

SOLA SOLETTA: the comfort in discomfort

It could be said that it is an exciting time for opera because the doors to an artistic practice considered mostly elite throughout its history are finally being flung open. One could also say that it is an exciting time for women, as recognising recurring patterns of gender bias - which may not happen on purpose, but which also don't happen by accident - is becoming more normative. With that fine work, however, comes the exposure and analysis of the inner workings of the business of opera, and how it has traditionally succeeded until now. It also exposes why we must become active participants in the clean up crew contributing to the reshaping of our cultural world.

My part in that reshaping has recently taken the form of posing questions specific to my industry, which I then test out on my own career. On May 18th 2022, I directed, premiered and performed my own concept in an opera entitled *SOLA SOLETTA* at Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, a piece dedicated to questioning gender hierarchy within the opera industry and its gendered roles, on and off stage. The piece was born from personal and collegial experiences with a wish to open up important discussions in a post-MeToo climate. In a way, I reported various findings back to the public from the point of view of a female opera singer today. As it was important to me to use the performance as a platform offering space to more voices and experiences, I also interviewed professionals of different genders from in and around the opera world and incorporated those interviews into the score of *SOLA SOLETTA*.

The title consists of words written in the libretto of our female "specimen" character, someone resembling Mimi from Puccini's *La Bohème*, when she makes a small joke in a first encounter with what will become the man in her life (the poet Rodolfo). She says she lives "alone" (sola), "a little bit alone" (soletta), adding the diminutive to her state to perhaps appear more sweet, cute, small, funny, etc. The title gives an idea of the research that took place and the chance our artistic team took by looking at female representation under the penmanship of male librettists and composers. The piece also examined how the opera world thrives on the often-tragic fortunes of young female characters and the arias written for them, but behind the scenes, women are less likely to be at the helm of institutions. On a nearly naked stage with no orchestra, we used every part of the theater as our home. Our cast was made up of two opera singers of various ages, a dancer and a boy, each passing through the same story, but showing it from the different perspectives of their gender, their age, their backgrounds and their life experiences. In addition to an artistic performance in its own right, *SOLA SOLETTA* was also an experiential study: would the opera industry support me as a leader, and if so, how far would it let me go in asking critical questions? How open would it be to having an open conversation about the future of this art form?

In researching, creating and performing *SOLA SOLETTA*, I have seen firsthand where support is given to female leadership and where it is not, how gender representation onstage affects its representation offstage, and how acceptable (or unacceptable) it is to broaden the perspective of the traditional operatic canon by offering new representation of its characters. Most of all, I have seen the multitude of possible answers to these questions, as we continue the process of creating new working methods that have never been put into practice before. Whether or not I succeeded in presenting actual "answers" to those questions will be felt differently by each individual who attended the performance. However, this was not the goal which fuelled my personal need for this creation as a maker. The necessity was to simply show up and unveil these topics to encourage a continued dialogue, not to display a set of predefined solutions as an artistic product.

The reaction to my findings, crystallised in *SOLA SOLETTA*, have been varied, deeply interesting and a privilege to receive. What stands out to me in those reactions, first and foremost, is the pain. No matter the gender (identity), background or sexual orientation, I heard continued stories of discrimination and injustice. These everyday occurrences, seemingly integral to the behaviour of the opera industry, are simply painful and demoralising to us all. For some, the exposure of this topic has been eye-opening and, therefore, a step forward in relieving pain, and that is in itself a solution. For others, having no solution is exactly the painful point of confrontation, and this discomfort can even drive us to feel impatient with painful stories. Therefore, in the spirit of *SOLA SOLETTA*, which is an open discussion, I feel it remains

essential to continue looking at discomfort within the growing pains of change. After we agree to stop sweeping oppressive behaviours under the carpet, how do we get our hands dirty and “lean in” to change, or the discomfort of witnessing not fully defined solutions? I believe a “horizontal” approach could help.

The bottom line of discomfort is vulnerability because of its “-ability” to reflect back to us the very weaknesses which truly touch us. And that’s where we get stuck. So it is often easier to pick a side or choose a single explanation as we reach out for a sense of normalcy or clarity. Following something clear, simple and established, even if it may be incorrect or outdated, seems often more attractive than deeming all sides of an issue important. The latter has been historically coined as “over thinking” and has also been used to discredit feminine logic in the past.

As opposed to a top down hierarchy, lateral action is less about supporting the “one” definition - perhaps the alpha or simply the branded face of a product - and is more the result of a collaborative definition or goal with experimental results. We are seeing successful evidence of this practice even in the opera world in productions directed by FC Bergman, a theater group that demonstrates how collaboration and ownership of a piece can be shared. Or in compositions such as *TOGETHER #6* by Alison Isadora, part of a series about how we create things together and how the ecology of composition practice is not something fixed but something which is in process - concepts which in other media and writing have long been exercised.

This is not to say that we must get rid of individuals or working systems, or to say that inclusive practice examples don't already exist. It is more to recognise that even our most beloved long standing processes of creation in opera are often inherited systems which may work in many ways, but at the same time, may also not serve us all. Whether using a more lateral structure, pyramid or any other shape, the point of inclusivity is to encourage and implement pluralistic working methods. This may require us to ask ourselves: how do we want to define opera today? Who gets to perform it, who decides what is performed, and who has access to it? And should it be graded in accordance to older European-based works? It may look like redefining “mastery” and “genius”, or rethinking what qualities make an opera house whole. It may require reconsidering topics such as community outreach, social issues or working methods as equally important carriers of artistic expression as virtuosic talent and skill. It may also ask us to hold space for discomfort as we collectively search for and redefine the values we place on new operatic output. Happily, there is no “one” answer to these questions, only hope that new production methods might create wider power structures and new leadership roles, which will translate across to the shared space of our artists and our public.

When it comes to the topic of women, over the past 10 years alone we’ve seen accelerated strides in reparations to insert female artists and leaders into their rightful place in our revisionist histories and in our decision making powers. However, in a partly impatient approach to fix the problem by matching numbers or counting heads, we now know that it is less about filling a quota, and more about the detailed work of redefining those positions. Although I will be the first to wish for more presence of female leadership so that I can relate and reflect myself in the world, I believe the goal should also include promotion of feminine and queer working practices so that the expectation of artistic output is not required to resemble patriarchal results.

I created SOLA SOLETTA in order to question the state of my own industry today. Opera’s tried and tested embeddedness into the definition of western music history sometimes makes the stories of abuses exchanged in the safety of the dressing room seem small in comparison. This finding was shared by individuals relating to the performance and finally feeling represented, but was also met with the longstanding tradition of deeming feminine practices as unworthy. This included language such as “hysterical” and a “big self-overestimation” as stated in one online review ¹. This reaction is so familiar

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that it is unable to avoid political meaning, and has inspired the right for a whole opera to be created to discuss exactly that dichotomy which is clearly still present today.

You may say that we have talked long enough about gender discrimination and demand to focus on solutions, but counting a few female conductors, composers or heads of house on one hand isn't enough, because it is not about filling a quota. It's about showing young women, as well as the women we say are too old, that they are welcome to apply their methods and build their strengths in public, even in rebellious or unfinished ways, as so many men have done before them. It is about realising that the work of gender acceptance is still a young notion and, within the arch of our expanding cultural history, has only just begun as we redefine what we think of as worthy about our gender roles. And it is about understanding that vulnerability seems to be the seed of discomfort, but can also be a key to a solution stemming from true diversity, if we really mean it, because diversity is imperfect.

Are these steps scary to everyone? Yes! But whether in courageously sharing personal trauma stories publicly for the first time, or courageously being the first to redefine a title or working method, or courageously taking responsibility for updating an action that was once deemed acceptable, but no longer — in all cases, our vulnerability is at stake. We must continue to fight for the theater to remain a safe place to have vulnerable discussions, because our vulnerabilities could be the thing which unites us in the end, if we are willing to do that hard work.

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1 “Een politiek correcte bubbel in het muziektheater” (Johan Thielemans)