

Pursio) to come to terms with the tragedy, Tereza (Jenny Carlstedt) expressing her inability to let go of her daughter's memory, and the heartrending confession by Tuomas (Markus Nykänen) of his original intention to participate in his brother's killing spree.

The most intriguing performance was Vilma Jää's Markéta. Jää has studied early forms of Fenno-Ugrian vocal expressions and fused them with techniques derived from advanced popular music production. Saariaho has employed her special talent in an intriguing way, creating an ethereally childlike, at times almost angelically voiced character that perfectly captures the ambiguousness of the dead Markéta.

The production, which is to travel to Covent Garden, Dutch National Opera and San Francisco Opera, kept the audience spellbound. I have seldom experienced such complete concentration on an operatic performance.

HENRY BACON

FRANCE

Paris

Before the show, I overheard young couples tittering expectantly over the OPÉRA BASTILLE's warnings of *Salome's* 'violent and/or sexually explicit content'. As promised, the production (seen on October 15) applied the now well-worn formula for shocking opera-goers: create a grim dystopia, portray its inhabitants as psychopaths or victims, display explicit sex and splatter blood about the stage.

From the first moment, the director Lydia Steier was relentless; a German critic might say 'konsequent'. High above the bleak inner courtyard of a brutalist building, a large picture window showed Herod, Herodias and their courtiers conducting grisly gang rapes, culminating in the serial dismemberment of young women. Once every 15 minutes, bloody body parts are carried down the stairs, disinfected by men in yellow hazmat suits, and tossed into a pit.

Salome, here a morbid goth teenager, watches silently. After being rejected by Jokanaan, she secures his severed head by offering herself to her father and his pals not for striptease but for a gang rape, which leaves her bloodied. At the end, a body double writhes in the darkness next to a plastic bag containing the head, while the singing Salome acts out a chaste love scene with Jokanaan (head intact). At the end the (normally insignificant) Page stages a school-shooting-style massacre of the courtiers and then Herod.

Steier mounts one effective *coup de théâtre*, reimagining the Dance of the Seven Veils—sometimes dismissed as a slightly embarrassing interlude of little dramatic or musical interest—as Herod's rape of Salome. This hints at why Salome turns to necrophilia: rather than a spoiled rich kid in rebellion against her parents' lifestyle, she is a traumatized victim of abuse by a psychopathic father.

Had Steier limited herself to this single reading, the result might have been revelatory. Instead, she violated the prime directive about sex and violence in art: less is more. After nearly two hours of mayhem, much of which required textual liberties, I could not make out whether Salome had committed suicide or launched a household revolution—or why any of it mattered.

The theatrics also seemed to degrade the music. Simone Young's insightful conducting revealed new facets of the score. Yet loud dynamics and a slightly garish orchestral

colour dulled its glitteringly decadent surface, thereby blunting Strauss's musical translation of Oscar Wilde's core irony: the more beautiful the exterior, the more depraved the reality underneath.

The singers, riotously and wonderfully dressed in ageing rocker/drag queen couture, coped bravely. John Daszak's Herod dominated the stage with a penetrating half-*Sprechstimme* and uncannily clear German. Karita Mattila, once a formidable Salome herself, brought more voice than focus to Herodias. Iain Paterson projected well as Jokanaan, though without much prophetic warmth and ease. Tansel Akzeybek sang a Narraboth of unusual weight and clarity. Katharina Magiera rendered the (now homicidal) Page with lovely contralto resonance. In her debut as Salome, Elza van den Heever had near-perfect intonation and thrilling top notes—to which, in the future, she will surely add more interpretative nuance.

The opening-night spectators greeted the final curtain with the ambivalence it deserved: strong applause for the musicians and a barrage of boos for the production team, only partially offset by a small band of supporters. The production was broadcast on French television and copies will surely circulate.

ANDREW MORAVCSIK



Karita Mattila as Herodias and Elza van den Heever as Salome in Lydia Steier's new production of Strauss's opera in Paris

Paris

The premiere of *Lakmé* took place at the OPÉRA-COMIQUE on 14 April 1883 and the house now holds the record for the number of performances (1,615 in all) of Delibes's best-known opera—in fact his only opera to have established itself in the collective consciousness. Lilo Baur's 2014 Opéra Comique production starred Sabine Devieille—who once again enjoyed a triumph this time, in a new staging by Laurent Pelly (seen on September 30), with her husband Raphaël Pichon as conductor.