

8 : THE HEARTBEAT OF BOHÈME

A. KEEPING IT SIMPLE

1. Class title 1 (Zeffirelli and Kosky *Bohèmes*)
2. Section title A (the above, animated)
3. Repeat of Class title

Once more, **Franco Zeffirelli** (1923–2019) is the icon against which any modern production of the big romantic operas must compete. Especially his 1981 Metropolitan Opera production of *La bohème* (1896) by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924). When **Peter Gelb** came in as General Manager at the Met, he talked about replacing many of the old productions, and indeed he has done so with most of the Verdis and Wagners, and *Tosca* and *Butterfly* by Puccini. But it was quickly made clear to him that *Bohème* was not one he could touch. It was a Met signature piece, and clearly the way the opera “ought to be done.”

4. Posters of *La bohème* (reused slide)

But is it? Imagine you know nothing about the opera, and take a look at these three posters. What would you think you were going to see and hear? With the original poster on the left, a madcap romp. With the **Jamie Wyeth** one in the middle, a romantic weepie. And with the small Australian company on the left, something real and gritty, involving young people like ourselves, our children, or grandchildren. All these are reflections of the taste of their time, but also choices made by the directors and impresarios. And the Zeffirelli Met production is also a choice, coming from an esthetic that sees opera as an extravagant feast for the eye as much as for the ear, and catering to a donor base that expects *mucho* bang for their buck. Here is the trailer.

5. Puccini: *La bohème*. Title footage from the Met
6. Act I set (reused slide)
7. Act II curtain (reused slide)

The Zeffirelli production is simply amazing. Not only does he get the attic room onto the stage in every detail, he adds a couple of balconies and several nearby rooftops as well. There are two singers up there somewhere; you might even look at them once you have finished applauding the set. You will hear me speak of the “Wow! factor.” Well, Zeffirelli has Wow! in spades, but think about it: four impoverished students go round to a neighborhood *bistro* and *this* is what they get?! How easy it is to forget that *Bohème* is not about spectacle, but about two young people who meet, fall in love, and then have to cope with the fact of death.

8. Repeat of Class title (modified)

This what I so much admire about the production by Australian director **Barrie Kosky** (1967–) at the **Komische Oper** in Berlin. He updates the opera to Puccini’s own time, and sets it in an attic photography

studio (**Marcello** is no longer a painter). The spectacle has all gone; there is nothing here except a stove, a bench, a chair, a photographer's backdrop, and of course the camera. Three of the four students who live there have gone out; the poet **Rodolfo** stays behind to work. Then there is a knock on the trapdoor; it is their neighbor, **Mimi**. I'll play from here to the end of the act, leaving it to you to tell me of any qualities you found special. The singers are **Jonathan Tetelman** and **Nadja Mchantaf**.

9. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act I duet (Kosky)

10. Nadja Mchantaf (Mimi) and Jonathan Tetelman (Rodolfo)

What did you think? Is it all basically realistic? How does he use the camera? The Germans, who have a technical term for everything, would describe this as *Personenregie*, or the directing of people, as opposed to *Sachregie*, the manipulation of *things*. I pointed out with *Figaro* that the directing of people is the most basic of the director's skills, the *sine qua non* without which even the most spectacular production drops dead, and the most ingenious concept becomes meaningless. Kosky, I think, is absolutely superb at this.

B. PARADIGM SHIFT

11. Section title B

12. *Regie* (Glyndebourne *Bohème*)

This is the current production of *La bohème* at **Glyndebourne**. *Noir* and sinister, it is the antithesis of Zeffirelli's spectacle at the Met. Totally unexpected, but I gather it works. I used the term *Personenregie* in connection with the Kosky to describe the director's most basic task of directing the performers. But the German word *Regie*, which basically means Directing, has acquired a special meaning in opera over the last 40 years. **Regie Opera**—those who don't like it call it **Eurotrash**—is an approach to the medium in which the stage director is no longer a servant but a co-creator of the work. I want go back over some of the productions we have watched so far, and apply the concept of *Regie*.

13. The Scozzi and Cogitore productions of *Les Indes galantes*

Although staged by French rather than German directors, both productions of *Les Indes galantes* that I showed in Class 3 are absolutely examples of *Regieoper*. There is no way you could say that **Rameau** envisioned his piece in terms of generals and cardinals arriving on quad bikes, or as a woman looking at her cellphone in front of a bunch of models in vitrines. *Intellectually, this approach to opera production involves a paradigm shift—essentially, that any stage production, however faithful, however realistic, is not a literal representation but a metaphor for the meaning that really matters*. And once you think in terms of metaphor, you are free to change it, to layer it, to combine several different metaphors that each work in their specific moment, but may not build to a logical overall consistency.

14. Abstraction, Updating, Addition

So what are the *Regie* director's tools? There are many, but let's consider three: Abstraction, Updating, and Addition. **Abstraction**, or extreme simplification, is what you have already seen in the Kosky *Bohème*, but the **Willy Decker** *Traviata* is probably the most extreme example. **Updating** is now pretty commonplace; it is basically the idea of bringing the action forward to a period—not necessarily the present—where the underlying theme of the opera has greater relevance; all three of the operas here are updated, though none of them is contemporary. **Addition** is the most interesting: it is when the director clarifies or deepens the opera by adding some new element that was not part of the concept at all, such as **Katie Mitchell's** idea in *Lucia* of showing what is happening *offstage*.

15. Die Meistersinger ar Bayreuth

I have two reasons for illustrating the **Abstraction** idea with Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. The first is personal, because it relates to why I got into this profession in the first place. The first important director to make a virtue of extreme abstraction was **Wieland Wagner** (1917–66), the composer's grandson. Here is his radical approach to the opera, removing all of the literal prewar scenery and replacing it with a stylized linden tree and a cobbled street, plus evocative lighting. I made the pilgrimage to **Bayreuth** when I was 17; the seed took another dozen years to flourish, but I am sure that this visit was the inspiration for the career I ultimately chose. My second reason is that one of the more recent productions of the opera, from 2017, was by **Barrie Kosky**, who showed that extreme abstraction was far from the only string to his bow. He starts the opera as a reading at Wagner's own house next door to the theater, and ends it in the War Crimes trials in Nuremberg after the War. For the ending to work required realism rather than abstraction, and it is impossible to think of anything more detailed than his Act One set.

16. Michieletto, Herheim, and Gut

The pop-up images I put on my animated title just now illustrate both **Updating** and **Addition**. The 2012 production by **Damiano Michieletto** (1975–) in Salzburg is updated, treating the bohemians, not inappropriately, as students living in a squat. But their sleeping bags and down anoraks are fresh off the shelf, and there is not a speck of grunge to be seen. So, updated or not, it is clear that the director has no interest in realism, but instead takes these bright colors as an element in his frank use of theatrical artifice as the medium through which he tells the story. Let's look at the opening of Act Two. Note the Christmas parcels dropping from the sky!

17. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act Two opening (Michieletto)

18. Michieletto, Herheim, and Gut (repeat)

The other two thumbnails are examples of **Addition**. Both start from the same premise: *What if Mimì is already dead when the opera opens?* Guth imagines Rodolfo much later in life, as an astronaut in a malfunctioning space capsule, running out of oxygen and looking back in his delirium. It is the more successful of the two, but requires deep immersion to work. The Herheim is easier to explain.

19. Opening of the Herheim production

The Mimì of the 2012 production in Oslo that launched **Stefan Herheim** (1970–) to international fame dies on the first beats of the opera. We see a woman on a hospital bed, with all the modern paraphernalia. But then the monitor flatlines, the doctors and nurses spring into action, and the opera begins. *It now becomes about how people deal with grief.* The tenor, Rodolfo, uses the opera to come to terms with his loss, playing through it in his mind—sometimes with a sick Mimì, sometimes with a well one—imagining the hospital staff in the other roles. He does reach a kind of peace at the very end, but it can be quite challenging to watch on the way there. But if I play just the same Act One-Two transition, I think you will see the **magical thinking idea** working in a very positive way. [A small biographical note here: Herheim’s father worked at the Oslo Opera, and he grew up more or less backstage. So it is not just the familiar music that his protagonist calls upon, but the familiar scenery too. I imagine it must have been a considerable selling point for the management to be told they would only have to build one new set, and no new chorus costumes!] We’ll discuss both transitions after you have watched this one.

20. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act One/Two transition (Herheim)

21. Act II in the Michieletto and Herheim productions.

Which works best? Which one would you most like to see? The Michieletto is bright and invigorating, but that is a stylistic matter only; I don’t think it is *about* very much. The Herheim is definitely about something, perhaps something that most of us would prefer not to consider on an evening out. But there is an **idea**. The main question for me is whether he can present it with the forces at his disposal.

C. AFTER THE CROWD DISPERSES

22. Section title C

Barrie Kosky gets a lot of people onstage for Act Two—directors more or less have to—but he is back to absolute simplicity for Act III. And it is in this context that his *Personenregie*—his skill in working with people—really shines. All is not going well for Rodolfo and Mimì; he realizes that she is ill, and knows that she would be better off with someone able to take care of her. She eventually recognizes this too, and breaks it off with him at the beginning of the clip I am going to show. It is a wonderful **aria**, apparently just about packing up her things so that someone can collect them, but filled with musical memories and the love she is trying desperately *not* to show. The aria is immediately followed by a **quartet**, in which they agree to stay together until the spring, while their friends Musetta and Marcello have one of their slanging matches at the other side of the stage. It is at moments like this when I most appreciate the psychological realism of Barrie Kosky’s direction, and the performance of **Nadja Mchanta**, which is as far from opera *cliché* as you could possibly imagine.

23. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act III ending (Berlin)

24. End of the Zeffirelli production

You remember I said that, for all its narrative simplicity, *Kosky is metaphorical—poetic—rather than literal in his use of the camera*. Nowhere does this come out more clearly than at the very end of the opera. I will play the last two minutes in the Zeffirelli production at the Met, then a longer stretch of about 8 minutes from the Kosky. Here is the back-story. The act opens with Rodolfo and Marcello back in their garret studio. Mimì has left to live with a Viscount, who can at least afford to buy her medicine, and Musetta has gone who knows where. But Mimì's illness has worsened. She leaves the Viscount and comes to Rodolfo's place to die. The other bohemians pool resources to buy a few things to make it easier for her, leaving Rodolfo and Mimì alone for a last duet. She goes to sleep when the others return and dies quietly without anyone noticing at first. So here is her death in the Zeffirelli, and the middle of the love duet in the Kosky. We can compare them afterwards.

25. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act IV ending (Met)

26. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act IV ending (Berlin)

27. Class title 2 (end of the Kosky)

So why did Kosky chose to end in that unusual way? What is the function of the camera, and indeed the whole photograpers's studio set-up?