

Michael Unger discusses operas based on plays

Michael Unger made his Sarasota Opera debut as stage director of *Die Fledermaus* in 2006. Since then, he has returned to stage new productions of *La rondine* and *L'amico Fritz*. I asked Michael to comment on Sarasota Opera's upcoming production of Robert Ward's opera *The Crucible*, based on the much-acclaimed play by Arthur Miller.

Before you began directing opera, you were an actor and theater director. Did you ever work on any Miller plays in those capacities?

I unfortunately never had the opportunity to work on Miller's material in any official capacity – until I directed William Bolcom's opera *A View From the Bridge* last year. I can remember seeing productions of *Death of a Salesman* (at Steppenwolf Theatre Company) and *The Price* (at Northlight Theatre) in Chicago; and I think I did a scene from *Death of a Salesman* in high school. I certainly studied Miller in my theater history classes in college and was always impressed with the realness of his characters within the context of rather epic stories. **Even before Sarasota Opera asked you to direct *The Crucible*, you directed the opera by American composer William Bolcom *A View From the Bridge* based on Miller's play. What was your experience on that production?**

It was a wonderful experience for many reasons. It was a very intimate venue and therefore a very intimate production. Vertical Player Repertory (VPR) in Brooklyn, NY, produced it and they are known for environmental settings of operas. They did a production of *Il tabarro* on an actual boat moored in Brooklyn's Red Hook Marine Terminal and also a production of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* on the loading dock in

the same container port. They had the full cooperation of the longshoremen who are likely the descendants of the characters in *A View from the Bridge*. It was a natural extension, then, to try to do *View* on those very docks, where the play is set – with Manhattan, the East River and towering gantry cranes as the backdrop. But because of new federal security measures audience members would not have been able to attend the performances. So we did the production in VPR's Brooklyn storefront theater which is only about 20 feet wide by 30 feet deep – and that includes risers for fifty seats! Our playing space was literally 20 feet wide by 18 feet deep – 15 feet deep when we added an extra row of seating because the show was selling so well. Into that space we had to fit nine principals, twenty-two chorus members, two pianos, and a conductor.

It sounds like quite the challenge!

I also ended up being the *de facto* set designer, not only for budgetary reasons, but because of the limitations of the space – there were not many options. To accommodate the cast, I had to stack them vertically – on two levels of scaffolding. So a “Greek Chorus” surrounded the action on three sides which made for a very intense experience for performers and audience alike.

We also had the honor of the composer, William Bolcom, at early rehearsals as well as the opening and closing performances. He said he always wondered how this opera would fare in a “pocket” production and he was thrilled with what he saw at VPR.

Finally, what was your reaction to being invited to direct the opera



A scene from “A View From the Bridge,” directed by Michael Unger

***The Crucible*?**

It is always a uniquely rewarding challenge to create a new production with all the resources and talent that Sarasota Opera affords. It is an even greater honor to be trusted with directing the first opera in Sarasota's new American Classics Series. The story of *The Crucible* is, I believe, as good as any story can get. It was an important story in the late 17th century when the horrific events occurred, in the mid-20th century when Miller wrote it and when McCarthyism was on the rise, and it is important today.

There are still demons in our midst – extremists forcing what they feel is right even on those that know better. It is especially harrowing that shortly after 55 forced confessions, the hangings of 19 men and women and two dogs and 150 others awaiting their fates in jail; several of the key players in the Salem witch trials retracted their passionate commitment to wiping alleged witches off the face of the earth. Those who attempt to control the world by fear, lies and manipulation doom us all. This opera is a gripping and timeless warning of what can happen when society's checks and balances become neither.

— Greg Trupiano, Artistic Administrator