

## Arias, anxieties and epidemics

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reative people have always chosen works of art as a way to respond to the challenges of the human condition. Given that illness and mortality are among the greatest of these challenges, it isn't surprising that they have been major artistic themes throughout the ages. This is where art gets tangled up with the practice, perspectives and language of medicine. Because medicine is practised within a larger social framework, concepts that originate in a medical field inevitably come to be interpreted in that larger context, and so take on meanings well beyond the medical. This is why art can tell us so much about the medical concerns and even anxieties of an age.

Opera is an art form that is particularly revealing, in part because it is particularly powerful. It brings together the impact of a literary text that is sung to complex music

specifically written for it and dramatized on stage with costumes, lighting and theatrical action. While it owes its power to this combination of art forms, opera also has to reduce its stories to the basics, simply because it takes longer to sing than to say a line of text. This makes operatic story-telling very focused, unobvious and direct. When operas tell stories of illness (as they frequently do), they clearly reveal not only the social meanings that accrue to disease but also the human responses, such as anxiety, that are provoked.

Many of the operas we enjoy today were written in another time and, in both the lay and professional understanding of medicine, time brings enormous change. Consequently the production of operas about disease (or that use metaphors of disease) requires a rethinking of what kind of anxieties about illness might be experienced by a contemporary audience.

Although physicians understand that an individual's response to illness will be determined to a great extent by the individual's personality structure, larger social structures also can have an important impact. We can learn much, for instance, by examining the reaction when epidemic illness strikes the social body as well as the individual body. Igor Stravinsky uses this metaphor of epidemic illness as a sign of social and moral corruption in his operatic adaptation of Sophocles' tale of *Oedipus the King* (from a libretto by the French avant-garde poet Jean Cocteau). The afflicted citizens of Thebes open the opera begging Oedipus to save them:

*The plague falls on us.  
Thebes is dying of the plague.  
From the plague preserve us  
for Thebes is dying.*

When this opera was written in the 1920s, its creators had a number of epidemic illnesses to choose from, but instead they drew on the general social anxiety about plague and left it unspecified. However, in a recent production by the Canadian Opera Company directed by François Girard, the plague was made more specific and contemporary: AIDS. As the production opens, the chorus sings Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms" while the



A scene from the Canadian Opera Company's 1997 season-opening production of *Oedipus Rex with Symphony of Psalms* at Toronto's Hummingbird Centre

names of those who have died of AIDS are etched onto a screen and on the floor by silent actors, writing at the edge of the footlights and moving through the audience — linking us directly to the action on the stage. Oedipus's struggle to solve the mystery of the plague in Thebes and his gradual understanding of it resonates with our attempt to deal with the place of AIDS in contemporary society and our implication in such things as transmission of the virus in tainted blood.

With AIDS being a major medical anxiety of our time, it is perhaps not surprising that the epidemic has caused a shift in how disease is represented on the stage. New stage musicals that confront this crisis — often with subversive humour and irony — include a projected off-Broadway show called *Last Session* and, of course, *Rent*, a rock operatic updating of Puccini's *La Bohème* that moves from 19th-century Paris and tuberculosis to 1990s New York and AIDS. AIDS also has been substituted for other diseases in operas about consumption (Verdi's *La Traviata* by the New York City Opera Company) and, indirectly, about syphilis (Wagner's *Parsifal* in Berlin).

Another opera that recently underwent a radical new medical contextualizing is Richard Strauss's 1905 work, *Salome*. Based on Oscar Wilde's 1890s' play, *Salome* tells the biblical story of the passion of the young princess of Judea for the prophet John the Baptist. When thwarted, this passion leads her to demand his head. She gets her way by persuading her stepfather, Herod, to give her anything she wishes; in return she must dance for him the famous Dance of the Seven Veils. In the libretto, Salome is represented as a young woman who is imperious, labile in emotion and ultimately monstrous in her desire for the head of the prophet. Interestingly, when the opera was written and first performed, contemporary medical views (of such people as Havelock Ellis, Forel and Krafft Ebing) would have categorized her as the pathological female. She was the menstruating (the libretto is full of references associating the moon with Salome, and with the moon as red as blood), pubescent female connected with loss of control, mobility of emotion, increased sexuality and a penchant for violence. In addition, the medical discourses about hysteria (from Charcot to Breuer and Freud) would have been invoked to explain things like her labile mood and violent response to rejection. This all added up to the figure who was the nemesis of the

turn-of-the-century male: the "femme fatale," the magnetically attractive woman who would lead a man to certain destruction.

Filmmaker Atom Egoyan's 1996 staging for the Canadian Opera Company radically altered this fin-de-siècle conception of Salome by depicting her as an abused child. Setting the court of King Herod in a spa-like medical atmosphere where surveillance by people and cameras was continuous, Egoyan presented Salome as a young woman who grew up amid corruption, drugs and the abuse of power. The scene of the Dance of the Seven Veils, which is performed behind a screen, opens with a film of a vulnerable young girl

walking through a forest; the dance accelerates (and, with it, the dancer's frenzy) until it culminates in a gang rape of Salome by members of the court, including Herod. In this context of sexual, physical and emotional abuse of a young woman, spectators at the end of *this* century can understand how she might well demand the head of John the Baptist when her desires are denied; the now-outmoded image of the "femme fatale" is transformed into a powerful and very contemporary message.

These recent productions bring older operas into modern medical context and, in so doing, play on society's contemporary medical anxieties. As cultural vehicles, operas have always reflected social values, but they also have a role in influencing values by representing them on stage. When operas tell stories about illness, they reveal a lot about society's response to disease and our understanding of medical concepts. Updating earlier operas not only makes them more immediately relevant for us but also reminds us that our responses to and anxieties about illness are part of a much longer historical reality.

## Bibliography

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