

Seen and Heard International

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Philip Glass: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, world premiere in Erfurt Theatre on September 10, 2005 (SM)

Conductor: Dennis Russell Davies

Director: Guy Montavon

Sets: George Tsy-pin

Costumes: Hank Irwin Kittel

Lighting: Thomas Hase

Magistrate: Richard Salter

Joll: Eugene Perry

Philharmonic Orchestra of Erfurt

Editor: [Marc Bridle](#)



I must admit I've never been entirely convinced by Philip Glass' music. His film scores are dazzling and his violin concerto is simply gorgeous. But, for me, his scores lack the tingling adrenalin rush of, say, John Adams' "Short Ride in a Fast Machine" or the intellectual rigour of Steve Reich's "Music for Eighteen Musicians".

There are, of course, plenty of people who would disagree and so the chance of attending the world premiere of Glass' 21st work for stage at a spanking brand-new theatre in Erfurt seemed an ideal opportunity to give America's most popular living composer another go. On paper at least, the venture looked more than promising. "Waiting for the Barbarians" is based on a novel of the same name by South African Nobel laureate John M. Coetzee to a libretto by Christopher Hampton (of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" fame). And it was to be conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, who has played midwife to so many of Glass' works. To boot, Erfurt had recruited Russian stage designer George Tsy-pin, who did the magical sets for the Mariinsky's Ring under Valery Gergiev in St Petersburg and Baden-Baden.

But despite it all, I couldn't help feeling just a little short-changed at the end of the nearly three-hour evening, even as the first-night audience gave Glass 15 minutes of standing ovations. It wasn't Hampton's libretto, a lucid, carefully crafted piece of writing that could easily stand on its own in the theatre. In two acts and 24 terse scenes, Hampton offered a thought-provoking, sometimes spine-chilling examination of state-sponsored torture and repression, while hinting along the way at the much wider topic of the modern-day legacy of centuries of repression of black cultures by white society.



The "Barbarians" of the title are a nomadic tribe deemed by the "civilized" whites to be socially and racially inferior, and demonized as violent and war-like, just waiting to attack the tiny frontier-town in which the action is set. Of course, that threat never materializes, but the authorities use it as an excuse to declare a state of emergency, suspend all civil rights and brutally intimidate, torture and even kill their opponents. "We are forced to begin a short war in order to safeguard peace," argues Colonel Joll (Eugene Perry), who heads a bunch of henchmen sent by the government in the far-away capital to impose marshal law in the town.

Those words sound sinisterly familiar in the current context of world politics and it's clear who Glass' target is -- the US Bush administration and the war against Iraq. Nevertheless, the production's director, Guy Montavon, wisely avoids taking all-too-easy shots, only once showing blindfolded and hooded prisoners being led onstage on a leash in a reference to the atrocities carried out by the US army at Abu Ghraib prison.



Hank Irwin Kittel's costumes also refuse to be pinned down to a specific period, similarly helping to underline the universality of Glass' themes. Tyspin's sets, beautifully lit by Thomas Hase, were wonderfully effective. Gauze curtains that constantly moved to depict the desert's shifting sands, bathed in blazing yellow and red to depict the scorching heat of the day, and then blue for the freezing sub-zero temperatures of the night. Strange mummy-like figures glowed ominously and hovered threateningly above the stage. At first, they seemed to be purely abstract. But the Magistrate (Richard Salter) is later beaten and bound in the same way for daring to disobey orders and help a "barbarian" girl (Elvira Soukop) escape back to her people.

The Magistrate is on stage all of the time and it is his spiritual journey that Glass is interested in. He starts off as a conscientious, unquestioning servant of the state and its dominant (white) cultural values. But the plight of the tortured prisoners moves him to rebel and stand up to the brutal government agents, as he grows increasingly conscious of his own guilty complicity in a system that has long oppressed and demonized the non-white "barbarians".



The role was tailor-made for Salter, with his ageing, world-weary baritone, while Eugene Perry, who has sung in other Glass operas, lacked the malice really needed for evil part of Colonel Joll. The smaller roles were all ably sung by members of Erfurt's own ensemble and the -- rather untaxing -- score was admirably played by the town's Philharmonic Orchestra.

"Waiting for the Barbarians" certainly tackles some big issues, but it was here, for me, that Glass' music failed, with its characteristic diatonic harmonies sounding just a little bit too pat to be able to explore all the moral complexities of the play's themes. While Glass still uses a big orchestra, including the extremely rare contrabass clarinet, he radically pares down the instrumentation, reducing the number of musical lines moving at any one time. That may make it easier for the listener to hear -- diction, especially from native speakers Eugene Perry and Richard Salter was crystal clear -- but it also tended to show up the limitations of Glass' invention.

Frustrating, too, was the way in which the opera was divided up into a series of musical numbers, leaving the music no room to bewitch and weave its magic. And more than once it seemed we were watching more a musical than an opera.

The music was perhaps at its most effective right at the very beginning when the orchestra painted a gorgeous wall of sound interwoven with floating, wordless chorus almost reminiscent of Vaughan William's "Sinfonia Antartica". But most of the time it lacked the natural ebb and flow needed to underscore the Magistrate's story and the absence of strong emotions and musical climaxes meant the singers could just as easily have been singing a shopping list.

There were critics there on the opening night who were totally bowled over by Glass' new work. And the composer's fans will undoubtedly love it. But for professed Glass-sceptics like myself, I'm afraid that I can't see "Waiting for the Barbarians" will win over any new converts.

Simon Morgan

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