

DANIEL PELZIG

Richard Dyer interviews the Director and Choreographer of Opera Boston's *The Bartered Bride*

"WHATEVER I'M DOING, I always connect dancing and movement to the story," says Daniel Pelzig, choreographer and stage director. "Movement should fulfill the storytelling, and realize the dramatic imperative. The story must be told. That's what I do."

Pelzig has been working in Boston off and on for almost 20 years, beginning with a Huntington Theater production of *HMS Pinafore*; during the seven-year period when he was resident choreographer for Boston Ballet, he lived here. Now back at his point of origin, New York, Pelzig has returned to New England for his first assignment with Opera Boston, a new production of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* which opens in the Cutler Majestic Theater May 1.

It is the job of an opera director to get under the skin of the characters, and Pelzig has a qualification shared by none of his colleagues; he holds a degree in cellular biology from Columbia University. He's had a colorful career as a ballet and Broadway dancer, choreographer and stage director; recently he's been working a lot at the Metropolitan Opera, where he choreographed two of its most controversial recent productions: *Lucia di*

Lammermoor and *La Sonnambula* and he has many a tale to tell out of school.



Pelzig is compact, burly and intense, and his mind is as agile as his body was in his dancing days; built like a sparkplug, he throws off energy and ideas. About the only subject he deems out-of-bounds is his age.

As he describes how he developed his production concept for *The Bartered Bride*, it's clear how one idea led to another.

"We began by deciding to perform the opera in English," Pelzig says. "After looking at a number of translations, we settled on the one by Tony Harrison that the Met used 30 years ago. The translation made me think about setting the opera in a Czech community in America. I knew that Dvorák had spent the summer of 1893 in Spillville, Iowa, so I decided to move the opera there. But the length of dresses that women wore in 19th century America would interfere with all the dancing that's required, so I decided to move the time-frame forward into 1934, when America was just coming out of Prohibition. There's a drinking chorus in the opera, so it seemed natural to set the story in and around a brewery where the women could wear

clothes they could dance in. The circus that comes to town in the libretto sounds like a tatty little American touring circus of the 1930s – it travels with a Native American and a grizzly bear!”

Pelzig is pleased with the consequences and resonances of these decisions. “To me, *The Bartered Bride* is about community, and in this case, the community has responded to the Depression by starting up a mom-and-pop brewery. Everyone is involved in making a living there, and the venture generates a shared optimism. I like the way all this is pertinent to convergence of factors in America right now; it is a perfect show for us in this time and place and economic climate. And I discovered as we developed the production, that none of it required us to bend the opera out of shape. Iowa even looks a little like Moravia, and I decided to have the chorus sing some verses of their numbers in Czech – a bit of nostalgia for the old country.”

And Pelzig was delighted when he learned that Smetana grew up around breweries; the composer’s father became a prosperous brewmaster.

Pelzig has done his homework. For example, he was charmed by Max Ophuls’ early German sound film (1932) based on the opera. In it, Mařenka and Jeník sing their love duet in a boat floating downstream. “This is water music,” Pelzig says of the duet, “so I have them singing it as they fish on the brewery dock.” And he liked Ophuls’ ending, which pairs the stuttering, shy Vašek with the circus’s lively

trapeze artist, Esmeralda, so he found a way to put that into the opera, a more satisfying conclusion than the rather hasty one the librettist put together.

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“Vašek is the most sympathetic character in the piece, affable, innocent and charming, and we have this amazing singer Keith Jameson doing it,” Pelzig says. “Vašek represents all of us who have felt like outcasts

in the world. He may not be naturally shy; he is the victim of a domineering mother, Háta, who is the one unattractive character in the opera. I don’t think Smetana mocks him in any way, and he has turned Vašek’s stutter into music.”

Pelzig finds all of the characters interesting. “There is nothing weird or complex about any of them, but they keep surprising you. The situation they find themselves in is not what you would expect, and neither is the way they get themselves out of it. Everyone is trying to fool someone else, but no one is fooled – that is the moral of the story. These people are much smarter than you think when you are first introduced to them. And none of them is purely innocent, because none of us is.”

Pelzig is delighted that Smetana’s characters not only fit into America in 1934, but represent kind of people who are still with us. “Kecal, the marriage broker, is a huckster, and he could have stepped straight out of David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*. In the end, it is the huckster who gets hucked!”

What America wanted to see during the Depression were the dancing movies of Busby Berkeley and the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. “*The Bartered Bride* is a feel-good, joyous and celebratory piece, and it is full of dancing,” Pelzig says. There are three major dance episodes. The *Furiant* becomes a pub dance; the famous *Dance of the Comedians* is a circus dance, and the Polka will begin as part of an impromptu baseball game. He enlisted some pals from the Boston Ballet to help him put together a small company of six dancers for the opera, five of them from the Boston Conservatory. “The dancing is folkloric, which is where my own dance history began. I loved the *weight* of that kind of movement, and I still do; it comes from people’s guts.”

Pelzig did not want anything to do with folkloric costumes, however. “They interfere with movement and turn characters into cartoons.” Working with costume designer Jennifer Caprio, Pelzig wanted *clothes*, not costumes.

“The color palette is browns and greys, people in smocks, or in floral prints. I wanted the people dressed the way that people in the period would have dressed. Háta, Vašek’s bad mother, is the only one who wears what you could call a costume. Her husband Mícha makes all the money – and Háta wears it!”

Always, with Pelzig, the conversation wheels back to character and movement. “The overture sets it all up with those fabulous rhythmic shifts and surges which continue to filter throughout the opera – it introduces us to the sheer joy and the kinesthesia of the piece. It is gorgeous

because it is so full of character. And my basic instinct is always to ask who are these people? What are they doing? And why?”

- Richard Dyer