

SAM HELFRICH

Richard Dyer talks with the director of Opera Boston's *Der Freischütz*



ONE OF DIRECTOR Sam Helfrich's first professional opera productions was in Massachusetts – Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto* for Berkshire Opera in 2003. He was in Boston two years later to direct a witty semi-staging of Handel's *Agrippina* for Boston Baroque that both *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Phoenix* acclaimed as the best operatic production of the year.

Since then he has returned annually to create stagings that have commanded attention and generated controversy because his work is untraditional, theatrically exciting, intellectually challenging. Some of his ideas can misfire, because he is willing

take big risks – but only big risks can result in big triumphs. His production of Weber's *Der Freischütz* for Opera Boston, which opens in the Cutler Majestic Theater Oct. 17 (with repeat performances on Oct. 19 and 21) will be his fifth local staging – after *Agrippina* he did *Don Giovanni* for Boston Baroque, Handel's *Semele* for an Opera Boston/Boston Baroque collaboration, and Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny* for Opera Boston.

Helfrich is a boutique rather than a chain-store director, planning his productions for individual companies and developing them through intense work with the singers and he is not shy

about expressing his despair at the economic realities and managerial caution that confine many American companies to safely generic productions that can travel easily from city to city, theater to theater, cast to cast. So far, at least, he is happiest working with smaller companies with an interest in personal expression through music-theatre – he has worked most often with Glimmerglass and Opera Boston.

His interest in theatre is lifelong. As a child in California, he was an actor, and when he grew up, he went to Columbia University to study playwriting. This came after some wandering years in Europe which have stood him in good stead; he is fluent in French, Spanish and German. He was experienced in writing, acting, and direction before his late first encounter with opera. As a part of the program at Columbia, he was required to work as an intern in a theater or opera company; he wound up at Glimmerglass, where he was in charge of the apprentice singers. He had studied viola and piano as a kid, but dropped out of music, but at Glimmerglass, he found he loved working with music, text, theater and singers. “This” he says “was my lightning-bolt moment, when I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

His first staging was a university production of Dominic Argento’s *Miss*

Havisham’s Wedding Night; and his first professional production was a modest but ambitious version of Wagner’s *Die Walküre* in New York’s Riverside Church, accompanied by two pianos; the set, he says, was “three platforms and three chairs,” and the prop was a sword.



SAM HELFRICH LOOKS a little like the television actor Neil Patrick Harris, half Barney Stinson but still half the prodigy Doogie Howser. He describes himself, with a smile, as “thirty-something” – that description will fit for another year. In conversation he is in turn candid, intense,

impish, thoughtful, wry and curious. He asks a lot of questions, some of them to himself; finding which answers matter is part of his life story, and of his work.

Opportunities to direct *Der Freischütz* do not come along very often. Helfrich says, “Opera Boston has given me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – unless I move to Germany!”

Helfrich realized early on that he didn’t want to create a traditional production in German Romantic style. “I had seen productions like this in Germany, productions that reduce the opera to a silly fairy tale or a ghost story. This was not interesting to me – there is a lot more to the piece than that. Also it is an opera that German people relate to in a unique way because it is so tied up with German

traditions, history, folklore, literature, and, in fact, the very idea of Germanness. How do you go about bringing this to an audience that is not German?”

One reason Weber’s opera is not performed very often in this country anymore is that it delivers a lot of important information through spoken dialogue. Helfrich did investigate various English translations before arriving at the decision to present the opera in German. “I didn’t like the translations because all of them sound clunky. Also they departed too often from what the German is actually saying – there is a religious dimension in the original, but some of the earlier translations really enlarge on it and take huge liberties by invoking God at every opportunity. The text, and there are many versions of it even in German, is very contorted, and you have to turn somersaults to make sense of it – I wound up picking and choosing from among the various German texts to arrive at something that will work for us.”

The plot of the opera involves a Faustian pact with a devil named Samiel, “The Black Hunter.” A young woodsman named Max has just lost a shooting match, and he is desperate; he must win the next match in order to marry his beloved Agathe. Kaspar, Max’s rival, has already sold his soul to Samiel in exchange for seven magic bullets; the first six will fly anywhere he wants them to; the seventh belongs to Samiel. Max is so frantic he agrees to join Kaspar in the dreaded Wolf’s Glen to meet Samiel

and to acquire his own magic bullets. In doing so he risks his soul – and, although he doesn’t know it, he places Agathe in mortal danger.

As he studied the libretto and the music, Helfrich found himself focusing on the psychological dimension of the story which is given such vivid expression in the music.

“My jumping-off point was to explore the idea of an individual who is isolated from his community, and a community that has become frozen in its own traditions.

“Max is the individual – he is under such intense pressure that he is in a state of psychological paralysis. He has just been ritually jeered and punished by his community for losing a match, and he *has* to win the next one in order to win his inheritance and the girl he loves. It’s more than he can handle, so he turns to evil. He goes to hell and back. Agathe is also under pressure; love and anxiety are mingled in her, and, ultimately, terror, and she bears the weight of tradition on her shoulders as much as Max does.”

“I want to tell a fascinating story that is always rolling forward.”

The importance of tradition on the community is directly symbolized by the portrait of Agathe’s grandfather that falls and hits her, leaving her dazed. Re-hung, it falls again later.

“The weight of tradition is so heavy it can’t hang on the wall any more,” Helfrich explains. “A Hermit arrives to deliver the moral of the story at the end – he says what has happened is not Max’s fault, and the community

must renounce the tradition of the shooting contest. He places the blame not on Max but on the community. Unwavering devotion to ancestral values was causing people to turn bad. I take that as important information – it drives the story in the direction of a moral lesson for the community; Max must undergo the trial in the Wolf's Glen in order to teach his community. I don't think I am making all this up; it's all there."

Supernatural events are part of the plot of *Der Freischütz*. Movies have developed a whole visual vocabulary for dealing with them. It is harder to put them on the stage, but Helfrich clearly believes it is more fun. "That's what's marvelous about the theater – it is real bodies in real space; you have to put things out there."

But he is also deeply committed to ambiguity. "I want to achieve a mood in which any of the supernatural occurrences in the opera could be psychological in origin. But I also want to leave them open-ended – the way Henry James did with the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* or that Benjamin Britten did in the opera he based on it. We don't have the budget to put everything into the Wolf's Glen scene that the score asks for – most opera companies can't supply a high cliff and a waterfall and flaming wagon wheels that race across the stage! So I decided that

Kaspar will conjure up a nightmare for Max, images the audience has already seen, images that haunt Max. The supernatural is simply the real world put together in a different way."

A related idea was to have the satanic Samiel and the holy Hermit, played by the same singer, baritone Herbert Perry. "Whether Samiel and the Hermit are the same person is a decision we will leave up to the audience," Helfrich says. "After all, they both have magic powers – Samiel casts the magic bullets; the Hermit gives Agathe magic flowers to protect her. In the end there is a paradox – Kaspar dies because of Samiel's magic bullet; Samiel is responsible for ridding the community of this evil. If the audience doesn't know just exactly who Samiel and the Hermit are, it really doesn't matter – these figures serve to get the real story told."

And Helfrich believes in leaving the audience to grapple with the kinds of questions he has been asking of the opera all along. "I want to tell a fascinating story that is always rolling forward. But there is no need to answer every question. I don't want to leave the audience confused or alienated to the point they just don't care – instead I want the public to leave the theater with questions, with something to think about. I want people to *wonder* about things."

- Richard Dyer