

# the Scenographer

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stage and visual director  
**Tommicciché**  
works 1987-2008



A while back, I happened to see at the Arena di Verona an opera production that added new expressions to my visual vocabulary. The visual director, Paolo Miccichè, had emptied the Arena's immense stage area and filled it anew with a stream of dynamic imagery that showered Puccini's musical landscape with energy and colour. No longer did we have the traditional opera set, there were as many "sets" as the music prompted and so Butterfly was all alone in that vast space, but also haunted by her ghosts.

I was so impressed that, as soon as the opportunity presented itself, I invited Paolo to Washington Opera to open the difficult season "in exile" at the Constitution Hall, where two new editions of *Aida* and *Norma* were staged, as different from each other in terms of imagery and style as they were similar in the set-up; and then – returning to the Kennedy Center, riding high on the success of this new visual language – with *I Vespri siciliani*, which I myself wanted to conduct, and with an edition of Verdi's *Macbeth* that perhaps is my favourite among the productions that Paolo has worked on for my theatre. And how to express the emotion I felt when, once again from the podium, I witnessed the towering architecture of the Baths of Caracalla, its ruins become authentic characters interrelating with Verdi's cast in the production of *Aida*.

Paolo often tells me that I am a key figure in his development of this language so in tune with the visual awareness of our day, but also with the demand that the music makes for continuous changes of rhythm and situation. I am pleased that my contribution – together with the critical elements that experimentation requires – has played such an important part in the course of his artistic development.

This monothematic issue of "*The Scenographer*" is an appropriate tribute to Paolo's courage, determination and talent in seeking new avenues for staging opera today.

Plácido Domingo

Affascinata innamorata conquistata  
operosamente convinta tanto da  
non poter non rinunciare  
sempre e comunque  
alle meraviglie poetiche che dalla  
magica finestrella piena di cristalli  
luquidi

mani sapienti e generatrici  
sanno estrarre per poi  
proiettarle nello spazio  
e dar vita di conseguenza a  
imprevedibili camere ottiche piene  
di sorprese.

Vestire lo spazio,  
riempire il tempo,  
spazializzare il suono  
essere padroni dell'eco,  
animare il pensiero,  
abbandonarsi e immergersi  
in un acquario di  
emozioni reali e virtuali  
concrete e metafisiche.

Con Paolo Miccichè  
magnifico visual director  
tutto questo abbiamo  
vissuto insieme, dedicandoci ad un  
Trovatore che ci ha portato ad un  
trasporto straordinario dove si rischia  
di venire addirittura colpiti dalla  
sindrome del "power point" cioè il  
potere di arrivare a puntualizzare il  
punto estremo dell' astrazione  
dell'attimo sonoro che passa.

Una gioia una ebrezza per un lavoro  
faticosissimo pieno di aspettative  
nella ricerca futura per nuove  
tecnologie.

Un gran compagno di viaggio,  
Paolo Miccichè.

*Enchanted captivated conquered  
actively convinced enough  
to be unable to renounce  
forever and come what may  
the poetic wonders that from the  
magic lens dancing with liquid crystals  
skillful productive hands  
are able to extract to then  
project them into space  
thus generating spontaneous camere  
ottiche full  
of revelations.  
To clothe the space,  
fill time,  
spatialize sound,  
to be masters of the echo,  
to stimulate the mind,  
to abandon then immerse oneself  
in an aquarium of  
real and virtual emotions  
both concrete and metaphysical.*

*With Paolo Miccichè  
superb visual director  
all this we have  
experienced together, dedicating ourselves  
to a Trovatore, which has given us such  
tremendous enthusiasm to the point  
where we risk being hit by the power  
point syndrome: the capacity to qualify  
the limit of abstraction of the resounding  
instant that fleets.  
Boundless joy and exhilaration for such  
a demanding activity ripe in new  
technologies.  
A great fellow voyager, Paolo Miccichè.*

Cristina Mazzavillani Muti

Inside the opera, precisely that. Such a title usually refers to a guide that leads the reader to discover secrets and marvels, penetrating right to the heart of the creative lab of a director or, in this case, a visual director. In the case of Paolo Miccichè, the words "inside the Opera" (with a capital "O") might rather sound like a personal subtitle, almost an inscription to include on a business card. Paolo Miccichè has always felt perfectly at ease with the language, the spectacle, in the physical and emotional expression of opera, and a simple and by now remote memory confirms this. November 1984: in the openly dramatic parade ground of barracks on the outskirts of Bari [southern Italy] hundreds of self-conscious recruits line up to the sound of stentorian military marches. The handsome rookie, Miccichè takes part in the muster. Impeccable in standing to attention, yet his mind is elsewhere. In fact, by place and situation he is literally on the other side of the planet: he is mulling over his first opera production as director, *Così fan tutte* for Santiago de Chile. While the air reverberates to the sound of corporals

# ENTRO L'OPERA

Stefano Zuffi

Paolo Miccichè



## Così fan tutte



*Così fan tutte*  
Santiago, Chile, Teatro Municipal - 1985  
Scenic and Costume Designer: Beni Montresor  
Director: Paolo Miccichè  
*Sinfonia - Per pietà ben mio perdona (act 2) - Come scoglio (act 1)*

yelling orders, a light suddenly gleams in his blue eyes: "I've got it!", he confides, softly laughing to yours truly, his 'fish out of the water' comrade-in-arms. "Fiordiligi sings her great aria 'Come scoglio': it is the defining moment of the narrative. On an effectively bare stage I'll have a large mirror descend from behind her. The audience will also get a rear view of the singer, and this will be the symbol of her inner conflict, of the dialogue with herself, of the "double" that is being generated from sentiments that are apparently unshakable." He is thinking, for example, of the mirror effect of a repeated phrase, first on very low notes followed by an acute: "e la tempesta... e la tempesta". From this flash of inspiration, in the midst of the scenario so lacking in stimulus that is military service (anything but *bella vita militar...*, with a nod to Mozart and Da Ponte), Miccichè had a very clear objective: intervene on the image, manipulate it, multiply it, make it come alive and so involve the spectator "within" the scene, thus enabling him to actively participate in the magic and the illusion of opera.

On another, more subtle, level, Miccichè then began a continuous research into “the visualisation of an interior world” that characterises the protagonists of these dramas and which marks the most moving and memorable moments of his productions: through the projection of images emerge citations, memories, dreams, nightmares, déjà-vu, illusions. Like music, the flow of these images is evanescent, elusive, transitory: yet these delicate figures, poignant in the subtlety of their continual dissolving and reappearing, hold an exceptional communicative power.

Each stage of his career has been coherent with this desire. The context, the means or the technologies can change, but the will remains constant (or maybe it is the necessity) to communicate and share passions and emotions. An undertaking that has become extremely pressing. In fact, with great lucidity Miccichè has for some time repeated that the future of opera cannot be enclosed in the obligatory “boxed” spaces of traditional theatres: opera should now enter into dialogue with the arenas, the archaeological sites, the stadia, the piazzas,

# Hansel and Gretel



*Hansel and Gretel* - Houston Grand Opera 1988 - Scenic and Costume Designer: Beni Montresor - Director: Paolo Miccichè - *Monster in the Forest*

and not be afraid to explore environments and audiences beyond the norm. Special visual effects, lighting, multiple projection of images that stream, costumes that become an integral part of the scenography, experimental materials, synchronisation of colours and figures: Miccichè’s research always appears to be in quest of something new, but, as the man himself repeats, without the anxiety of modernisation at all costs. Indeed, Miccichè is perfectly aware of carrying out a rigorously philological operation. Mozart (from whose letters he produced a fascinating theatrical light entertainment) and Verdi are the composers that are closest to his heart, as he fully identifies with their concept of an opera capable of speaking to everyone, of transmitting emotions that are in no way the reserve of melancholy adherents in search of lost time. Each period offers new materials and means of expression, and artists develop the ability to make effective use of them. That is why, for the ancient Greeks, the word that we translate as art was *tékne*: in the etimological sense, there is no contradiction between artistic creation and the application of “technical” rules.

When Miccichè set *Il Trovatore* against the petrochemical refinery of Ravenna, transforming the stage area into an aquarium, or when he computer-generated images of obsessive, compact parades of Egyptian figures for his *Aida* on the walls of the Baths of Caracalla, he achieves something that is both sophisticated and popular in effect, deliberately referring back to the original spirit of the opera.

And if this same *Aida* kept 25,000 spectators glued to their stadium seats in Pretoria, as if they were at a Springboks rugby match, it can only mean that this enterprise is built on solid rock.

In formulating this sense of an art that is unfailingly contemporary and alive, Miccichè had some of the best mentors. At the state school in Milan where he graduated, he often heard repeated that the concept of “classical” does not coincide with a theoretical ultra-conservatism “carved in stone”, but is rather a state of mind that still has force and relevance today, when it lives and resonates and is in the present. Art, poetry, music: the utmost respect for the original text and an awareness of its context and background are the starting points for any



*Hansel and Gretel* - Houston Grand Opera 1988 - Scenic and Costume Designer: Beni Montresor - Director: Paolo Miccichè - *The Witch as a Big Cook*

reading and enable one to develop a deep understanding of the meaning of an artwork, placing the author in relation with the expectations and techniques of his time. As for interpretation, the details are crucial: short cuts or approximations are unacceptable. Miccichè carried out a meticulous study of Italian 19th-century painting in order to select the paintings “projected” within the gigantic frames of *I Vespri siciliani* staged in Washington in 2005. A meticulous selection, which prompted an enthusiastic audience response to the production echoing the spirit of the Risorgimento (with a finale that included a charge of the rifle regiment of the Italian army and a deal of flag waving: this really was “Viva V.E.R.D.I.!), and not just a superficial display of factual knowledge. Just as effective is the surprising “manipulations” of Doré’s etchings, magnified, coloured, dismantled and reassembled as a visual casing of the *Dante-Symphonie* by Liszt: in this way a refined piece of musical theatre intended more for an aristocratic Middle-European salon is transformed into an electrifying artistic spectacle of universal appeal. For the scenery designed for the *Norma* staged at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, the pieces of Celtic

**Don Giovanni**  
 Sassari, Italy - 1994  
 Set Designer: Antonio Mastroratte  
 Director: Paolo Miccichè

## Don Giovanni

jewellery that appear enlarged to the dimensions of supernatural idols and caught in the tangle of branches, have the finality of a revelation, they play a part - mysteriously! - in comprehending the nocturnal whirl, the hypnotic power of Bellini's opera

It looks easy. Miccichè loves the simplicity and clarity that is real culture, and he intends to have fun. The real risks to avoid are inertia, irrelevance and emotional distance, which alienate the spectator from

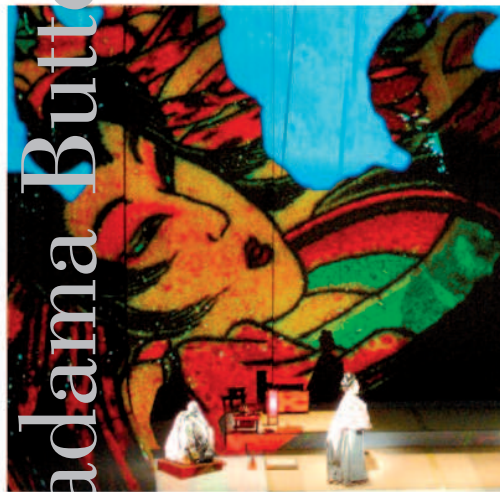
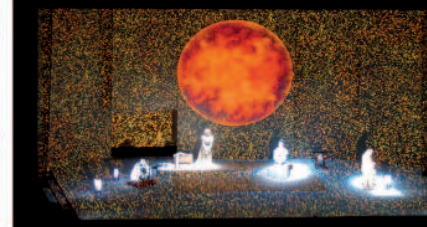
that which occurs on stage. Prejudice coupled with the intrinsic difficulty in language can create an unbridgeable gap between opera and today's audiences: the solutions that Miccichè proposes are always respectful of the classics though never in a neutral, detached vein. On the contrary, there is not one production staged by Miccichè, in whatever hemisphere, in which one does not feel his essentially Mediterranean passion for opera, blended with a dash of Latin wit, a



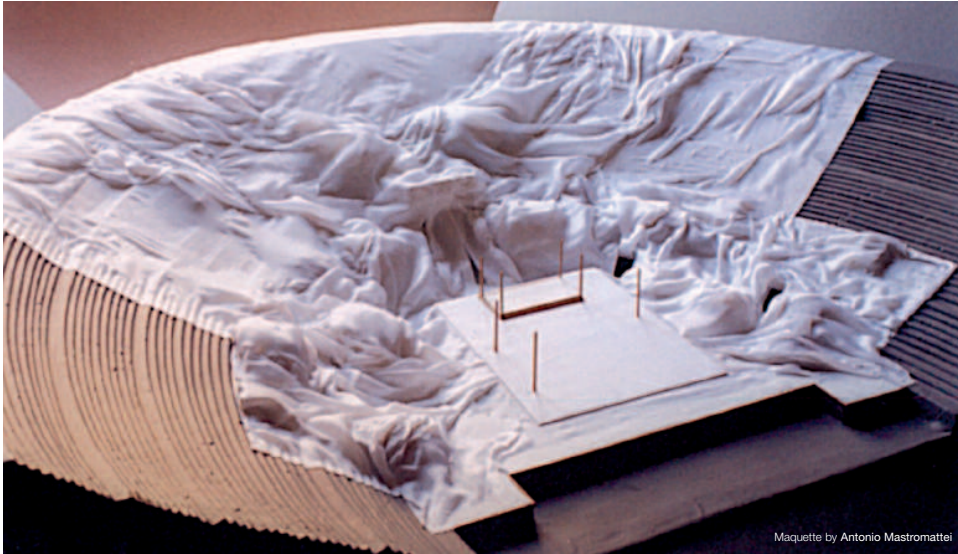
## Madama Butterfly

**Madama Butterfly**  
 Baltimore Opera - 2008  
 Costume Designer:  
 Alberto Spiazzi  
 Projection Coordinator:  
 Michael Clark  
 Stage and Visual Director:  
 Paolo Miccichè

Baltimore Opera



# Madama Butterfly



Maquette by Antonio Mastromattei

**Madama Butterfly** - Arena di Verona - 1999 - Set Designer: Antonio Mastromattei - Projection Designer: Patrick Watkinson - Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Miccichè

hint of scepticism and a relish for the unexpected. Opera, in serious danger of becoming a leisure pursuit for a handful of intellectuals, makes its comeback as a healthy, lively form of popular entertainment.

The pleasure derived from music, from song, from live performance and image is not just limited to the intellectual enjoyment by any individual, but it is a collective experience in which to become completely immersed. If opera is staged in stadia, it is only right that an atmosphere of active participation and engagement is generated. Why ever should this dimension be negated, thereby reducing the staging of an opera to a solitary cerebral act? Witnessing an opera designed by Miccichè means letting yourself be enveloped in a stream of moving images that spread the expanse of unusual sites, and in some cases even invite the spectator to become an active part of the narrative flow.

The paradoxical situations, the high Cs belted out, the coloratura, the eloquent gestures, the larger than life characters, the impossible dialogues, the narrative stratagems, the amazing scenery, the garish costumes, the physical hyperbole of the singers have always been an integral part of an opera production: they are essential ingredients that make up its brand of magic. There is no sense in trying to sterilize them, or water them down or conceal them in any way, worse still to "revisit" them in a forced symbolic manner or in an anorexic minimalist setting. Miccichè's productions are basically "traditional" in the sense that they do not represent a search for hidden meanings and do not constitute a forced modern-day reading, when not grotesque. Miccichè loves the music, the song and the unfolding of an opera's narrative too much to even think of suffocating it with sensational effects for the sake of it. He is the first to put himself on the line: when he speaks of opera, Miccichè can barely suppress a smile that expresses affection and pleasure.

His aim is to transmit, through the image and the movement in scenery, the concept of melodrama as Gesamtkunstwerk, "global work of art", precisely the same aim that composers, conductors, actors and directors have for centuries expressed. The use of digital technology, of images in fade-out, of synchronized video projections and the penchant for unconventional sites for his productions has

# Arena di Verona

prompted talk of "rock opera", but this is a misleading interpretation. Miccichè certainly does not believe that a mask, an artificial appearance, or a superficial facelift are sufficient to make opera attractive or "suitable for a modern audience". His way of doing things runs so much deeper, based on his creative and professional role as visual director, a key figure for a new interaction between the stage and the audience. Miccichè is fond of repeating that music lovers have access to sound reproduction and recording equipment capable of offering a listening experience that is a far cry from live musical performance: individual control of volume, star line-ups even in the minor singing roles, filtered and optimized recordings, totally in tune with the listener's lifestyle. It's out of the question! Opera as live performance is an entirely different matter. Beyond the immutable appeal of the house lights that dim and the curtain that rises, your neighbour's stifled cough, the minor incident, the unintentional humour in the text of the libretto and in its translation, the makeshift solution, the final ovation, maybe even the throng at the crush bar during the interval are all part of the experience. It's the job of the



**Madama Butterfly** - Arena di Verona - 1999 - Set Designer: Antonio Mastromattei - Projection Designer: Patrick Watkinson - Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Miccichè



## The Magic Flute



**The Magic Flute**  
 OperaInCanto, Umbria, Italy - 2006  
 Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché  
 Costume Designer: Alessandra Vadala

visual director to study, to plan and manage the wealth of materials and their collective power to amaze as well as to act as a point of reference for a team of professionals. Real success - and it can't be overstated - is measured by the level of audience engagement, intended not just as an individual's appreciative response, but by an audience as a communal whole.

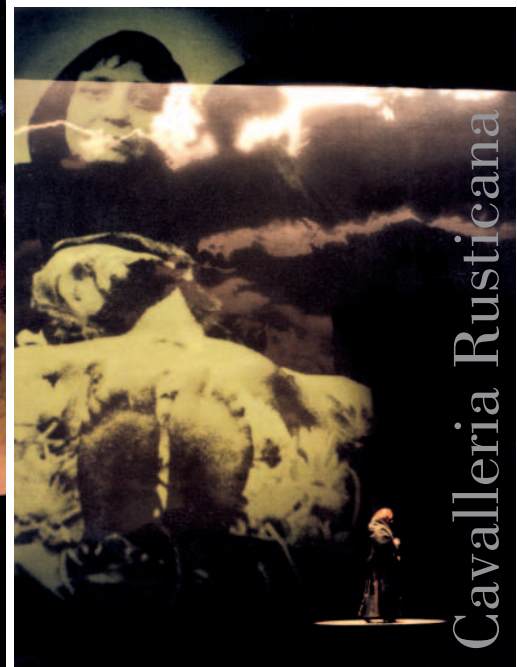
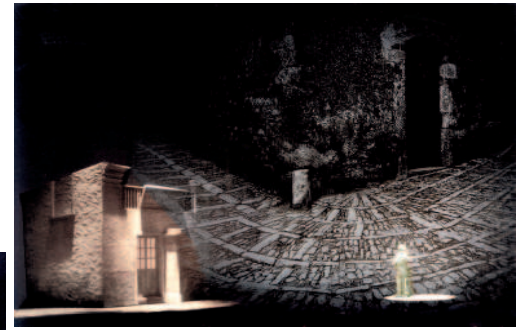
Micciché is years ahead in staging opera as a cultural phenomenon with mass-appeal: the spectators who respond with enthusiasm to his shows can be compared to the hundreds of thousands of people who queue for an art exhibition, to the crowd that gathers to listen to Dante's *La Divina Commedia*, or the piazzas still full late at night during the summer festivals of poetry and literature. While sociologists were trying to gain insight into the phenomenon, with great lucidity Micciché got right to the heart of the affair. Our age has created the ideal conditions and means in which the myth of individualism propagates, it is the realm of the "my generation", of private territory and self-sufficiency. The antidote to egocentricity lies in the desire to participate, to belong, to be part of the group. If art and culture have the courage to break free from the traditional "designated sites" which, though protective tend to stifle, they would certainly find a ready and willing audience. It's a



question of emotional experience, one which can be enjoyed in private, but which is so much more satisfying if shared: these are rare cases in which art, the "classics" still have the power to amaze. As the art critic and historian Simon Schama affirms: "They tell us something about the world, about how to live our lives". Art, music and theatre really can be a part of life, capable of offering us - even when we least expect it - moments of enlightenment on the human condition. And not just that of the characters that walk the boards, but of our very own. ■



**Cavalleria Rusticana**  
 Salzburg, Austria, Salzburg Grosses Festspielhaus - 1996  
 Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché



Cavalleria Rusticana

**Macbeth**  
Washington National Opera, Kennedy Center - 2007  
Costume Designer: Alberto Splazzi  
Lighting Designer: Maurizio Montobbio  
Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché  
*Lady Macbeth Sonnambulum*

# Macbeth



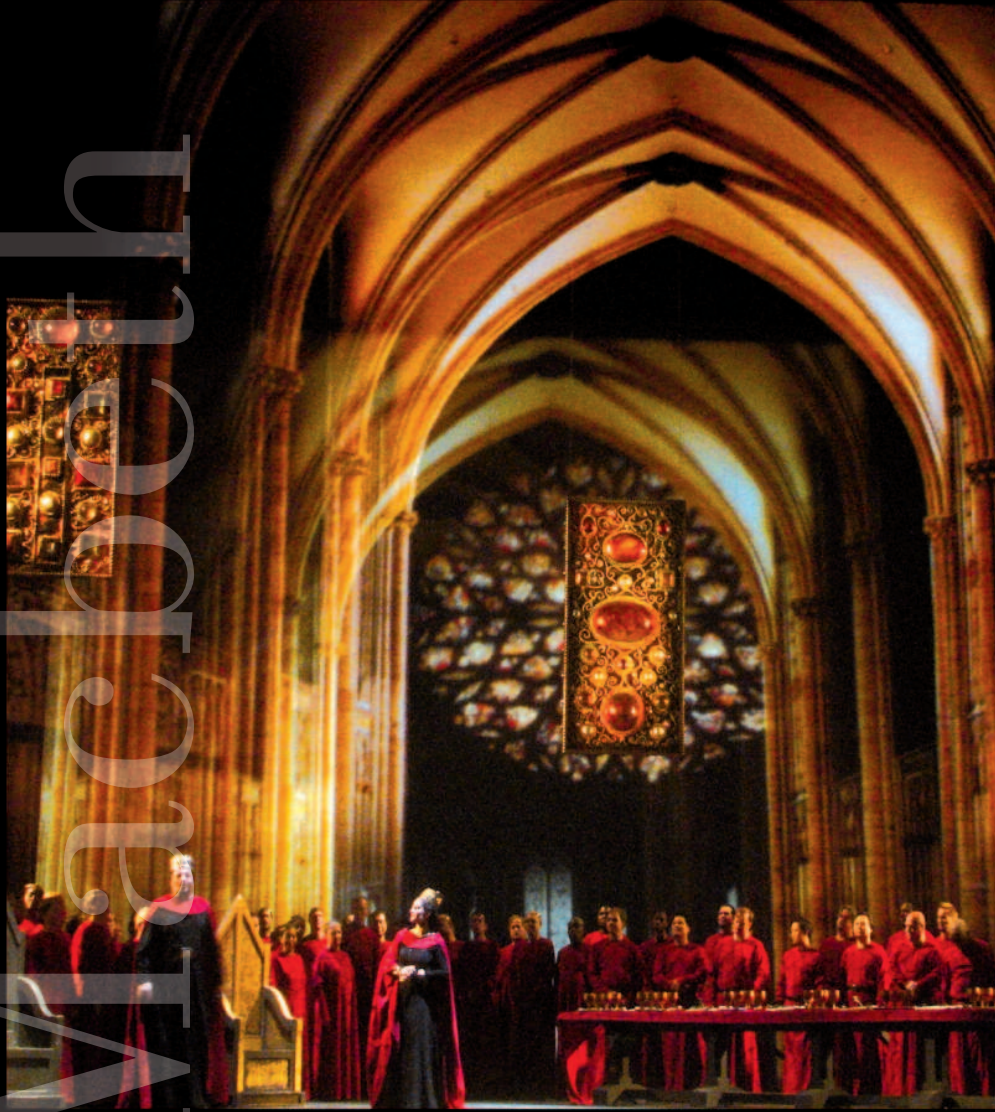




**Macbeth**  
Washington National Opera, Kennedy Center - 2007  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spalazzi  
Lighting Designer: Maurizio Montobbio  
Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micocche  
*The Witches' Cairn*

# Macbeth

Michael

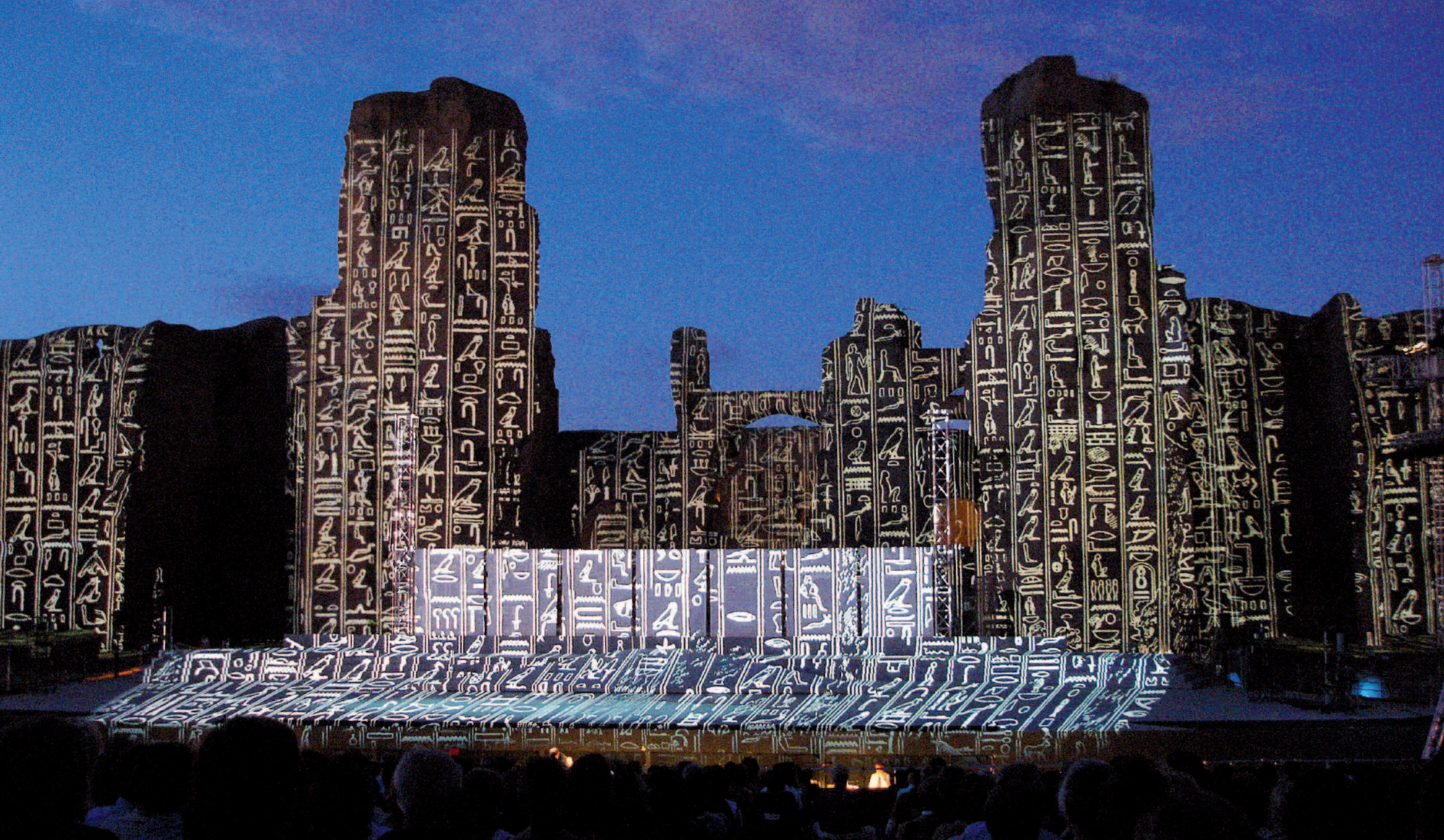


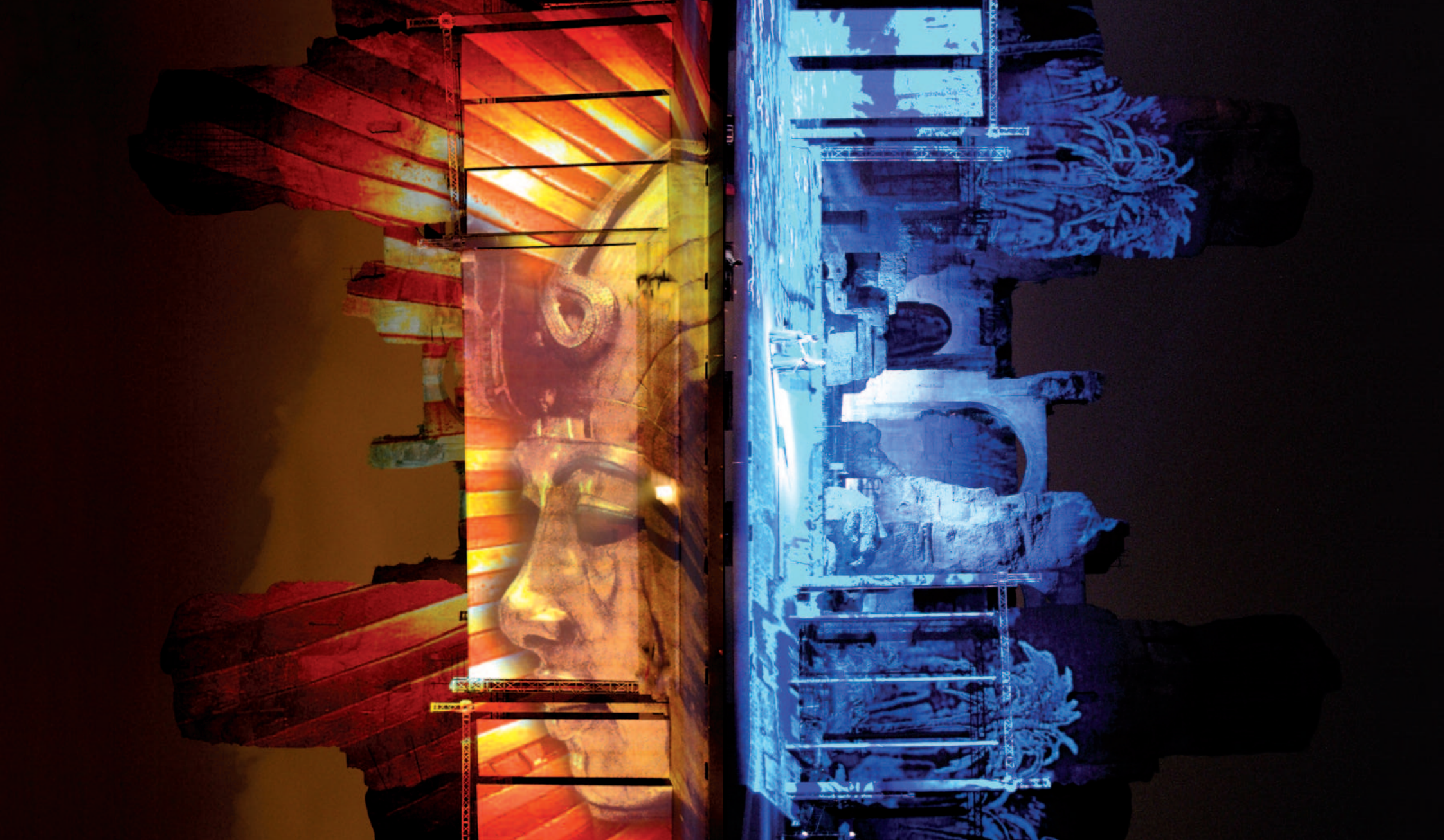


**AIDA**  
Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Terme di Caracalla - 2015  
Set Design: Alberto Spazzi  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spazzi  
Images Output: Luca Dalco  
Stage and Visual Director: Paolo Micciché

AIDA

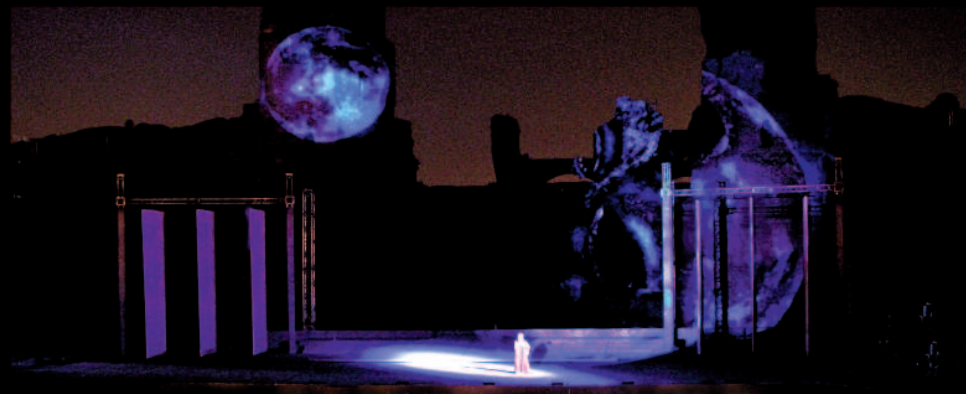
Baths of Caracalla



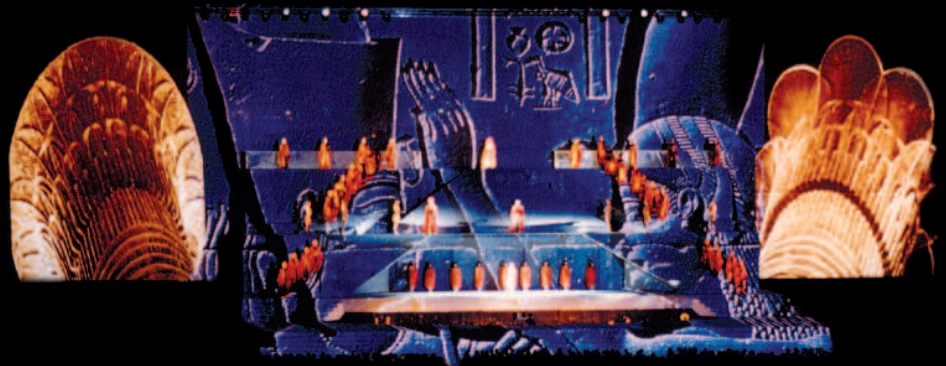




*Aida In Tour* - Madrid, London, Amsterdam, Zurich, Lisboa, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Buenos Aires, Pretoria  
Set Designer: Antonio Mastromattei - Projection Designer: Patrick Watkinson - Stage and Visual Director: Paolo Micciché



*Aida* - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Terme di Caracalla  
Set Designer: Antonio Mastromattei - Stage and Visual Director: Paolo Micciché



**Aida** - Washington National Opera, Constitution Hall - 2003  
Set Designer: Antonio Mastromattei - Projection Co-designer: Patrick Watkinson - Costume Designer: Alberto Spiazzi - Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché

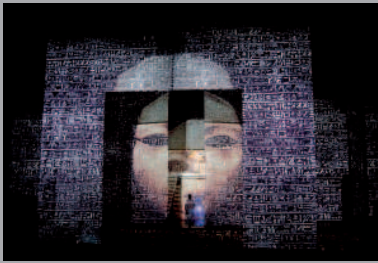
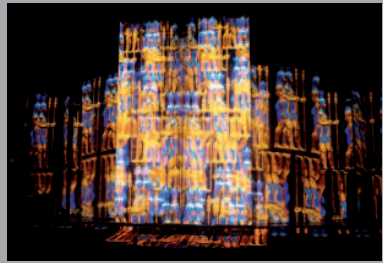
# AIDA

Washington Opera

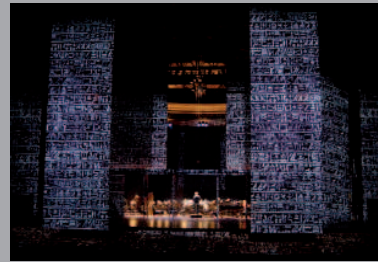




# Dynamic Projection as a character



a new visual language for the performing arts

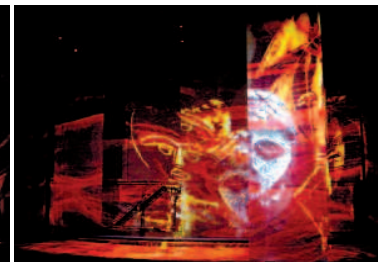
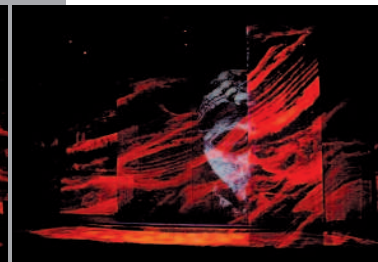
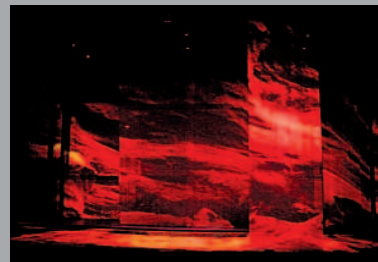


Maria Harman

Paolo Micciché has carved out a dynamic career for himself in 25 years of theatrical experience, starting out as a director before metamorphosing into his current role as Visual Director. This career path charts the progress of someone who has had the opportunity to operate in one of those intervals of linguistic transition that traditionally alternate with those periods of full-blown coherent expressivity; breakaways that - given the hyperbolic advancements of our time - nowadays occur with hardly a prospect of establishing some measure of continuity. Breaking into theatre in the late '70s, Micciché was left with a growing conviction that "it had all been done before", with future generations having to make do with the epigone's crumbs. "For my generation, Strebler and Ronconi were the last to be masters and Mannerists at the same time", he once confided to a friend while at university. Besides, throughout the entire twentieth century, theatre had steadily exhausted the production of scenic-visual solutions to the point of using all their possible combinations. Indeed, the more these solutions were re-utilised the more their formal capacity for expressive strength was depleted. A new way of engaging the audience had to be worked out, but what kind of rapport should

this be? The encounter with Beni Montresor at the Arena di Verona, marked a double breakaway towards a new "Euclidean geometry". With Beni, - at that time working "only" as a scenographer and costume designer - Paolo begins directing, whilst setting out to simplify the scenic element and using the lighting not in terms of simple functionality but as an element capable of exciting a direct emotional response, much in the same way that music does. In *Così fan tutte* in Santiago del Chile, ceramic and reflective surfaces capture the essence of materials of historical settings but do not flood the scenic space with objects and therefore allow Mozart's music to run the distance while the lighting is synchronised to song and music rather than simply being limited to light the sets, which in this case are merely allusive contexts reduced to the minimal. In the successive *Hansel and Gretel* for Houston Grand Opera (1988) this structuring is enhanced by the hi-tech component: today's children are attracted more by luminous panels linked to the computer than by marzipan; the witch's broomstick is radio-controlled, as are a number of scenic devices. This marks the first steps towards a new conception of staging a show in traditional venues.

In the meantime, following his apprenticeship at the Arena di Verona, early experiences in a variety of open spaces take place - *Attila* and *Rigoletto* at the Teatro Romano in Benevento - where the challenge was to stage a production for a mass audience gathered at a considerable distance from the stage area while seeking to overcome the problems associated with a large-scale open-space event. It is thus along this dovetailing of career paths that Micciché was to channel his energy: innovation in visual language for live performance and the staging of opera in giant venues. From then on, focus would be on these two guiding principles. At times there are experimental deviations, such as Rossini's *Cenerentola* for the Seoul Arts Center (1994) where a small-scale traditional set is immersed like an ornament in a large stage area and is articulated in a frenetic movement of the theatre's stage lifts with frequent changes of rhythm and visual perspectives. They are effects - differing from those of the projections - of a purely mechanical type, including the orchestra pit which, in the crescendo of the overture, is raised to the point where it is level with the stage floor. Or the *Carnaval* production based on Schumann's work, for the Teatro Comunale in





Florence, performed using the shadow play technique to the point of transforming the pianist interpreting the role of Clara Schumann into a projected shadow that rejoins that of her husband. In other cases, as in *Don Giovanni* at Sassari, use is made of innovative materials - sheets of perforated iron as a base for the stage - combined with traditional scenic elements though in constant movement; here the projections are incorporated to design the theatre's curtain, this too an expressive element that opens and closes - fully or in part - according to scenic requirements and not just to mark the beginning and end of each act.

At Salzburg (1996), he is both stage director and visual director of *Cavalleria Rusticana* where a residual set design remains but where Mascagna's dramaturgy is precisely conveyed in its alternating between moments of "realist" theatre - the projected image in fact disappears to make way for the acting in real time - and the evocative representation of a Sicilian landscape in large black and white stills on a scrim that creates a frontal filter.

The leap towards the intensive and radical use of projections does not however occur in traditional venues but arises from experimentation - in large European indoor and outdoor stadia - of a language that is appropriate for a vision specific to those spaces.

If *Aida* is staged for 20,000 people in a stadium and the audience - a large part of which is not accustomed to going to the Opera - is placed as much as a hundred metres distance from the stage, how can one attract their attention and continue to engage them?

To what extent can the exaggerated gestures of the singers and chorus compensate? Or perhaps this necessitates a search for a new way to conduct the narrative?

"If a gesture cannot be seen from a distance, it cannot be enlarged beyond measure and so the pathway that technology finally offers us is that of immersing the protagonists in a dynamic projection of which its subjects move and 'narrate' at great distances. In some way you become a modern version of the old popular Italian 'visual story-teller' (cantastorie)".

This is Micciché's starting point, but it also becomes clear that these large projected images have a nature closer to the sensibility of one who lives daily immersed in new visual technologies and the realisation

gradually dawns - and this will also apply to indoor sites - that the power of the projection is such that you can "wash" the entire scenic space while virtually cancelling out the material surroundings. One even creates a third scenic language: no longer confined to simply being in the wings or onstage but also being already within the scene, in a play of conceal-reveal, camouflaged by the projections to then fully appear bathed in the light that "pierces" the image.

The *Aida* staged in European stadia - together with *Nabucco* - is Micciché's testing ground in which to experiment, not only as an expressive language but also from the technical standpoint. It is virgin territory that brings some measure of success: after Munich, Brussels, Madrid, Lisbon and Zurich, *Aida* has its first full success at Earls Court, London; clearly the result of a creative maturation but also of a more honed use of technology.

And it is also the first time that a total split is attained between "Skeno" - "Graphia", between a purely functional set comprising greyish surfaces and the images that are projected and that constantly change the narrative.

This production is seen by Renzo Giacchieri, then Superintendent of the Arena di Verona; from the proposal put forward to stage another production it now almost seems that Micciché has come full circle from his early days at the Arena di Verona to his "homecoming", not only as both director and visual director, but as pioneer of an experimental language far beyond the expectations of a segment of his institutional public.

*Madama Butterfly* (1999) was also to prove a rather difficult experience: final rehearsals, insufficient for the experimentation of a new language, not to mention financial cutbacks, though none of which impedes on the production staged at Verona marking a turning point. The Arena is "wrapped" with an enormous grey screen with only a large raked surface beneath it, and nothing else. Facing it are a cluster of 9 extremely powerful ETC-Pigi film-projectors, each capable of a 360° rotation. The images are composed of 6 superimposed films and the entire system is capable not only of covering the expanse of the performance space but also of being articulated within it.

In each case the entire area of the enormous stage is "washed" by the image and - crucially - it interlinks splendidly with the dramaturgy. Puccini's monodrama comes to life: it is Cio-cio-san who charges her solitude with images that she herself produces; then doubt sets in and the images become increasingly darker until death arrives with a violent light that "rips through" the projection, signalling her demise with the end of the projected images, leaving the protagonist alone in the static, empty space of a daylight-effect colourless screen.

The audience was divided, as were the critics; there are no half measures: either you accept the language or you reject it. Plácido Domingo came to one of the last performances and was greatly impressed with the result. With his proposal to import this innovative visual language to the Washington Opera, of which he was then artistic director, the production leaves the large open-air spaces with their specific conditions and shifts to traditional theatres as a transitional move towards a new and young audience.

And again, with a new edition of *Aida* (2003), the yardstick by which progress in Micciché's experimentation of the language is measured. The electrifying performance at the Constitution Hall in Washington takes the audience by surprise. The critics talk of a point of no return. The disconnection between the scenic apparatus and the visual landscape is at its maximum; but it isn't just the images that change and move: there is also a mobile system of strip panels that rise and descend, enabling the imagery to be articulated and broken up, thus providing the spectator with a myriad of constantly changing perspectives. The costumes designed by Alberto Spiazzi (his longtime collaborator, along with Antonio Mastromattei, Patrick Watkinson and Luca Dalcò) are profiled volumes, surfaces on which to receive the projected graphics and which, for the first time ever, make use of an innovative fibre-optical fabric that produces an internal - and therefore interior - light to the costumes of the Temple dancers once the god has descended upon them.

A third edition of *Aida*, which Plácido Domingo himself was to conduct at the Baths

of Caracalla, Rome Opera season, comes close to complying with Micciché's mission to cross-link between traditional theatres and open spaces, and once again reunites the language of projected imagery for indoor venues with imagery expanded to a broad field of vision on a grand scale.

For this production we are not in just any old open space: we have as a backdrop the awe-inspiring presence of the ruins, an authentic character to reckon with, at times merely lending visual support, at others, an integral part of the show: their towering heights depict the Napata gorges, the banks of the Nile, the Pharaoh's palace. Specific reference is made to the Roman Baths' original function for the Amneris's bathhouse scene, where the "painting" of the architecture culminates in the projecting onto its exterior the same mosaics still preserved within its interior. The projections flood the ruins with dramatic visual starbursts skilfully choreographed with the dissolving images flanked on a triptych of screens positioned in the wings that rotate to recede from view or become visible, in a chiaroscuro of diverse perceptual planes. The audience has never seen anything quite like this before and is bedazzled into reappraising the sense of the music no longer simply as an accompaniment to the story but as juxtapositional to the visual narrative.

Meanwhile, in a traditional theatre space, Bellini's *Norma* is staged at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa - on paper a less spectacular opera - though highly effective in its blend of timeless materials: the cosmos, the forest and ancestral symbols that bombard the audience with kinetic boldness.

At the Ravenna Festival during that same period Micciché strikes up a fortuitous acquaintance with "a fellow wayfarer", Cristina Muti. "*Cristina was - and is - committed to a rethinking of the scenic space and of audience response: that of a new audience but also a new audience in as much as it is 'genetically modified' in its everyday perceptions.*"

Micciché was really struck by the *Capuleti e Montecchi* that Cristina Muti had staged the previous year; a sign that the language of projected imagery could also serve less intrinsically spectacular dramaturgies.

Micciché brings the *Dante Symphonie* to Ravenna, a visual concert for two pianos,

chorus and actors with projected imagery drawn from and reworked from the visual art of the "Lisztian" Gustave Doré.

Such a spectacle demonstrates the extent to which the use of various forms of media can be an important factor in the staging of instrumental and choral performances, as these too are often penalised by scene changes. At home one can listen to the best music on discs played on sophisticated hi-fi systems. What will spur us to still go to a concert if not a visual add-on value? Here, Cristina Muti is struck by the dynamic images and by the celestial chorus that suddenly appears against the light, "piercing" the projected image. The following year sees a successful new edition of *Il Traviatore* directed by Cristina Muti with visual direction by Paolo Micciché. Enrico Fedrigoli's images of an anachronistic Ravenna dominated by an industrial landscape is repackaged and dynamised by Micciché by creating the "aquarium" effect he often employs, which does away with the traditional wings so typical of Italian theatres; in this production the singers appear here or there lost in a visionary *mare magnum*.

The same structuring that Micciché - in his dual role as stage director and visual director - was to give to *Macbeth* for the Kennedy Center in Washington. The production isn't limited to one fixed piece of scenery; everything is seen through a kaleidoscope of visual planes, whether more contextualised, or imaginary or internal. Lady Macbeth appears as if she were generated from within a cathedral-like castle which in turn has emerged from the growth of an unbridled root; there we find her in midair enveloped in its tangle. Still Lady Macbeth sings her "Somnambulismo" imprisoned within an enormous blood clot suggestive of a cerebral reticulum that palpitates of life itself and it constricts her until it appears to absorb her. The phantoms of thought materialise superimposed on the planes of reality.

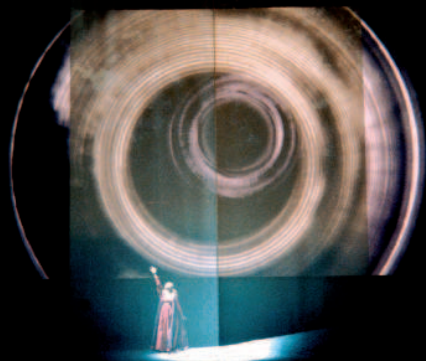
The research is by definition ceaseless and often contradictory; during this exploration there is also an attempt to go back or to rework those elements into other contexts. In *I Vespri Siciliani*, with a favourable dramaturgy playing its part, the radical fracture between "Skeno" and "Graphia" is alleviated by the presence of scenic objects in

the form of enormous empty picture frames made mobile, designed by Antonio Mastromattei. These are positioned at various levels while images taken from nineteenth-century Italian painting - Hayez in particular - are sized to fit the frame or projected in juxtaposition: giant visual frescoes to accentuate an opera where often the action is illustrated and only at times performed.

With Verdi's *La Forza del destino* for Baltimore Opera (2007), yet another experiment. The rupture between "Skeno" and "Graphia" returns but here the images are those by Nicola Benois for the Teatro alla Scala edition of 1948-49. Benois was the great painter of backdrops and flats to create an illusion of perspective; through projection they impart the same lightness even if with less variety and flexibility. In this specific case Benois, as a true painter, created artwork of extremely modern visionariness. What was to remain of the conversion of those paintings into real objects, what kind of mutation would it have undergone? Micciché attempted to do justice to Benois the artist rather than Benois the scenographer; this is how his sketches have become projected images, at times dynamised though always impalpable, with which to envelop the protagonists, who in turn become the animated characters of these same pictures. Another artist, Rousseau (Le Douanier) is the inspiration behind the ethereal, otherworldly *Magic Flute* by Mozart staged in a number of delightful little theatres as part of the OperaInCanto festival in Umbria. The fantastical and "Magic Flute-ish" world of the French painter is analysed in detail and becomes the inspiration for the whole look of the opera, an enchanting, magical musical box.

The latest project is an excursion into the musical, as visual director for *La Divina Commedia, l'Opera*. Once again Doré as a visual ground is referenced, but within a context of highly technical experimentation - thanks to the computerised animations of Dalcò - it is the achievement of a visual dynamism at intervals almost overwhelming. Are we on the verge of reaching the limit of a true hybrid of live theatrical performance and filmed entertainment? It is difficult to know from an experimenter like Micciché: "*the next step you will really come to know only after having made it*". ■

*Norma*  
Washington National Opera, Constitution Hall - 2003  
Projection Co-designer: Patrick Watkinson  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spiazzi  
Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché



*Norma*  
Teatro Carlo Felice, Genova - 2003  
Projection Co-designer: Patrick Watkinson  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spiazzi  
Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché

*"What can I say, I'm a typical Aries, a pioneer, and I love to see the buds that blossom, but not before I've sawn off a branch or two though", says Paolo Micciché behind a grin while he shoots you a glance that is both affable and provocative. His career has certainly taken an unusual path, from his early experience directing theatre productions - "with Beni Montresor as scenographer, though; not by chance a master of light intended as a dramatic character" - to his interest in new technologies as a means to satisfy what he felt to be a burgeoning audience receptivity to innovation. This approach "inadvertently" led him to metamorphose into a Visual Director, one who devises a unique, evolving visual landscape, the fruit of a clutch of disciplines among which - though longer paramount - is that of the Theatre Director. "Do you like the term 'dramaturgic-visual designer'?", he asks me point-blank. "I talked about this the other day with Cristina Muti, director of the Ravenna Festival and an artist, one of the very few to have understood that the language employed up to the present has now reached the end of its line." Micciché broke with traditional methods of stage design around fifteen years ago, when he began experimenting with a new visual language for opera to stage in large spaces: indoor and outdoor stadia on the international circuits that were once used solely for pop and rock concerts, but instead of "leaping over the fence" he again approached institutional theatres with the aim of involving them in the process of renewal. He finds important interlocutors such as directors Renzo Giacobini and Plácido Domingo and so launches at the Arena di Verona with a Madama Butterfly staged solely with the use of large-scale dynamic projections. He continues in this vein with a Norma, with the projected images "washing" Constitution Hall in Washington, then "painting" the architecture of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome with an Aida conducted by Plácido Domingo. Then on other occasions, projections and moving lights are turned to minute spaces where by contrast a more intimate rapport with the audience is created. It really seems that Micciché relishes juggling with opposites and with paradox. So I ask him to retrace a few points in order to clarify and get a sense of order. "Why do you want to go over this again?"*

## Paolo Micciché

I am trying to understand, to define your profession.  
I am a Visual Director.

Another way of defining the scenographer?  
Another way of defining the director.

The director is the director.  
Precisely; everything that moves on the stage is decided by the director. If the images then become characters in their own right and they are integral to the dramatic action then a visual director is needed.

In the past this role didn't exist.  
In the past we lacked the enabling technology. But then neither did the television director or the sound engineer and many other roles exist.

And the scenographer is pensioned off?  
With the language that I am experimenting I would prefer to split the term into Sceno - Graphy, as in Skènè and Graphè. The latter thus assumes a dynamic role and often performs in the same way as a character, so this is a matter for the director. The "Sceno", however - that is, the scenic apparatus - remains in the hands of the scenographer.

A serious business, creating difficulties for such an important traditional role.  
Why should I be restricted to banality? The email substitutes the letter written on paper and the automobile replaces the horse-drawn carriage. If we don't want to see the computer and television - and their interactive capacities - wipe out theatrical live performance, we have to take up the gauntlet.



Is the scenic space redefined or is it just the technical methods that bring about change?  
Both. A neutral system of platforms and mobile screens are put together on which to project the images. An effect is then created by constantly modifying spatial depths while the front projection "washes" the entire stage area and the back projection integrates the image, lending it depth.

And the actors?  
The actors or the singers are sometimes placed within a recognisable space, at other times they appear at different heights or at varying transparencies - immersed in an aquarium, as Cristina Muti, a "colleague" of mine, would say. Like me, she has experimented with this language for a number of years though chiefly within more traditional sites.

A scenic space that evolves.  
Yes, one that can take us from a realistic context to one that is symbolic or to another that is totally abstract. In an opera production obviously it is the music that guides us on this journey while no longer having the certainty of the scenic space as it was traditionally organised in the "Euclidean geometry" of Italian theatre.

Perhaps it's just as well that Mozart or Verdi aren't around to see it...  
I wouldn't be so sure. You only have to read their letters and the other evidence to realise that they would have been enthusiastic supporters. Just as I think they would be disappointed to see how their works are often represented today, that is, looking "backwards".

Fidelity is a value...  
Absolutely. The shock of seeing *La Traviata* was so strong precisely because a mid-nineteenth century audience was almost contemporary to the protagonist. Nowadays, if we don't recognise and in some way recreate parallel perceptive conditions, we "betray" the author's intentions. In this sense, there could be many such examples.

Then let's dress her in blue jeans and update her.  
Forcing a modernised version is too easy and often merely pointless if produced simply for the sake of going against the grain. Whether to use historical costume or not is not the issue. The important thing is not to start out with the idea of staging an historic reconstruction but a reading from the present for the present. This should count for all types of productions, including those that do not use new technologies. In my case I add the visual language of the projections, which I believe to be the best entry code for the spectator of our time.

Dynamic video and panels that dance in tune to TV and computer; isn't there a risk of radically changing opera?  
Verdi, for the 1847 staging of his *Macbeth* in Florence, imported from London The Magic Lantern - the forerunner of projections - just imagine what kind of effect it must have produced on an audience weaned on an innocuous and well-established painted backdrop and lights that lit up the stalls thereby greatly reducing the audience's ability to fully engage

in the theatrical fiction. Verdi was aiming for Effect in order to have an audience that was utterly involved in the process. Why shouldn't we also aim for this?

The overall rhythm and pace of our time are different.

Yes, our interior metronome beats faster, but our visual and aural perceptions have also changed. We are "corrupted" to change. From the moment that we purchase a CD in a store for a few euros and then listen to it at home, perhaps through a set of headphones, we will then struggle to appreciate an orchestra that is of inferior quality or that does not benefit from such a full sound. At home we have audio and visual devices that are increasingly sophisticated: they are dangerous viruses that alter our perception. In order to obtain permission to "enter" into a spectator, to be able to make an impression on him, there is a need for new weapons. This is war! A crusade against surface noise.

And what does the public have to say?

A decade ago it was split down the middle; today there is much greater approval, just as those who reject have not lost the conviction of non-acceptance: an apathetic "no" interests me much less than a "no" that is vehement or even obnoxious.

Does this happen?

Yes, at times I read in the blogs that someone complains. I once read with great amusement about a couple of classical music lovers that said something like "our nerve endings quiver at the mere thought of Micciché returning". I certainly find this better than certain complimentary remarks where you realise that the interlocutor thinks they have simply seen a multimedia extravaganza.

The biggest compliment?

That of the doyen of Argentinian music critics. I didn't know her. She asked to speak to me after a performance of my controversial *Madama Butterfly* at the Arena di Verona. She said: "It is the most beautiful thing I have seen". She was already eighty years old and I can't deny that her words both shook me up and gave me encouragement.

Do you feel at the top of the tree?

No way; experimentation is hard, it often clouds lucidity and at times it makes you fall in love with the techno-toy you have in your hands. That said, I do feel that I am a pioneer, the first that has experimented with this language in huge spaces, in those sites that I call the "theatres" of our time. At sixty to a hundred metres distance one no longer has a perception of the theatre director's imprint, only the images in movement, which have to transport the strands of the narrative.

In Pretoria, at the Minolta Stadium, *Aida* was seen by 25,000 people in a single evening. Not one of them left before the end. That's right! Unlike a certain kind of audience that disappears before the finale to grab their coats, they remained in their seats to applaud. A fantastic energy. I once again felt opera as a strong and vital theatrical genre.

Isn't there a risk of simply staging a *son et lumière*?

Perhaps. But that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Take the *Aida* that I produced at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome. The monolithic structure and the towering architecture of the Baths with their dominating presence. I "painted" them with the projections in such a way as to create a dialectic with opera. In this way the attention was captured by a broad field of vision: it would have been too much for the spectator with other references that are purely theatrical.

Does this also challenge the drama production?

Certainly not, but it becomes more rarefied, allusive, with elementary links between characters and an orderly arrangement of chorus and extras, supers. Then let's face it, today's audience has already seen dozens and dozens of *Aida* productions - not to mention *La Bobème* or *Tosca* - with their worn-out repertoire of predictable movements, the same old variations on a theme. The rarefaction means a clean-up operation from the visual overload; it leads to a rather alienating zeroing-out.

In an enclosed theatre space, though, dramatic direction is still necessary.

It definitely carries more weight, but here, too there is a fine distinction. The projected images are very much at the forefront and occupy much of the spectator's attention. And also in an enclosed space the gestual expressiveness of the singers tends to be formulaic and stereotyped, due in part to insufficient rehearsal time. I often feel the need to reduce the movement and the gestures, to try to boost the interior interpretative tension, allowing the spectator the possibility to reassemble the elements and associate the components in a more personalised, modern way. As I teach *acting for opera singers* (Conservatoire of Siena) this put me beyond every suspect not to believe in acting.

You are a director that is not a typical director and a scenographer that is not a typical scenographer...

Micciché beams another smile with the faintly amused look of someone who has clear ideas and could with patience reiterate what has been said... Look, I'll meet you halfway, let's touch on the past... I graduated in History of Music... Claudio Monteverdi was "excommunicated" by the "high priests" of the Prima Pratica [Renaissance polyphonic music] for having created a Seconda Pratica [a Baroque style] from which was established the Teatro d'Opera and its 400 splendid years of history. Perhaps not even he came to fully realise what he had set in motion; he undoubtedly characterised the breaking point of the language. Please forgive me the irreverent comparison... it is just to make the example stronger... but I cherish the thought that I am contributing to the birth of a dramatic Terza Pratica and this constant thought gives me a certain satisfaction. ■



**Dante Symphonie**  
Ravenna Festival  
Piano: Vittorio Bresciani, Francesco Nicolosi  
Narrator: Monica Guerritore  
Stage and Visual Director: Paolo Micciché

# La Forza del Destino



Based on original artwork by **Nicola Benois** for the production staged during the 1948-49 season at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan



*La Forza del destino*  
Baltimore Opera - 2007  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spiazzi  
Lighting Designer: Maurizio Montobbio  
Projection Coordinator: Michael Clark  
Stage and Visual Director: Paolo Micciché



# La Forza del Destino

*I Vespri Siciliani*  
Washington National Opera, Kennedy Center - 2005  
Set Designer: Antonio Mastromattei  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spiazzi  
Stage and Visual Direction: Paolo Micciché



# I Vespri Siciliani

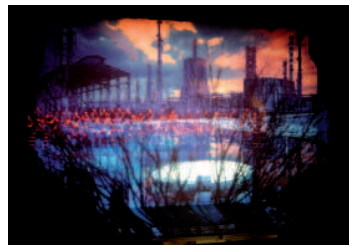
*I Vespri Siciliani*

Washington National Opera, Kennedy Center - 2005  
Italian painter Francesco Hayez: living pictures



# Il Trovatore

*Il Trovatore*  
Ravenna, Italy, Teatro Alighieri - 2005  
Stage Direction: Cristina Mazzavillani Muti  
Lighting Designer: Simon Corder  
Visual Director: Paolo Mioricichè  
From the photos by Enrico Fedrigoli

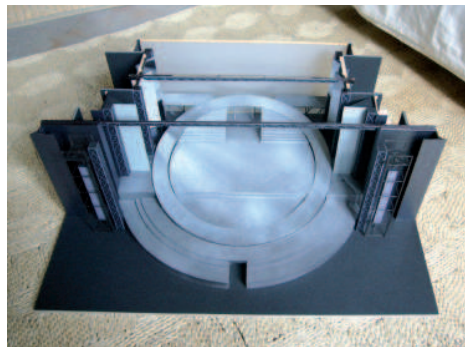






# Divina Commedia

*La Divina Commedia*, l'Opera  
Rome 2007, co. Tit.  
Music and Dramaturgy: Marco Frisina  
Set Designer: Antonio Matromattei  
Lighting Designer: Maurizio Montobbio  
Costume Designer: Alberto Spazzi  
Visual Director: Paolo Niccicò



Maquette: Antonio Matromattei







Nova Ars Musica Arte e Cultura specializes in the planning, production and realization of concerts and large-scale events, geared to transmit to new generations a familiarity with great artistic works. The Scenographer meets Gabriele Gravina, President of Nova Ars, who tells us how the *La Divina Commedia* project was generated, an authentic musical spectacular which premiered in Rome in a marquee structure of gargantuan proportions designed to accommodate 2,500 spectators. "*La Divina Commedia. L'Opera*", as it was announced to the Italian public, "is a real extravaganza, brought to you by Nova Ars and renowned entertainment professionals, such as Carlo Rambaldi, three-times Oscar winner, who created all the opera's fantastic creatures. This is a show that is unique in its genre, as demonstrated by its Rome debut. An enormous itinerant theatre marquee was specially designed for this event, with a maximum seating capacity of 2,500, planned to the finest detail in order to enhance the spectacular and atmospheric aspects of the Opera, like the projections screened by 4 highly advanced projectors choreographed and directed by visual director Paolo Micciché." We ask him how such a project gets off the ground and how it is coordinated. "We view every project that we decide to take on as if it were a dream to be realized, for which we find new solutions, creating synergies with a wealth of talent and professional skills. Commitment and professionalism are the hallmarks of the Nova Ars team, bringing together professionals and artists of high calibre: a well integrated and harmonious team capable of exploiting and integrating their pool of skills. Particular attention is given to the logistics and the organizational aspects linked to the territory and to the peculiar characteristics of the arts and culture market."

#### Technical specifications

*A tensile structure with a free span of 40 metres in width and 150 in length, for a height of 16 metres, supported by 28 steel arches.*

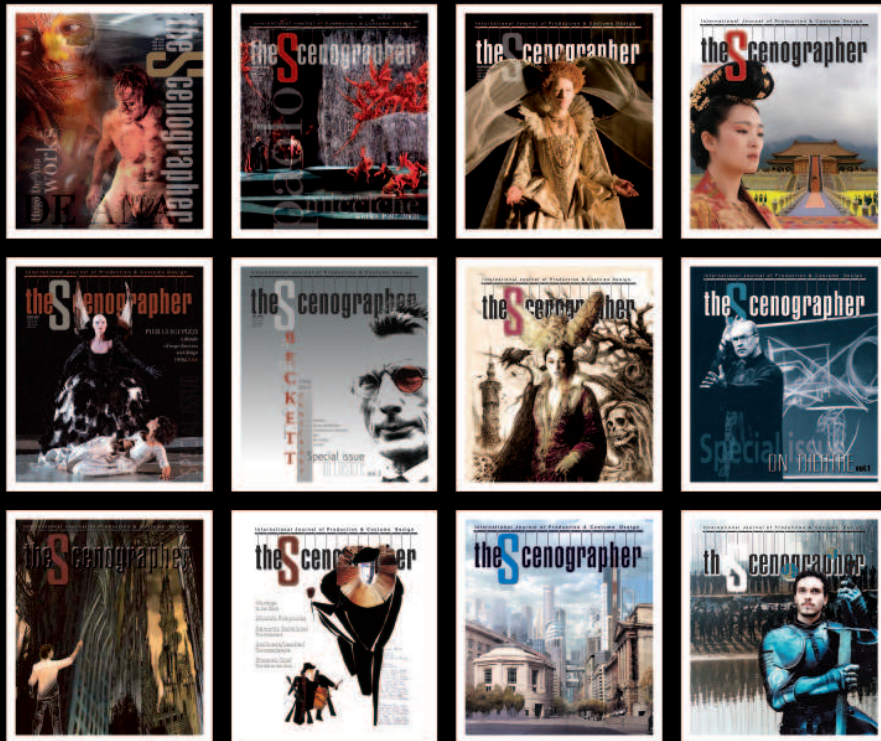
*Advanced projection technology of 30,000 and 18,000 ANSI lumen full HD. A total output of 1000 Kw.*

*A stage area of 24x24 metres, with a total frontal span of 26 metres and a workable depth of 24 metres. Stage machinery consisting in a rotating ring, 18 metres in diameter, taking one minute to complete a full circle.*

*Over 200 artists involved: 24 actor-singers, 20 dancers, 10 acrobats, while the recorded music was performed by the 100-piece "Roma Sinfonietta" orchestra and a choir composed of over 40 youngsters from the most prestigious musical institutions in Rome.*

*In addition, 600 costumes built with thousands of metres of fabrics and finished with innovative materials.*





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*Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini  
Director, Stage, Costume and Light Designer: Hugo de Ana  
Costume House Tirelli Costumi Roma - Sartoria Teatrale e Cinematografica  
Fiorenza Cedolins, Marcelo Álvarez & Ruggero Raimondi  
Orchestra e Coro dell'Arena di Verona, Daniel Oren  
Arena di Verona, 2006

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