



# Lust and the libretto

Sex underlies much of opera and life. Putting it on stage has challenges, writes HARRIET CUNNINGHAM.

What is opera's favourite subject? Heroism? Fidelity? Revenge and forgiveness? If you read the glossy brochures, you could be forgiven for thinking that the noble art is powered by love and passion and the glorious gamut of human emotion. But if you take a good, honest look at opera plots throughout history, there is one conspicuous constant: sex.

One of the first works officially classified as an opera, Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*, first performed in 1643, is all about a Roman emperor and his illicit passion for Poppea. In Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, Susanna spends the entire opera trying to avoid pleasing her boss, Count Almaviva, before she marries Figaro. Then there is Verdi's *La Traviata*, about opera's favourite working girl. Alfredo does not invite Violetta to his room merely to admire his etchings.

As opera director Chas Rader-Shieber observes, "When a character says, 'For this man, women open wide their doors ...' Let's just say I'm sure they do."

He is quoting from the libretto of *Giasone*, a 17th-century opera by composer Francesco Cavalli and librettist Giacinto Andrea Cicognini, which he is directing for Pinchgut Opera. *Giasone* is based on the Greek myth of *Jason and the Golden Fleece* and was a hit show in the 17th century. This production, which opens at City Recital Hall on Thursday, is its Australian premiere. The plot revolves around central character Jason and his attempts to juggle two wives. It features a string of love and, frankly, lust duets. "There are some awfully sexy scenes," says Rader-Shieber.

"The act of being at that emotional level where you can't speak any more, where you've got to sing; that level of emotion is inherently sexy."

The music often does much of the work: two entwined voices, a surging orchestral accompaniment and a clashing discord resolved into sweet harmony go a long way towards describing sexual pleasure.

But what about the singers? How do you choreograph a clinch in opera?



Believable passion: David Hansen and Celeste Lazarenko star in the opera *Giasone*. Photo: Tamara Dean

"There's one rule in opera," says Opera Australia principal Taryn Fiebig. "No tongues. That is universal, that is understood." But beyond that there is no holding back.

"I think you can tell if an actor doesn't go there. It looks weak; you make the audience feel uncomfortable."

"You have to handle it with respect and grace, but you have to commit."

Oslo-based Australian counter-tenor David Hansen, who plays the title role in

*Giasone*, agrees: there is no point in being shy. Operatic sex scenes will always be stylised, "but within that stylisation there has to be a degree of believability, of naturalness. If we're not acting as we would if we were alone with our partners, husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, the audience isn't going to believe."

But, says Hansen, it is also important to trust the music and the power of suggestion. "With opera, as with

straight theatre, it's nice when you leave things to the imagination of the audience, when you have them in the palm of your hand, wanting more. If you give them everything from the word go, then where do you go from there?"

Fiebig can confirm that there is nothing titillating about graphic sex on stage. In 2010, she played Lucy Joy, daughter of Harry Joy in Brett Dean's opera *Bliss*, an adaptation of Peter Carey's award-winning novel.

Lucy is a troubled young woman who will do anything for a drug fix and in the first act Fiebig had to mime giving fellatio to David Corcoran, who was playing Lucy's drug dealing brother. It was confronting for everyone involved.

"To see yourself degraded in front of your peers and in front of an audience is hard. I found the rehearsal process harder than performing, because [when performing] you're a character. You're not Taryn Fiebig; you're someone else. You walk on, be dramatic and walk off."

And what about the audience reaction? "It is an important part of Lucy's journey as a character. People were disturbed by it but they appreciated the way it was handled, which I was very pleased about."

Fellatio, nudity and simulated sex on stage – can it go too far? There are plenty of instances in which the audience and even performers have drawn the line.

In Opera Australia's *Acis and Galatea*, the sight of a dancer performing fellatio on a singer drew catcalls.

In 2010, soprano Cheryl Barker withdrew from a new production of *Tosca* at short notice. While her management cited "personal reasons", Christopher Alden's controversial production, characterising Baron Scarpia as a psychotic sexual pervert, was booed on opening night.

Fiebig and Hansen agree that there is nothing wrong with a bit of no-holds barred passion, as long as it is justified by the music, the words and the story.

"Sex is such an integral part of all of our lives," Fiebig says. "The fact that we display it openly on stage, it's sometimes as though that's foreign, and it's not. It's part of our everyday life. We're just amplifying it."

*Giasone* is at the City Recital Hall from Thursday until December 9.

## Five scenes to make you blush

### THE CORONATION OF POPPEA

(Monteverdi, 1643)

"*The Coronation of Poppea* would have to be the sexiest opera from start to finish," says counter-tenor David Hansen. Monteverdi's masterpiece starts with a bedroom scene and finishes with the Emperor Nero and his mistress singing a rapturous love duet, "I gaze at you, I possess you ..."

### DON GIOVANNI

(Mozart, 1787)

Before the opera starts, Don Giovanni, aka Don Juan, has notched up more than 1000 conquests in Spain alone, according to his manservant Leporello's Catalogue Aria. He's losing his touch in the opera, only managing several seductions and/or rapes. Teddy Tahu Rhodes stars in Opera Australia's production at the Opera House next year.

### MANON LESCAUT

(Puccini, 1893)

Manon falls in love with an impoverished young stud, but her brother marries her off to a richer, older man. When her lover tracks her down, they have a rapturous reconciliation: "Your kiss, sweet treasure, sets me afire ... Manon, you bring me nigh to death! Such sweet suffering ..."

### LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK

(Shostakovich, 1934)

Shostakovich's thrilling but tawdry tale of a desperate housewife who seeks satisfaction outside her marriage features an extended bedroom scene. The music is notorious for its explicit description of sex, including an unmistakably graphic trombone part, which thrusts, swells and, er, sags. The opera was banned in the Soviet Union for 30 years.



Lover: Teddy Tahu Rhodes as Don Giovanni.

### POWDER HER FACE

(Thomas Ades, 1995)

The story of the "dirty duchess", Margaret Campbell, Duchess of Argyll, hit the newspaper front pages when her messy divorce proceedings were made public in 1963. Composer Ades and librettist Philip Hensher dramatise an act of fellatio, where the duchess hums instead of singing. British radio station Classic FM considered it unsuitable for broadcast but it was made into a film for Channel 4 and broadcast on Christmas Day 1999.

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