12 : Reframing the Fairy Tale

A. Transformation

1. Class title 1 (Zimmerman and Carsen *Rusalkas*)
2. Section title A (*Rusalka*, Song to the Moon)

That was the opening of the most famous aria, *The Song to the Moon,* in *Rusalka* (1901), the most famous opera by **Antonin Dvorak** (1841–1904). The singer was **Renée Fleming** in the old production at the Met by **Otto Schenk**; we will be seeing a lot more of her later, in a very different production. The story is a variant of Andersen's *Little Mermaid.* A water creature falls in love with a human, and gets transformed into a human herself to be with him, but the story ends tragically for all concerned. This was her prayer to the Moon to look down on her beloved and tell him she loves him.

3. Synopsis (from Schenk production)

But Dvorak's **Rusalka** is not content to send disembodied love from a distance. She asks the witch **Jezibaba** to make her human, even though she is warned that she can never return to her sisters and, more importantly, that she will lose her voice. As soon as the **Prince** encounters her in this new form, he falls instantly in love, takes her back to his palace, and prepares for their wedding. But he is frustrated by her inability to speak, and once a dominant **Foreign Princess** comes along, he falls for her charms. Rusalka leaves the palace in despair. But once the Foreign Princess realizes the Prince doesn't have his heart, she casts him out. So Act III begins with both in limbo. Jezibaba tells Rusalka that the only way she can return to her former life is by killing the Prince with a kiss. As he still loves her and is fully prepared to die in her arms, this is how the opera ends.

4. Schenk set

The old Schenk production, which has since been replaced, is one of those old-fashioned stagings that "they don't make anymore," with painted sets that look more like 19th-century landscapes than anything from the real world. Many more modern directors have not been content with that, but have sought to ground the opera more realistically in the modern world. Here is one of the more extreme contrasts, a 2024 production by **Philipp Stölzl** & **Philipp M. Krenn** at the Dutch National Opera.

5. Schenk/Stölzl flip

Stölzl and **Krenn** imagine Rusalka living on the streets in a seedy part of town; she falls for a movie star on a poster, and he does indeed take her to Hollywood, where of course she is entirely out of her element. I'll put a trailer on the website, but alas have no more of this to show.

6. *Rusalka* DVDs

I have 5 DVDs of *Rusalka* and a handful more sources online; I find the opera an excellent way to gauge the quality of a stage director. Two of these stand out for me as exceptional: the 2009 production from Paris by **Robert Carsen** that I'll be using for most of my examples today, and the extraordinary 2011 production from Munich by **Martin Kusej** that I'll show you briefly now.

7. Josef Fritzl

Kusej ripped the setting of his opera from the then-recent case of **Josef Fritzl**, a man in Austria, who imprisoned his teenage daughter in a basement for 24 years and fathered several children by her, all with the complicity of his wife. Kusej makes the basement ankle-deep in water, which both establishes the identification of Rusalka as a water spirit and makes the scene that much more horrific in real-life terms: YouTube restricts the video as "inappropriate for minors"; for seniors too, probably; I am playing only a very short segment of the cellar scene for this reason. But Kusej's version of the opera does not continue to play out in real life. Rusalka escapes and, tottering on her new high-heeled shoes, ventures behind some theatrical backdrop. And the world she finds there is not real at all, but **surreal**. In Act Three, not surprisingly, she ends up in a psychiatric hospital, and it is there—quite mad—she has her final scene with the Prince; she kisses him and stabs him at the same time. I have strung 10 minutes of excerpts together to give you the plot points. The singers are the superb **Kristine Opolais**, **Günter Gröissböck**, who is not always this sleazy, and matinee idol **Klaus Florian Vogt**. We'll discuss afterwards.

8. Dvorak: *Rusalka,* Kusej cellar
9. Dvorak: *Rusalka,* Kusej escape
10. Dvorak: *Rusalka,* Kusej chorus
11. Dvorak: *Rusalka,* Kusej fish tank
12. Dvorak: *Rusalka,* Kusej ending

B. Mirror Variations

13. Section title B (Carsen set)

Robert Carsen sets his production in a modern world, but the décor is more like a luxury hotel than a waterlogged basement. What interests him are the **symmetries** inherent in the opera, reflecting Jungian psychology rather than everyday realities. **Rusalka sees another world as though in a mirror**. But when she gets through the glass, she discovers that this world too has two sides: image and a reflection. All through the second act, she herself is unsure which side of the mirror she belongs. This is all made possible by the marvelous set designed by **Michael Levine**; here are some of its permutations.

14. Carsen set demo

So just like in the Kusej production, Carsen's set has water in the basement. Only this is a beautiful pool in which Rusalka and her sisters play and paddle. It is hard to explain how it all works before you have seen it in action. So here is a half-hour video that links eight different scenes with explanatory text slides. Note that the Father is *not* sleazy in this version. We'll talk after you have watched it through.

15. Carsen text 1
16. Carsen opening
17. Carsen text 2
18. Carsen transformation
19. Carsen text 3
20. Carsen end of Act I
21. Carsen text 4
22. Carsen opening of Act II
23. Carsen text 5
24. Carsen Foreign Princess scene
25. Carsen text 6
26. Carsen ballet
27. Carsen text 7
28. Carsen Act II ending
29. Carsen text 8
30. Carsen Act III ending
31. Class title 2 (“No bed of roses”)