moran 03:13

Thanks for joining us, Madame Clarkson. Can you tell us about the first time you saw Parsifal?

Adrienne Clarkson 03:18

We were very fortunate to be able to go to Bayreuth in 2005, when I was Governor General, we took on our holidays, but we went and that's where I first saw Parsifal. So in the shrine of shrines – it's not an opera festival you know, Bayreuth. Bayreuth is like shark or, like, Lord; it's a religious ceremony and the people there are pilgrims, and they go every year. And I saw the production of Parsifal that was conducted by Pierre Boulez and directed by a poor gentleman called Christoph Schlingensief, who was known in Germany because he had been quite a prominent film director and this production was dreadful and the music was wonderful. And we were seated in Bayreuth, which is an extraordinary... Extraordinary acoustics, Wagner built it for his, you know, his music, his everything – that lip that covers, the orchestra pit. It was so extraordinary: there was a big rake on the stage, which was terrifying. (I'm always terrified when there's a rake on the stage because I'm terrified for the performers, that they will stumble on them, and especially in things that have a lot of costumes, that they'll roll down the hills.) Anyway, so, there's this huge mountain of something or other, and Kundry appears and you can't tell what Kundry is – whether it's a man or a woman or anything – dressed in what looked like old, dilapidated flags. And then, when Parsifal shoots the swan very early in, it's supposed to be a swan. So what falls to the ground is a large rabbit or a hare. So at that point the audience is restive right in it seats and at the sort of intermission, just as we were going out, we were seated beside a very elegantly dressed gentleman, he turned out to be a Slovenian but now Swiss banker coming to Bayreuth every year for one week for 31 years, and he said, "Is this your first time?", and I said, "Yes.", and he said, "You know, this is one of those performances where you just close your eyes and listen to the music." And, so, it was beyond ridiculous, however, the music was beautiful, the singing was beautiful. And, also, we were invited to dinner at the intermission by Wolfgang Wagner and he had a dinner of 10 people – himself, his wife, and the other major guest was Richard Strauss' grandson. We were seated at a table with these legendary families that center in this extraordinary place. None of us commented at all on the production and that was just as wise. But it was extraordinary to see these two profiles, that

I could see down the table, of Wagner and Strauss and they were absolutely the epitome of their families: I mean, Richard Strauss' grandson looked like him, and Wolfgang Wagner's profile looked like Richard Wagner. So it was amazing. Then, that one, that was in 2005. And about a year or so later, we were in Berlin, and I saw [Dmitri] Tcherniakov's production. And now Tcherniakov is kind of a madman but I think he's a very interesting opera director. We've seen his production of Don Giovanni. Then I saw about two years ago, the revival of François Girard's Parsifal at The Met,

Julie McIsaac 07:04

Wonderful! I'm just going to chime in for a moment, Madame Clarkson, and just let our listeners know – for those who might not be aware – that this production, the François Girard production that you've just started speaking about, was, of course, supposed to be the production that was seen at the COC this fall, had we been able to go forward with it – that co-production with The Met and Opéra National de Lyon – and we'd love to hear more about your experience watching that broadcast and the specifics of what engages you around the Girard production?

Adrienne Clarkson 07:31

Well, I have a very vested interest in François Girard because I gave him, you know, one of his first contracts for television, on "Adrienne Clarkson Presents" when he was doing very short films on dance and music with a company called Agent Orange. And I thought he was a genius then – he was about 12 years old – and I was buying everything that he made. And then one day I didn't buy something and he told me that I had ruined his Christmas. And I was very sorry about that but I knew that it wasn't going to ruin his career and he went on to do "Le dortoir", which was a wonderful piece of theatre and dance. And then suddenly he was invited to do one of the four [Ring Cycle opera's] – I think he did Siegfried, didn't he, in The Ring [Cycle] that opened the [Four Seasons Centre] opera house. And, I mean, it's amazing: he's become the most amazing Wagner director in the world and probably the most sought after, doesn't speak a word of German as far as I know – I have no musical background – but he understands Wagner, he has mainstreamed Wagner – in a way, his productions of Wagner are extraordinary and this Parsifal is unbelievable because he does away with all the, kind of, the flower girls and, yeah, instead of which, everybody is drenched in blood. And I think that that production of Parsifal, I will never see another that is as wonderful as that. The design, of course, is part of it – the design is all in the director's minds and he gets the person who designs it with him to collaborate and I just think it's extraordinary. And, of course, being somebody who's interested in theatre and performance and so on, I have to say, every time I see it, "How do they get new costumes every time?", because the blood is all over those maidens' clothing and it comes pouring down on everything. How do they manage to do that? I don't know.

Robyn Grant-Moran 09:39

Can you talk a little bit more about your thoughts on the theatrical magic that made the blood and the lighting

Adrienne Clarkson 09:49

I did believe, when I was doing television – especially studio television but also out, you know, when we were on-site doing documentaries and especially the last series I did of "Adrienne Clarkson Presents" – that lighting is everything: lighting is the most important thing to a performer and also, I think, to the

audience. And so I always look for lighting and I always look at lighting credits when I'm watching theatre because I find that the lighting – the director can't do anything unless he has a lighting companion. And the great theater/opera director I'm going to talk about next, Robert Carsen, he worked hand in hand with only two lighting directors and he himself has his electrician's card to light; he can light at the Metropolitan [Opera], he can light here because he belongs to the unions. It's a very, very important thing, lightning. And lightning is everything: I mean, I'm so old that I was the person who was experimented a lot on when CBC went from black and white television to color television in 1969. And for a year before it, we were experimented on with, you know, we're going to have lighting scoops on the floor where we're having a talk, and the great lighting director of the CBC, who lit all the dramas that were done – a lot of them were done live – called Johnny Griselle I got to know quite well, and Johnny just knew about lighting and he said to me, "Never let anybody light you for anything unless you know that they're not lighting you like a piece of furniture. You're not a piece of furniture; you're a human being and the lighting has to model that." And I've always remembered that. So when I see a production, I know when it's been lit well. I don't know how to do it – I can't tell, you know, what's a key light or where you should move it – but lighting is everything. And I think that, in the Parsifal of François Girard, you see that and, you see, it's not just that they can manage to get the red blood coming out and the design is beautiful. I mean, I think those maidens in their white shifts with their long hair, they're both archetypal feminine and yet archetypal victim. Their frailty, their delicacy, and the whole idea of the blood being the connecting thing between the Holy Grail – which was the cup of the Last Supper – the wound of Amfortas the Spear, it just is a huge link. It's wonderful!

Julie McIsaac 12:26

I'm wondering if you could speak to us a little bit about the set design and the costumes and the... I'm going to use the word "updating" of the Knights of the Grail – but that might not be the right word – but just the way they've been interpreted in this particular production by Girard by Michael Levine.

Adrienne Clarkson 12:42

Well, in this production, the costuming and so on, which gives you a kind of eternal feeling and yet, the Knights are not clanking around in armor, you know, that just gets in the way. I mean, sometimes we have evolved as audiences and brilliant theatre directors and opera directors know that we don't need to see people in costumes, we know what that looks like. You may need to see it on Game of Thrones; you certainly do not need to see it on the stage of the Canadian Opera Company or at Bayreuth. And what you need to see is costuming and design and lighting that will bring you to the intensity of the work of art which is being presented. And that's what they have done in the Parsifal: when you see the man in their suits, and you see the women in their shifts, and you see the lighting, all of that leads you into "what is knighthood anyway?" Knighthood is a group of men who belong to the same caste and who are together in that way. So wearing the suits in Parsifal – you know, men in suits are a caste. So what you have is, you instantly recognize that they are part of a group. It's not necessary to put them in the 10th century, the 14th century or anything; it's just what we understand now as a caste. So that's the kind of thing I would just use that as a specific thing. And then if you have great actors as well as great singers, when you see that, when you even see something like Klingsor that you don't depend upon it being the costume or the makeup; it's the singing, the music, lighting, particularly, and a total concept of what this opera means.

Julie McIsaac 14:39

It's great to help illustrate, for our audience, how much the production design and the vision of the stage director inform the production that the audience then receives. I'm just thinking for our listeners who've maybe only ever seen one production of a particular opera, for them to be opened up to this whole expanse of interpretation that you're opening us up to. It's wonderful.

Adrienne Clarkson 14:59

I think it's really important because, you know, Verdi when he premiered *La Traviata* in 1847 or 6 – something like that – it was a not a success and the reason it was not a success was that he set it in the period of his event: it was a modern dress production, it was costume/clothes that people wore in 1848. And people hated that! They hated it! He got booed, he got hissed. He had to remount it later a year and make compromises, etc. So people's ideas of what they think they should see are very, very, very much tailored to what they think they should be seeing, what they're used to seeing. I think, with great art, your mind, and heart, and eyes have to be always open to what is the real meaning, because the genius is in the work of art and the production should serve that.

Robyn Grant-Moran 15:57

You've seen a lot of operas and many different productions of the same opera, and I'm just wondering: which, sort of, captured the magic of theatre most for you? I mean, obviously, *Parsifal* is a very powerful experience. But can you tell us about other, your top five list?

Adrienne Clarkson 16:19

My "top top" is Robert Carsen's production of *Dialogue of the Carmelites*, which we have put on at the Canadian Opera Company but which was first put on in 1997 at the Netherlands Opera Company [Dutch National Opera] in Amsterdam, and I went to do a program. I was doing a program on Robert Carsen, the great Canadian director, who has made his career in Europe, and that was the opera production he was working on. So we went there and I spent, you know, several weeks following him doing that. So I watched it through rehearsals, etc. and then I saw it on opening night and I have to say that Michael Levine, who designed it for him – and he used Poulenc's music, which is sublime – and produce something that was the very essence actually of the intersection of power and religion. There isn't a single cross or religious thing in *Dialogue of the Carmelites* and yet it is the most profoundly religious of any opera I've ever seen: the idea of sacrifice and victimhood in the service of good and belief is carried out in the most extraordinary way. And you'll never find a greater scene than the final scene when the nuns are all guillotined. But the way in which Robert Carsen developed that into a Sufi-like trance – the nuns do a Sufi-like dance in which they're all twirling around – it's just... And then they go off, you know, in this bliss of mysticism to their martyrdom. In an opera, you shouldn't be thinking there are these pieces and you like this and you didn't like that; it should all come together because opera without that is totally ridiculous. "All praise" is the most ridiculous of art forms unless it's done sublimely. And even more people are sometimes of course, you know, singing over an entire orchestra, which is below them and in front of them, and there's scenery and all this stuff and there's supposed to be a story. I think that's really why a lot of people who really are crazy about opera, like me: we understand the absurd because it can be. But even the worst operas, to me, have a charm about them and something that's wonderful because that effort has been made to bring all those things together. And it's so unlikely but when it works, boy, does it work!

Robyn Grant-Moran 19:22

I was completely blown away by the depth and breadth of Madame Clarkson's knowledge about opera.

Julie Mclsaac 19:28

And I loved what she was saying about light: how she brought her attention to the fact that, in the theatre, the director can frame what they want you to look at on stage by using light and that's different than a process in film and TV, whereas there's a whole process of editing that helps us to know what to look at.

Robyn Grant-Moran 19:42

And lighting and framing is so important when you're looking at costuming.

Julie Mclsaac 19:47

Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 19:48

I had the exact same question Madame Clarkson did about the costumes of Parsifal. So of course, we had to chat with the COC's costume supervisor, Sandra Corazza, to find out just how do you get the blood out of those costumes every night.

Julie Mclsaac 20:09

Thank you so much for joining us today. We're really curious – knowing that we weren't able to see Parsifal this season, but we very much hope to bring it to audiences in a future season – what were you and your team working on to prepare for Parsifal? What did your preparation look like?

Sandra Corazza 20:23

The preparation started many years ago. So the first time The Met put it on stage – which was in the middle of a snowstorm, I do remember that – we all got to go to New York and see it. And, at that point, we saw it from in front of the curtain. The team down there was amazing – from the head of the costume shop to the people who ran the wardrobe – they walked us through things backstage. But it's a madhouse back there: it's this weird little factory and it's so full. There was very little order to it, it was just as you walk by a room, they'd explain everything that was going on in there. And I wrote down notes madly and came back and tried to type it all up. Then a couple years ago, we were fortunate that we got to go again and this time we watched it from backstage. So by that point, your brains are sort of half-full, and you got your questions all lined up, and you know what's coming, and that let us watch the whole process, especially Act Two, which has the pool of blood in it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:27

How will you get the blood out of the dresses in time for the next performance?

Sandra Corazza 21:32

It's magic! We don't have the full casting of our chorus yet, but we believe that we will get enough slips (slips/white dresses, whatever you want to call them) that every person in our cast will have two. So

that gives us just a little bit of time. After that, it could possibly some overnights. The process is long. So for the chorus it won't be hard. Those slips might get a little blood on them; their nudes, as we call them (so everything that you would wear underneath your white slip, which could be a leotard, Spanx, nude bras, etc), those things probably won't get stained but they all need to be washed. So that's just plain wash, hang to dry, steam put it back in the dressing room. The 19 dancer ones have a process where they go into what they called "the marinade": so when these dancers come offstage, they basically strip, there was a series of bins, so one bin gets your robe. one bin gets your towels, the wig and makeup team is there, they take your wig (remember, it's a wig that goes down about knee length. It's a really long wig. It's soaked by this point), and you then take off your nudes and your slip, which are all attached in one piece – they've all been snapped together. So you just pull that on down and leave it in a pile and a dresser will come along and unsnap the nudes from the white slip. The white slips then had a rinse in water, then I believe here we'll probably then take them to another room, put them again in water with something called Fairy soap, which is this great dish detergent we get from the U.K., and I don't know why we don't have an alternative in Canada – it may be Dawn is the closest – but it's a pretty amazing product and we've already bought, like, about 24 jars of it. Because it wasn't just, "Oh, I'll put a capsule in," it was, "I'm going to hold the bottle and squirt onto the slips and rinse and rinse and water and rinse and rinse some more." They then got kind of wrung out and put in the marinade, which was three huge buckets that were prepared during Act One, and they had more Fairy soap put in them and OxiClean, and then they were left there for two days, which is kind of scary. When we've worked with Michael [Levine] before – because he likes his blood, he really does – we've always used natural fibres, which is interesting. One of Michael's shows was [Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung], which we've had in our repertoire for a long time and it's near and dear to my heart, but that's all natural fibres – it's all cottons and silks – and we literally brew, if we bring it to this simmer, a pot of water that has chemical color removers that we put into the pot and then her bloody dress then goes into that pot and is simmered, and it's amazing to sort of watch the blood disappear!

Julie Mclsaac 24:43

That was fascinating! She's really seen so much.

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:46

She really has! And if you're not familiar with just how bloody this production of Parsifal is, we'll put a link to some examples in this week's show notes at coc.ca/KeyChange.

Julie Mclsaac 24:59

Sandra had lovely things to say about having worked with Michael Levine on past productions, and we know that so many of our listeners are big fans of his work. So let's dive in and find out how that magic that he creates on stage is brought to life.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:24

Michael Levine, thank you for joining us today. When you're the set or costume designer for a production, how do you approach that process?

Michael Levine 25:32

Well, the process is an interesting one when you're working on a production as a designer because you, of course, start with whatever the piece is – you know, that is your initial point of departure, so depending on whether you're working in a theatre, or in an opera, or whatever. So if you're working in a theatre, you have the words – and so that's your point of departure – and then for the opera you have these two things: one is the words and one is the music, and the two of them require the same amount of attention in some regards. So there's a kind of slight difference when you're working on a play because the music of the piece comes much later in the process; it comes with the actors further on. So you can read the play, you understand the concepts of the play, you understand the place, the environment that it might be in, and also the quality of it, but you don't have the atmosphere yet. You know, part of what I do is try to kind of imagine the pace of that, trying to imagine the atmosphere. When you're working on an opera, for example, the atmosphere comes with the production, it comes with the music.

Julie McIsaac 26:40

We know that our COC audiences we're so looking forward to seeing Parsifal this fall and, unfortunately, they weren't able to see it this season but we're hoping to bring it to them in a future season. And so, what was related to what you've talked to us about, how did that inform your experience and your approach to designing the sets for Parsifal?

Michael Levine 26:57

Parsifal is a really interesting story because Parsifal is really dense – as a story and musically, it's really dense. It's where Wagner brings all of these themes that run through all of his operas: these strange, fascinating themes of religion, and the will of man, and all of these different kinds – they all collide in Parsifal. And also his sort of idea of religion, which is sort of slightly Buddhist and Christian – it's just all kind of mixed up and Parsifal. And the piece is really impenetrable, it's very difficult to understand what's going on. And there's a scene at the centre of Parsifal, which is a key scene, which is when Kundry kisses Parsifal. And it's a moment where she... it's a really weird scene: it's like you're listening to it and you're reading and you think, "What is this scene about?" So, because Kundry, who's supposed to be, like, a prostitute, is trying to lure Parsifal to sin, but she's doing that by pretending to be his mother, which is too weird. You know, she's pretending to be his dying mother. And so it became this question that I kept on coming back to, when I was working on it with François, is, "Why does she pretend to be his dying mother, to make him feel guilty that he left without saying goodbye as a form of seduction?" It just seems so odd. She's embodying his mother's guilt in order to get him to kiss her. It's really, really strange. And there was something about that and then there was something about his rejection of that. So she appeals to his sense of guilt – his deep sense of guilt – in order to seduce him, and he rejects her and we wanted that rejection to somehow be somehow relating to the whole rejection, because, I think, that's kind of a little bit central to Parsifal, is: the rejection of the female. And there's something about cardinal sin, the first sin, and all of that, which is caught up in that. I mean, you know, it's a very controversial thing in our society right now, but I wanted that humiliation of the woman to be, kind of, the centre point of the whole piece, because I think that is key to what he was thinking about in his, sort of, notion of the rejection of this sin and what that meant – it's this, kind of, notion of Adam and Eve. And so ultimately, what came out of our conversation was that the humiliation of Kundry has to be really horrible, has to be emotionally horrible for the audience. And I think it's something that can be overlooked in Parsifal. And, for me, it was the central key to the story. And so

then, you know, we had got to the point where they were on a bed together (because it made sense because she was trying to seduce him by pretending to be his mom), and we wanted him to push her off the bed and François said, "So we'll push her off the bed and that'll be humiliating." And I said, "Well, it's not really enough, I think we need...", and so, then, we came up the idea that maybe she should fall off the bed and fall into blood, because blood is a theme that runs through the piece. And then, from that, we thought, "Oh, well, oh, yeah, maybe she should. Maybe the floor should be blood. Maybe what she falls into is blood. So then that was a big discovery so that I wouldn't, because flooding the stage with blood is not just a small thing – you have to think you're okay with it. So you've got a bed and you have blood. So then, like, in the process when you're working on something, you try to hold on to those things that you find. So you found a bed, we found blood, and then you, kind of, work out from there. And then we had discovered, in Act One, that we wanted our landscape to be a barren landscape, because it's about this society that has a wound at the center of it. So you have this society that has this wound that needs to be healed. And so what we were looking for is a metaphor for that, which was a kind of parched landscape – a river that's no longer running. And in order to heal that wound in the society, we had to understand what caused the wound in the first place. And so we had this parched landscape with this river that was dry and then we open the landscape. At that point, we thought, "Oh, if Parsifal was able to, kind of, fall into the river – as if he was in a film, he would fall into the river – to discover what the root of the problem was, then he would fall into this other place, this other world, where he could help heal the society. And, so, then we thought, "Oh, well, if he falls into the river, then he falls down, and he'll end up in a place where this blood is." Yeah, so the flower maidens are there and they're the guardians of this other place. And it became this, kind of, metaphor of... it's like, "in this valley was where you found the blood, which is where Kundry lived, but she was on top of this bed, which meant that she was in this pure place or pretending to be pure." And it all started to spring out of that, out of this kind of layers of reading from the blood outwards, you know. And then there are, kind of, simple decisions that were taken along the way, which is that, when you get to Act Three, the society is really dying by then, Members inside of you to do So the stage is covered with freshly buried graves. And so then it becomes a little bit of a story of a rejuvenation of a society. So, it became something about blood and nature, trying to bring flow back into the river again, yeah, and connected to women and this kind of strange fear of women in the piece, which is why he descends into this place, which is full of blood. There are these two cliffs that run up the side, which are actually incredibly vaginal – you know, yeah, they're meant to be cliffs but they're actually, it's like, being inside of, kind of, an enormous vagina – and without being in a vagina but, you know, it's really connected to that. You have the flower maidens who are the keepers of that place. So, and there's a real sense of him being in a kind of female world, but then it's a very strange thing with the what they do.

Julie McIsaac 34:17

The ideas that come from the text and that come from the score then translate into these aesthetic ideas and these shapes and these textures that find their way on stage – it's lovely to gain that insight. The other guests that we're interviewing for this episode, Michael, is the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, who's a huge opera fan, Wagner fan, so she's seen a lot of your work. And I'm wondering, I might toss it over to you, Robyn, for that next question that relates to something that Madame Clarkson shared with us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:44

An opera that she found particularly moving was the Dialogue of the Carmelites and it was your production with Robert Carsen. So I was wondering what made that partnership so successful,

Michael Levine 34:57

Robert and I worked together for a really long time. We have this really interesting story that nobody really knows about, which is: I was designing Eugene Onegin for The Met and I designed this incredibly, wonderful, sort of, extravagant St. Petersburg house in perspective of, sort of, interior in perspective, and going back with all this, sort of, beautiful St. Petersburg stuff inside it. I thought it was really nice, it was like a, kind of, ornate room downstage that became less and less ornate as it went upstage. And so Tatyana's room was at the back and it was going to come all the way to the front of the room, which was, like, a version of the big room but small and stripped of decoration. Always a memory of that was from Onegin's point of view of this mistake, this terrible moment of mistake that Onegin had taken. And I had designed this really extravagant set with quite gilded and all of those things that I presented to The Met in a preliminary design and they said, "Fine, that looks great." Great. And so I went away and worked for a couple months, perfecting all, everything, and all the details was quite a lot of work. And then I handed it in and they were like, "Wow, it's a little bit, I don't know, it's a bit like our [The] Queen of Spades." And I was like, "Uh, what, what? You... I just handed this in. I've been working on it for, like, five months. And then we had this... No, it's really interesting." So I kind of devastated, I thought, "Oh my gosh." You know. "That's really the end of that." And they were like, "Come up with something different." Like what? And this was a finished design, where you do a model and it's a lot of time...

Julie Mclsaac 36:44

You had already reached that point with it.

Michael Levine 36:46

It's like a finished product your handing in. And that night, we were at the bar across the road from The Met and I thought, "Oh my god, I don't want to do... this is crazy." I said "This is crazy. Like, we just can't do it." I mean, now because I was also onto another project after and I was, like, I don't have time to redesign Eugene Onegin from scratch! And then we had this idea, we were, like, "Let's, like, not do that big, extravagant, you know, St. Petersburg thing; let's try to just, kind of, strip it all away to the essential story. And this was, like, you know, one of those crazy stories you read about on the back of the bar's...

Julie Mclsaac 37:23

Right! Yeah.

Michael Levine 37:25

... napkin thing. And I said, "Let's just take away all of the non-essential decorative detail and try to tell the story as just the story of Onegin's memory. So, you know, maybe it just is essential things we need. And it's more of a memory space," which is then we came to this new version, which is basically in a kind of white box, and there are some objects in it, which are kind of memory and filled with leaves, which the COC did.

Julie McIsaac 37:57

Yes! I was going to say, yes, it's been at the Four Seasons Centre.

Michael Levine 38:00

So, and it was a really interesting... and, for us, that was kind of, like, a big thing because, in fact, stripping it away, I think it was an incredible, kind of, learning experience because we thought, "Yeah, it's actually a much better production." I mean, we got, like, the critics were terrible for when we opened in New York – they thought it was, like, the worst thing they'd ever seen and, like, "What happened to our beautiful, old production of Eugene Onegin? We loved it! It had houses and walls, and we loved it." And so that was a little disappointing but, however, it became the much-loved production of The Met over a period of time, and then when they did their new production of Eugene Onegin directed by Deborah Warner, they then said, "Well, what, what about our old... we love our old production of Eugene Onegin..."

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:53

In the productions, like, what you're describing, there's so much detail that goes into creating this magic that we see on stage. What's the most memorable bit of stage magic that you've helped create?

Michael Levine 39:08

There's a terrible thing that happens to you when you're working on a production, you know, because you work on them for so long and you start off a bit by learning about the production and then you go on to begin to design it, and then the design process is quite complicated. And then, you know, once you have an idea and you're excited, but then you begin to figure out practically how to build that idea. Then you have to, sort of, pick it apart and so you're looking at it from all different aspects and you're trying to hold on to your original inspiration so that it captures the audience in the same way that it captured you. And by the time you get to the, kind of, finished process you're like, "Ugh, none of it's, like, as good as it should be," and, you know, even though you're trying really hard to make it. And it's always really nice to come back to a production several years or a couple years after you've made it because it feels very, "Oh, yeah, no, that's okay!" because you're less involved in all the tiny, little technical, "Oh, look," you're always like, "Oh, that corner, there's a piece of dirt on it," and so you can't see the production. So it's really hard when you're actually making a production to see any magic, you know, at all. I've had the chance to work on so many lovely productions, and interesting productions, and I feel, like, there are at so many different points in and on various productions I've achieved that I've felt really proud of what I've done. And, for me, the really magical moments are where everything comes together, so that you have, you know, whether it be a theatre piece or an opera, it's that you really feel like all of the disciplines in the theatre have come together. So, you know, the lighting designer's work, and my work, and the director's work, and the choreographer, and the musicians. And, you know, I mean, it's an incredible thing, which I think people take for granted, is that all of these people are working together to make this string of little moments work every night in the same way. Because, you know, so you have the lighting has to be exactly right. And, if you can do that – if you can, kind of, get that hand to move into the light at the right moment when your environment has just the perfect amount of, let's say, smoke in the air, and that's the lighting the thing and, you know, the sound of that flute, or whatever it is, you know, combines together – it's fantastic! And I'm always really, kind of, on opening night, after I've been through the whole pain of making the production, I feel

incredibly grateful that, you know, I've been a part of this incredible undertaking, which is amazing because you have all of these people working together, and the liveness of it is extraordinary, you know: the way lights work is that, you know, if you're lighting something, say, from the side, you know, you have the shutters that shutter down on it, so you jump like everything else. It's really, like, two millimeters, moving something in so that it's shuttered down to the right thing, so you're not lighting something you don't want to be lighting; you don't want the audience to look over there, you want them to look there. So, you know, if the light blasts all over the side, they're all looking at something else, which they should be looking at: the singer singing the thing. And so, you know, you'll be watching an opening night performance and, you know, you won't have the two millimeters and you think, "Oh, ugh" and that moment's gone but then sometimes you will and you think, "That's nice, it's perfect."

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:58

I found Michael Levine's point about theatre magic coming more from the mundane to be really interesting. It was in sharp contrast with what Madame Clarkson had said about the importance of lighting.

Julie McIsaac 43:12

Yeah, there's this really interesting contrast between the designer and the technicians and this whole team doing this series of, like you said, these mundane, precise tasks that need to happen, that, in the end create this effect that is experienced by the audience as super magical, but that they might be approaching it from two different sides – that the audience member's experiencing it in a different way than the people who are working really hard to make it happen.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:36

Right, like, if you're backstage at an opera, which, of course, is a vantage point that many people never get to experience, it's just this crazy choreographed dance with people leaving one exit and then running to another entrance. So they might be running around the back of the set. There's the stage manager calling directions constantly, that ever ticking clock.

Julie McIsaac 44:02

Yeah. And the fact, like, because it's a live art form, the fact that things are balanced on such a tricky balance that things can go wrong so easily. But then those nights where things just come together and the stage manager calls that cue just in the right pocket, just that right moment so that, like, Michael was saying, so the smoke is rising and the light is hitting the hand. And, yeah, this crazy choreographed dance that is slightly different every night.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:27

It absolutely. And I love that that's kind of the tension in the magic for me.

Julie McIsaac 44:34

Sandra's someone that I've gotten to know in my experiences at the COC but I didn't know, Robyn, if you'd met Sandra before, what your takeaways were from having that experience with her.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:42

Yeah, no, I only know her name from programs and by reputation. It's a number of showers needed – like, that has never crossed my mind. That, yes, you have people who are covered in blood; they need to get clean.

Julie Mclsaac 45:00

And this sheer amount of laundry...

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:02

Right?

Julie Mclsaac 45:03

...to be reminded and there's a lot of laundry even just in a regular production that doesn't flood the stage with blood. Like, laundry is an important element and I think it's really important for us to remember of those things that we might deem to be mundane, like laundry, are actually a really important part of the process, and none of this could happen without those hard-working people.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:21

Then going back to the lighting: like, just a millimeter making a difference with how your eye is directed. And, if the laundry isn't done perfectly... Like, it's just so many things happening at once that could go wrong every performance and somehow, as if by magic, it all comes together. We really are, as a species, like, herding cats. So, that, like, a small team can organize so many people to make so many things happen, it really is a remarkable accomplishment, I think, of humanity. I know it sounds cheesy...

Julie Mclsaac 46:09

No, no. No.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:11

But it is really remarkable,

Julie Mclsaac 46:14

Yeah. Robyn, do you have a moment of a design intervention or a design moment that really shaped your experience or appreciation of an opera?

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:23

When I was living in London, I saw a production of Alcina. And I believe it was Sue Blane who did the costumes – she did The Rocky Horror Picture Show – and, so, it was all these fabulous, opulent period pieces, but the fabrics were holographic...

Julie Mclsaac 46:44

Oh!

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:45

...and, like, and vinyl. So it had this futuristic, not-yet-really-in-existence steampunk kind of vibe to it. But I think that was sort of the moment for me where I suddenly had a very different appreciation of the

power of light, and costume, and convention, and how you can play with those things and create entirely new and different and exciting worlds.

Julie Mclsaac 47:16

What I love about it – and I'm not a costume designer, so, I don't have all the right vocabulary to speak about this – but the fact that there's a silhouette, so there's the shape of the costume, which might suggest a particular era, historically, like, the shape on the women: are they corseted, are they not, are the men's suits and the cut of the suit? But then there's also texture – like, what are those fabrics – and that you can take a silhouette of a certain era and a texture from another era and combine them in these novel ways and create these interesting effects by virtue of mixing up those things, those elements.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:47

I like the creativity of combining the sort of more minimalist approach with, like you said, more historically suggestive costuming. It takes it out of a museum context but it still has the whispers of its origins and where it fits historically.

Julie Mclsaac 48:10

And I find that there's something – when the production is more spare – I find that potentially I have more opportunities of realizing just the humanity of the characters.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:20

Mm hmm.

Julie Mclsaac 48:21

There's some...

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:22

Yeah!

Julie Mclsaac 48:22

...it takes away this level of artifice, or something, and I see the character more as just a fellow human.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:28

Yeah, and I mean, like, you don't have the distractions of the heavy opulence.

Julie Mclsaac 48:35

It's also making me realize that, in my own practice, I am very visual in terms of the storytelling. And I know that until we're at a certain point in our rehearsal process – and with adding tech where things are working spatially in the way that I think or that I hope serves the story the best – I have trouble focusing on some of the other elements. So the visual storytelling and the integration of the lighting – and bodies in space in particular, like, how bodies carve out space and significance and meaning by virtue of how much distance is there between those two characters, and what does that speak about tension and

about their relationship – until those spatial elements are aligned in the right way, I find it hard to then shift to another perspective as a stage director.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:16

That makes a lot of sense. Like, I mean, I don't think that much like a director. So how things get created is really... it's a mystery to me even though I am ostensibly somewhat part of it.

Julie Mclsaac 49:34

Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:35

It's still... you guys do this whole otherworldly miracle work, as far as I'm concerned,

Julie Mclsaac 49:44

Aw, that's so sweet of you to say – err, it's lovely to hear that it's perceived in that way, and interesting because as you're doing it, like Michael said in his interview, it feels onerous – you know, it feels like you're really in these, like, mundane, "trying to get this to that."

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:59

How he just broke everything down, like, if he's going to do a production...

Julie Mclsaac 50:05

Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:06

How he takes it apart?

Julie Mclsaac 50:09

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:09

Like, it's just completely stripped apart and subdivided, so he can then assemble it...

Julie Mclsaac 50:16

...and then put it back together. I was...

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:18

Yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 50:18

...like, when he was speaking about Parsifal and how it was really about that kiss – that moment of the kiss...

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:23

Right.

Julie Mclsaac 50:23

...and Kundry and how that became a central point of inquiry for them, in terms of figuring out what does that moment mean in our telling of the story, and how everything then had to come out from that. So it's, like, "She's gonna fall off the bed, okay. She's gonna fall off the bed into blood. okay. There's going to be blood," and how then it all comes out from that one central moment or that one thing that they deem to be essential or important in their telling of the story. And you also just never know what it is that's going to capture your imagination, or your passion as an artist working on the production – that it might be something buried in Act Three, but that it can illuminate your understanding of the whole opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:59

Yeah, I sometimes like a really grandiose production. And I never really know what to think going in, if I know something's going to be more minimal or sparse. In a way, like you said, when you don't have all that artifice and that you can connect to the performers and the characters more as people. But, outside of that, with the storytelling, how to look at it, or what that means, I found a lot of things clicked for me listening to Michael Levine speak about that process.

Julie Mclsaac 51:33

Okay.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:34

And the idea of Eugene Onegin, where he had this lush set planned and that it got denied at a very awkward time in the production process. So he had to then reimagine it basically at a bar on the back of a cocktail napkin. And that having the costumes with the minimalist set – I don't know, something just clicked there for me where, like, it can be a much more nuanced approach to telling a story because you are so focused on the characterization.

Julie Mclsaac 52:15

Well, and it brings my attention to this idea of atmosphere and how atmosphere created, and you can create atmosphere with... there's velour and there's tapestries, and there's really rich materials, and that creates an atmosphere of what this house is like. But you can also create atmosphere – an emotional atmosphere, you know, "is there..."

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:35

Right.

Julie Mclsaac 52:36

Is there doubt, is there trepidation, is there intrigue?" And that can be created through a combination of lighting and the angle the lighting and the number of bodies on stage and their spatial relationship to the central protagonist. And so there's all these different ways that we can create atmosphere and some of them are material and tangible, and some of them have to do with light and space, and they're things that are less, umm, at first glance, you don't put your finger on them in the same way...

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:00

Mm hmm.

Julie McIsaac 53:00

...and, yet, they're very powerful and evocative.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:03

Yeah, I'll definitely be looking into – once we have opera again to attend – I'll be looking at minimalist productions or more minimal productions, with a very different set of eyes after the conversations that we've had.

Julie McIsaac 53:22

Yeah, I'll find myself looking at productions and trying to figure out what was "the thing"? "What was that gem that they unlocked in their early conversations and that collaboration with the designer and the director? What do I think that was?" if they don't share it – they might share it in director's notes or something like that.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:38

Of course.

Julie McIsaac 53:39

But if they don't, or if it's just a fun exercise to go into it and to watch and to receive a production and try to figure out, "Okay, what was it that captured them: was it a word, was it a scene, was it a moment?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:50

So many exciting new ways to look at things.

Julie McIsaac 53:53

It was great to have this opportunity to talk about Parsifal and, just to let everyone know, that Parsifal will be coming as part of the 2022/2023 COC season. So keep the hope alive, thank you for your patience and we hope this has whetted your appetite a little bit.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:13

And speaking of productions in the future: our final episode of this season, of the 2020 season, will be about the future of opera.

Julie McIsaac 54:25

That next episode is going to come out on December 22nd, and we've got lots of exciting stuff in store for 2021 as well.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:32

And, remember, we love to hear your feedback. So please send us your thoughts, suggestions, or just say hi by visiting us on social media @CanadianOpera, or emailing audiences@coc.ca.

Julie Mclsaac 54:46

And if you're a COC subscriber or member, you have access to bonus content and extended interviews, which you can access through your weekly supporter newsletter – so stay tuned for that next week.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:57

Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eOpera.

Julie Mclsaac 55:09

Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber, and donor for coming on this journey with us, as we explore new ways to share opera's unique power.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:23

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Julie Mclsaac 55:30

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:37

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange.