

## REVIEWS

## In Berlin: La forza del regie

September 20, 2019 | By [Thomas May](#), *Musical America*

BERLIN — Booing can be a badge of honor in Germany's theaters, particularly when it comes to canonical works. That's at least one way of regarding the vehement reactions that have greeted Frank Castorf's new staging of *La forza del destino* at Deutsche Oper.

Or it can be confirmation of cynically stoked hostility, as a number of critics suggested in their initial assessments of Castorf's 2013 *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth, the premiere of which was booed more vociferously than any production in recent history there.

Many of the same charges — contempt for the audience, a perverse indifference to the music, a disastrous preoccupation with signature staging techniques — have been roundly lobbed at the director's *Forza* since it opened in Berlin earlier this month. But at the second performance of the run (September 14), I encountered an electrifying evening of music theater that opened up some genuinely fresh and useful ways of thinking about Verdi.



Tenor Russell Thomas (*Don Alvaro*) and baritone Markus Brück (*Don Carlo*) in Frank Castorf's staging of *La forza del destino* at Deutsche Oper

For all of its serious flaws, Castorf's encounter with *Forza* takes the work far more seriously than is the norm—if anything, too seriously, starting with the unusual title (not a character name, but an idea: *La forza del destino*). For the director, that means foregrounding the structural and social contexts—the real sources of “destiny”—in which the operatic passions play out: colonialism, the lust for war, Catholicism as an institution and as private piety and the longing for redemption.

It's not that the music is short-changed. But Verdi's score has a lot of other elements to compete with, some of which were impossible to untangle over the course of this staging.

Accounts of the tumultuous audience interruption on opening night had circulated widely. Sure enough, there was another outburst—at the exact same spot, well into the nearly-four-hour span of Castorf's production (based on the revised, 1869 version of Verdi's opera, which was initially premiered in St. Petersburg in 1862). Small but very loud contingents of the audience, pro and con, tried to shout each other.

The context involved dramatic recitations that were interpolated between scenes (a poem by the former East German playwright Heiner Müller and a text from the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte about the influence of American troops in Italy during the Second World War). These were extensions of Castorf's staging of the action during the Spanish Civil War (Acts 1 and 2) and in 1943 Naples during the Allied invasion of Italy (Acts 3 and 4). The shifted timeline was meant to make the all-important framework of war that surrounds *Forza* less fairy tale-like and more relevant.

The anti-Castorfians managed to bring the proceedings to a halt with cries of “Viva Verdi!” The entire episode didn't last as long as what had been reported on opening night, and the music then resumed. But there was something distinctly chilling about the power of a small number of naysayers to “cancel” this portion of the performance—to preclude the right of the rest even to judge it.

As the head of Berlin's Volksbühne company for nearly a quarter century (until 2016), Castorf, 68, has long been a defining presence in this city's vital, subversive-friendly theater scene, though *Forza* marks his debut at Deutsche Oper, the crown jewel of the former West Berlin located in the upscale Charlottenburg district. But he made his opera directorial debut as far back as 1998—in fact, with Verdi, in a production of *Otello* in Basel.

Castorf's technique of association can be elusive to grasp because he blends elements that are usually considered incompatible (psychological realism and alienation) into disturbing, corrosive amalgams. For example, the tension in the opening scene between Leonora (Maria José Siri) and her father, the Marchese of Calatrava (Stephen Bronk), was generated by far more than a daughter's misalliance.

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Castorf and his long-standing collaborators—Aleksandar Denic (sets), Adriana Braga Peretzki (costumes), Lothar Baumgarte (lighting), and a team of video designers and live camera operators—transformed the scene into an open-ended backstory involving fascist arms dealing and war atrocities.

This may account for why it seemed to take some time for Siri to settle into the role, but once there, she persuasively depicted the extremes Leonora undergoes: from total self-abnegation as she embarks on her hermitage to the final, crushed hopes of "Pace, pace." The dark-hued finale to the second act, as Leonora faces the stern but compassionate Pater Guardian (Marko Mimica), was a musical highlight.

That it happened to be among the most conventional looking of the scenes may suggest that the whole Castorfian apparatus simply doesn't mesh well with Verdi. But the ideas planted by his interventions elsewhere also contributed to the effectiveness here: His suggestion that Leonora (no blank saint in the production) and the symbols of the church had reached a "dead end" was revelatory.

Visually, Castorf's production uses elements that have become his signature. A tiered wooden structure on a revolving disc dominates the stage, while live footage and closeups are mixed with a montage of historic films and other visual references, all projected on large screens. Sometimes the live shots are shown with a weirdly jarring slight time delay.

Along with the aforementioned textual interpolations, Castorf introduced some characters not found in Verdi's opera: most notably, "the Indian," a figure played by the Brazilian dancer/choreographer Ronni Maciel. Sporting a golden thong, the Indian is mostly silent but frequently onstage, reminding us of Don Alvaro's link to indigenous South America and of the racist animosity toward him by the Marchese of Calatrava and his revenge-seeking son Don Carlo (Markus Brück, in a seething, intense portrayal that shows him possessed by brooding hatred).

The Indian is also identified with "the Angel of Despair" when he twice recites Heiner Müller's poem (a critique of Europe, to put it simply), once in German and once in Portuguese—a fact that made the shouts from the audience to "shut up" particularly chilling.

Castorf's intricate layering of narrative details and bizarrely obscure references have made for some of my most intense experiences of spoken theater. But there's an obvious risk in applying this practice to opera. The result can simply overwhelm with competing stimuli. That Russell Thomas, as Leonora's hapless lover Don Alvaro, succeeded in conveying such an imposing presence whenever he was onstage was all the more remarkable in view of the visual labyrinth of other narratives that were simultaneously unfolding (in Act 3, live footage from behind the scenes plus projected excerpts from the thematically related Italian film *Il Cristo proibito*, etc.). Thomas's enormous but suavely controlled tenor was nothing short of thrilling.

The charge that Castorf indulged a jaded disregard for the score doesn't hold up for me, in light of the detail lavished on the characterizations of Fra Melitone (performed with love-to-hate-him charisma by Mishia Kiria). Ironically, given his focus on social context, Castorf's staging of the vital crowd scenes came off as the most pallid, with Preziosilla (sung with jaded charm by Agunda Kulaeva) as little more than a prop.

Leading the terrific Deutsche Oper Orchestra, Jordi Bernàcer placed greater emphasis on telling details than on traditional lyrical phrasing or dramatic thrust—an approach that worked well in this unique context. It should not be anyone's first experience of this opera. Indeed, Castorf's *Forza* should probably best be approached as a new work in its own right.

Photo by Thomas Aurin

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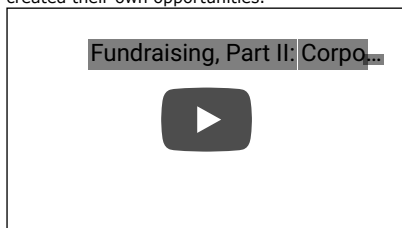


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