



Humor and Translation

Mark Herman

hermanapter@cmsinter.net

Destroying *The Magic Flute*

A couple of years ago, the Metropolitan Opera in New York premiered a new production of Mozart's comic opera *Die Zauberflöte/The Magic Flute*, directed with spectacular visual effects by Julie Taymor. Taymor is known for her previous fine work on Stravinsky's opera *Oedipus Rex* and on the movie *Frida*. She is also acclaimed for the stage version of Disney's *The Lion King*.

The Met's production exists in two versions: the complete opera in the original German performed at the Opera House, and an abridged 100-minute "family friendly" English version that is performed at the Opera House and shown in movie theaters and on television. Both versions have received many effusively favorable reviews. I recently saw the televised English version. Despite the critical acclaim, I believe the production is so bad that it effectively destroys the opera.

That *The Magic Flute* is a corner-

stone of the operatic repertory bothers some critics because, they say, the libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder is ridiculous. Why is Tamino in the country of the Queen of the Night? How can he fall in love with her daughter Pamina just by looking at her portrait? Why does he switch his allegiance from the Queen to her arch-enemy Sarastro so easily? Is Papageno a man? A bird? Half and half? And Papageno's bells seem to be as important as Tamino's flute—why does the title mention only the flute?

Furthermore, there is racism—a point is made of the villain Monostatos being black. There is also sexism—at times, Sarastro and his followers seem to hate the Queen simply because she is a woman.

And *The Magic Flute* is such an ill-made play! It ends not with one, but with three separate climactic finales: Tamino and Pamina survive their trials, Papageno gets his Papagena, and the Queen of the Night and her minions are cursorily defeated.

Because of all this, some conventional wisdom states that only the glorious music and the cute costumes and scenery are worth paying attention to; the plot and characters are of no importance. In this view, it is not only acceptable, but desirable to simplify the plot and omit anything, frequently in the sung lyrics and always in the spoken dialogue, that contributes to character development.

This is precisely what J. D. McClatchy's English translation does. However, one of the reasons that *The Magic Flute* works on the stage is that, despite some surface absurdities, it is *not* nonsensical; its ambiguities and contradictions have deep psychological resonance. In fact, one of the points of the opera is that the co-existence of complementary opposites is necessary for there to be healthy individuals and a healthy social order. Among the opposites highlighted are light and darkness, spiritual and physical love, reason and intuition, and male and female. And these opposites



Is your ATA e-mail stuck in cyberspace?

To help make sure you receive important ATA announcements and special offers by e-mail:

- Add the following address to your e-mail address book and, if available, your "safe list": ata-hq@atanet.org.
- Check your "junk mail" or "spam" folder often to make sure none of ATA's e-mail messages have accidentally ended up there.
- Use the Members Only area of ATA's website to keep your contact information updated.

ATA does not sell or rent the e-mail addresses of its members.

are embodied in characters, presented through both words and music, whom the audience genuinely cares about. But no one can care about the flattened characters marching through the flattened plot in McClatchy's translation, a version which, ironically, actually makes far less sense than the original opera.

McClatchy's translation is also technically incompetent, including words that are mis-accented when sung and using the word "now" over and over and over and over again as a metrical filler.

Contempt for the original libretto in the Metropolitan Opera production is signaled at the very beginning: librettist Shikaneder's name is omitted from the opening televised credits. Perhaps because the production was designed to be "family friendly," racism and sexism are excluded. But not exactly. Monostatos is no longer black, and there is no reference to his being black, but the Queen's three ladies, her

evil henchwomen, are covered in black hoods behind their inhuman white masks, and so appear to be black. And while there is no sexism, there is sex, more than in the original! For example, in Act II, when Monostatos is thwarted in his attempt to either kill or rape Pamina, he says as he exits, "Jetzt such' ich die Mutter auf, weil die Tochter mir nicht beschieden ist. [Now I will seek out the mother, since the daughter has not acquiesced to me.]" This statement is ambiguous, but it is obvious from subsequent events that Monostatos is not seeking the mother to win her personally, but to obtain her help in winning the daughter. McClatchy simplifies the line to the much more explicit, "If I can't have the daughter, I'll go try the mother." But when Monostatos and the Queen next appear, they are plotting, among other things, to give Pamina to Monostatos as expected.

I do not believe it coincidental that many of the favorable reviewers of the

Met's production consider the opera to be meaningless, and expatiate at some length over this notion. I fear that when the hoopla, mainly over Taymor's spectacular costumes, puppets, and scenery, has died down, the critics will not recognize that McClatchy's translation is incompetent, but will use it to buttress their opinion that a good English translation of an opera is impossible.

ata

Herman is a librettist and translator. Submit items for future columns via e-mail to hermanapter@cmsinter.net or via snail mail to Mark Herman, 1409 E. Gaylord St., Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858-3626. Discussions of the translation of humor and examples thereof are preferred, but humorous anecdotes about translators, translations, and mistranslations are also welcome. Include copyright information and permission if relevant.



TechInput, Inc., translation and consulting company, is currently seeking experienced translators and editors for its office based in Moscow, Russia. Specialization in oil and gas industry is desirable. Join our Moscow team and enjoy competitive rates, challenging job with ample opportunities for professional growth, and a vibrant urban environment of the city of Moscow. TechInput also offers free-lance and part time translation/editing job assignments in oil and gas, engineering, geosciences, environmental sciences, economics, regulatory permitting, and the law. With us you will have an indisputable advantage of regulating your work load.

Please send your resumes and preferred job schedules to techinput@techinput.ru (Attn. Anna).

For details please visit our websites: www.techinput.ru and www.techinput.com.