

In his unforgettable set designs
for theatre and opera

Michael LEVINE

conceives the stage in magical new ways

by Urjo KAREDA

Architect of Dreams

Of all estimable Canadian artists, Michael Levine probably works on the largest canvas. His creations often occupy spaces half-a-city-block wide and just as high and are seen by a couple of thousand people at a single viewing. As an extraordinarily imaginative stage designer, Levine has created pictures in the theatre that resonate tellingly with the action onstage and then invade audiences' memories, inescapably, for years afterward. Mention some of his productions, and you may struggle to recall who was in the cast, or you may dredge up a dim outline of some of the staging, but you will find that the images created by Michael Levine are still with you: the huge red Expressionist woodland of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* at the Bluma Appel Theatre; the dreamworld library, its walls climbing upward before our eyes, of *Heartbreak House* at the Shaw Festival; the yearning household of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, with its cramped and claustrophobic rooms enclosed by sky-blue walls painted with golden stars, at Tarragon Theatre; the tier upon tier of women's red evening gowns as the backdrop for Clare Boothe's *The Women* at the Royal Alexandra; the weeping watery floors and the ominously angled brick wall of the Canadian Opera Company's double-bill of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schoenberg's *Erwartung* at the O'Keefe Centre; and the dark Italian seaside resort, relieved only by a thin strip of the Mediterranean and a burst of Fascist banners, in Harry Somers' *Mario and the Magician* for the COC at the Elgin Theatre.

It's only a small sampler of his work, and only the work done in Canada at that. It leaves aside the designing he has done in Geneva, San Francisco, New York City, Cardiff, Paris, Antwerp, Glasgow, Aix-en-Provence, Santa Fe, Belfast and London. But every one of Michael Levine's stage creations represents both an intuitive response to, and an intense meditation upon, a given text. Levine's triumphant theatrical visions also reflect, sometimes to a greater or lesser degree of satisfaction, a creative interaction with a director, a company of performers, a choreographer, a



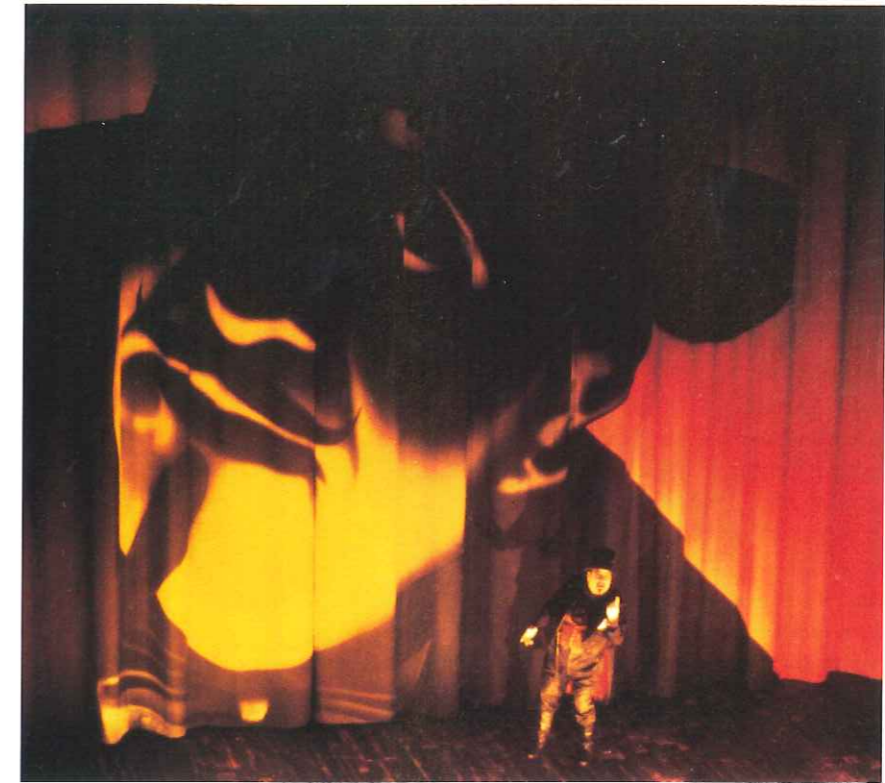
Portrait of Michael Levine by Eden Robbins



Heartbreak House
The Shaw Festival
Niagara-on-the-Lake 1985



Wozzeck
Canadian Opera Company
Toronto 1990



Mario and the Magician
Canadian Opera Company
Toronto 1992

conductor, and a technical staff. His is an individual vision, certainly, but one achieved through consensus.

Indeed it was Levine's desire for collaborative creation that steered him toward theatrical design in the first place. At Thornton Hall, a Toronto secondary school that stressed art, he received a strong grounding in the structure of painting, and, most importantly, in the history of art. "It seems absolutely nuts to me," says Levine, in his usual laconic drawl, "that people aren't taught more art history. We're taught wars and political movements, but not what people *made*. And yet that's our heritage: what people make." He went on to the Ontario College of Art, thinking that he might become a painter or a commercial artist. It wasn't long, however, before he was designing sets for friends' small productions in out-of-the-way spaces, and Levine realized that he was more interested in working in three dimensions than in one.

At eighteen, in 1978, he left Canada to attend the important Central School of Art and Design in London, which gave him the opportunity to observe the much wider range of theatre (and also design) available in England. Instructors at the Central School included active professionals, designers like Maria Björnson, who not only works in opera but also designed *The Phantom of the Opera*; directors like Richard Eyre, now head of the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain; Elijah Moshinsky, who directs at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera; and Philip Prowse, the influential director-designer who runs the groundbreaking

Glasgow Citizens' Theatre. "Technically, I don't think that I learned anything," Levine recalls. "Nothing at all. I still don't know how to draft, or any of those skills that a designer should have. I did learn how to read a text, however. And I did learn how to collaborate, and I think that's more important than anything else. And to *play* in studio time. It was three years of being given projects, and being allowed to *play*."

At the end of three years at Central, Levine applied to every theatre in Britain, and was taken on at the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre to design three shows of his own, and to serve as an assistant to Philip Prowse and Geoff Rose. It was an ideal placement for him, given the Citizens' innovative and vigorous commitment to design (Prowse both directed and designed his shows) and its high profile, both as a civic theatre and as a company on the cutting edge.

The Citizens' repertoire was wildly eclectic. Levine's shows included little known stage works: Goethe's verse epic *Torquato Tasso*, for which Levine evoked the pastoral with real hay and sheep; and Goldoni's *commedia dell'arte* farce *The Impresario from Smyrna*, in which Levine upped the satirical ante by clothing the characters in paper costumes. The company produced a new show every two weeks. "I remember having two all-nighters in a row every week," laughs Levine. Everyone did everything (Levine also played a Brown Shirt in *The Merchant of Venice*), creating an exceptional design sensibility on tiny budgets: only £500 per

show. It was the kind of theatrical crucible in which Levine had no choice but to transmute principles into practicality with no breathing time. At the end of the season, he was ready to launch himself as a freelance designer.

He returned to Canada and quickly picked up some work: the innovative *Uncle Vanya* at Tarragon, and several stylish productions at the Shaw Festival. In a sense, however, the culmination of this first phase of his return to Canada was the unforgettable 1986 production of *Spring Awakening* for the CentreStage Company in Toronto, directed by Derek Goldby. Wedekind's astonishing 1891 play about tormented adolescent sexuality proved once again its power to shock and offend; Levine used to joke that they were installing additional exits at the theatre to accommodate the audiences who fled the performance. To make matters worse, the adolescent roles in this production were actually performed by adolescents, reducing the comfortable distance between art and life.

The production began with dozens of dark-suited students bent over their school desks. A piercing school-bell broke the intense silence and, in an instant, hundreds of schoolbooks went flying through the air. This was a world in which home was represented by oppressive black rooms, with windows placed far too high to allow a view outside.

Adults were grotesque, often having gigantic heads, or out-sized limbs, or deformed bodies. Only the idyll of the woods provided a release, an arena for erotic experimentation. The forest oozed with rich, saturated colours and welcoming shadows. The boldness and intensity of Levine's sets and images created a hallucinatory atmosphere through which we entered the sensibilities of the play's fated children, doomed by adult incomprehension.

It was at about this time that Lotfi Mansouri hired Levine to design two productions for the Canadian Opera Company: Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Berg's *Wozzeck*. Levine's massive sets established his mastery of design on the majestic scale expected in international opera houses, though Mansouri's pedestrian productions didn't rise to the level of their design. A happier collaboration emerged with Canadian operatic director Robert Carsen, currently Levine's most frequent working partner. Their bold and sumptuous version of Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*, created for Le Grand Théâtre de Genève in 1988, audaciously re-imagined the opera house itself as the cosmos. All the settings — a medieval German town, a love nest for Helen of Troy in ancient Greece, and Mephistopheles' own extraterrestrial domain in the heavens — were represented by locations within the nineteenth-century opera house (backstage, the loges, the



Mefistofele
Le Grand Théâtre de Genève
Geneva 1988



Spring Awakening
CentreStage Company
Toronto 1986

box), with Mephistopheles himself appearing as a stage-door-Johnny in tails. This vivid conception moved from its triumphant Swiss debut to repeats in San Francisco, Houston and Chicago, and is scheduled for Washington in 1996. The video version has become a cult favourite.

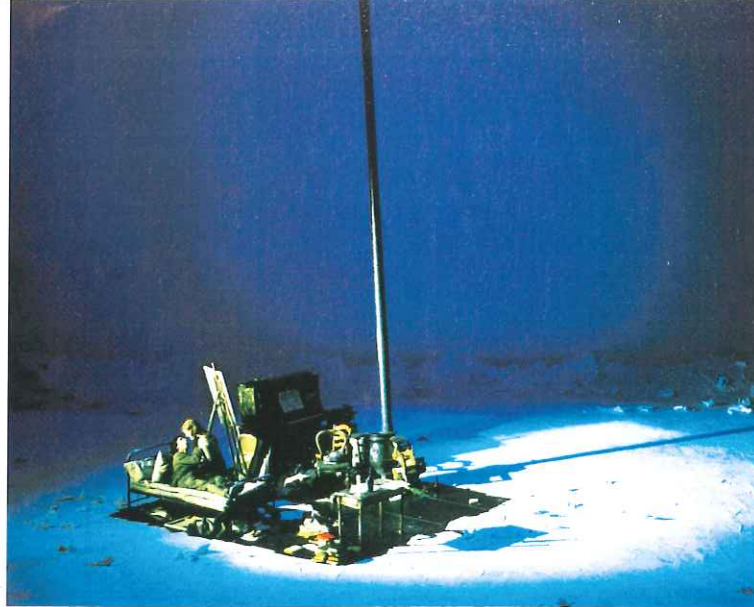
Levine's conceits could seem gimmicky if handled by a less imaginatively gifted artist. What makes the difference is the depth of Levine's intelligence and the grounding of his visual flights in a search for clarity, immediacy and resonance. He is looking not simply for something different, but for something better. It was in this spirit that Levine and Carsen recently came together to work on a Belgian production of one of opera's most belaboured warhorses, Puccini's *La Bohème*. The story of young artists in nineteenth-century Paris is usually treated in immense dimensions — Franco Zeffirelli's current production at the Metropolitan Opera is certainly our era's *ne plus ultra* — with gigantic representations of Paris garrets, cafés and street scenes.

"It was a juicy opportunity," says Levine of their 1993 production. "Puccini's music is so great, but the work is always done so horribly. It gets so convoluted. We had the real chance to tell the story well, to get at its essence, to

make its meaning accessible. Like Robert, I am always most interested in the story. That's very unfashionable these days. But then we're rather old-fashioned in our interest in the characters and what they want."

"I did a lot of research about Paris, and I love research. The layout of the streets. The sewer system established in 1870. But then we threw all the research out. A big operatic stage is never big enough to create a naturalistic Paris street: it ends up looking like Disneyworld. So one of our first big decisions became that *La Bohème* wasn't about Paris. Paris isn't important. *La Bohème* is about Bohemians, young people who make art. So we started to strip away."

While acknowledging that most operatic stages, by their size, cannot accommodate huge naturalistic vistas, Levine also knew that their size worked against intimate settings. Most *Bohème* garrets are big enough to house forty people. Levine created an exaggeratedly tiny studio space at the centre of the Antwerp stage, a freezing attic that could be reached only through the floor, a room in which the characters would be living almost on top of one another. Levine's poetic instincts, however, were expressed in the sea of loose paper which he scattered all around the tiny attic studio and



La Bohème
Metropolitan Opera
New York 1993

beyond, a stage covered with pages and sketch-paper. This *Bohème's* artists, philosophers and poets were almost literally drowning in paper. In the final act, when the consumptive Mimi returns to the attic in spring to die, the ocean of papers had been transformed into daffodils.

The second act of *La Bohème* presents Christmas Eve in an artists' café. It was here that Levine and Carsen took their boldest leap. Having brought the action of the opera forward to the first decades of this century, they made the contemporary history of art part of the opera's setting and action. The Carsen-Levine second act presented a cubist explosion of the idea of an artist's studio by putting on stage seven artists' studios, with seven pianos, seven beds, seven easels, seven tables, and artwork everywhere. The crowd of artists is seen celebrating by making art. "We wanted to preserve the story of that act," says Levine, "which is basically a fantastic Christmas Eve party among artists. Musetta's waltz-song warms everyone up, and by the end people are taking off their clothes and making love. In this world, everyone's an artist. We used the imagery of the avant-garde art of the period. I remember people putting lobsters all over Musetta. It was all slightly surreal, but a celebration."

Now that Levine works more and more often in opera — partly, he admits, because of the size of the canvas and the juiciness of the projects, and partly because of the long time it allows him to prepare — he searches the music for his metaphors. "The music is always there as an influence," he says. "The story of course runs through it, but it's the music that dictates the emotions of the piece. So you can either go against the music — which can also be interesting in itself — or you follow the the emotions that the music creates in you. I don't know that much about music, so I have to be intuitive and instinctive."

"I listen to it over and over again. When I did Schoenberg's *Erwartung* with Robert Lepage, for instance, I had no knowledge of the music prior to that. I found it quite difficult to listen to. But in the pre-rehearsal period, you listen again and again to the music, its ideas and emotions, and

it becomes quite beautiful. And working in opera, you hear the music deconstructed in so many ways — just the piano, then the singers alone, then the orchestra alone. You hear all these things separately, and then, when it all comes together, it makes more sense; you understand the music more."

Collaborating with Robert Lepage — as he did in the Bartók/Schoenberg double-bill (which is due to be revived this year in Toronto and then to tour widely) and in their controversial production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal National Theatre in London — affords Levine the kind of creative adventure that brings out his best work. The design concept for their *Dream* began with three objects: a chair, a bed, and a light-bulb on a string. "Robert is a director to whom you can give objects without having to explain them," says Levine. "You give a bed and a chair to Lepage and it ends up being a thousand different things, a house, and an airplane, anything. The more ordinary the object, the more extraordinary he will make it." Levine, for instance, had given Lepage a bare light-bulb on a long cord — an object familiar to theatre people; it is what is left on stage when a company departs for the night — as part of the available physical vocabulary for the production. When he returned to the rehearsal hall a week later, Levine found that Lepage had improvised an unexpected use for the cord. The woman playing Puck (acrobat Ginette Laurin) had climbed to the top of the cord suspended from the ceiling, and the actor playing Oberon was spinning her in ever-widening arcs around the perimeters of the stage, an improvised incarnation of Puck's promise to "put a girdle round the globe" in search of a magic flower. "The theatre that I like," says Levine, "is the theatre that does not have these huge elaborate scenic effects and all the hydraulic nonsense. There's something about them — you just say, 'Oh great, they did that.' But when Robert takes a chair, tips it back, and it becomes an airplane, it's extraordinary."

Michael Levine is in his early thirties and he's achieved a remarkable amount in a relatively small time. Yet he feels somewhat antsy about being identified primarily as an opera



A Midsummer Night's Dream
Royal National Theatre
London 1992

designer. It's work that ties up his schedule years ahead, partly because of the responsibility of remounting successful productions in new opera houses around the world, and partly due to preparing new productions which may not be seen by the public for a season or two. Currently, he's working on a new *Nabucco* for Paris for next year, building models in his Toronto studio as he listens to Verdi's monumental score. The opera tells the story of the Israelites in captivity in Babylon, and of the cruel, mad tyrant Nebuchadnezzar. Above them all, a righteous, punishing Old Testament deity presides. Levine's designs look like the music *sounds*; monolithic, weighty, larger than human scale.

Recently Levine designed a film, Rhombus Media's Kurt Weill anthology, *Lost in the Stars*. While he liked the anarchic mood of film, he missed having more control over what the audience would see. He has toyed with the idea of doing

some directing, of making the transition that his mentor Philip Prowse did, but he's uncertain. "I know a lot of designers have done that," he reflects "And it interests me. A little bit. But I'm a little shy with people. Also, I'm not very good at thinking on my feet, and that's a key tool a director has to have. But basically all designers direct their own pieces anyway; you come up with a scenario that you think will work. The projects I do, I know I spend too long doing them, but I don't like doing things fast. I like making models, which is really old-fashioned, a long, slow process. People tell me I should work with computers. But I don't know. There's something about looking at your model, and maybe draping a napkin over a part of it, that lets you discover something. I love the mystery that can happen with slowness. You can't do anything good quickly. Waiting and watching are the keys." ■