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Tüür's "Wallenberg" Stinging, Timeless and a Likely Operatic First



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Wallenberg with Nazi officers in the background

"What I do is not enough, but it would be a start."

Holocaust hero Raoul **Wallenberg** and his nemesis Adolph Eichmann both sang those words in Estonian composer Erkki-Sven **Tüür's** "**Wallenberg**" at the Estonia Theater in Tallinn in May.



Estonian composer Erkki-Sven **Tüür**

Good versus evil, myth making, and modern tragedy all reside in this powerful opera (Tüür's first), inspired by

the Swedish diplomat who saved an estimated 100,000 Jews in Budapest at the end of World War II, only to be sent to the Gulag by the occupying Russians. It was commissioned and premiered by Dortmund Opera in 2001, with a tightly crafted libretto by German playwright Lutz Hübner. The Tallinn production was a new one by Russian director Dmitri Bertman.



Raoul **Wallenberg**



Estonia Theater, Tallinn

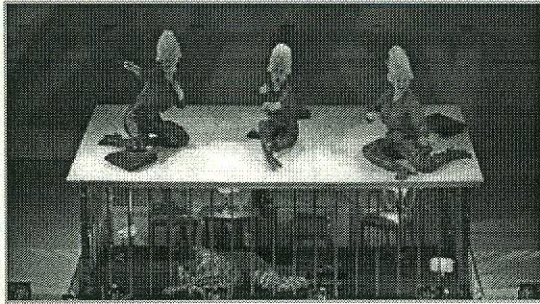
When Bertman's production was first presented in 2007 in Tallinn, it marked a likely

first in operatic history: after the removal of a Soviet war monument from central Tallinn in April, the Russian government forbade Bertram to travel to Estonia (he was allowed to attend the June 1 premiere). Undaunted, Bertman asked Estonian director Neeme Kuningas and designer Ene-Liis Semper to follow through with his staging. Rehearsals were held over the Internet, using online pictures from the stage.

Bertman, enfant terrible of Moscow's Helikon Opera, gives "**Wallenberg**" a universal aspect as opposed to the Dortmund production, where Nazi symbolism dominated. His view is timeless, as if "from the 42nd century," Bertman said.

The diplomats were ornately dressed, with powdered wigs and heavy makeup. The Germans wore black leather and carried light sabers. The Jews had prayer shawls. The Gulag prisoners were in rags. Russians wore red. **Wallenberg** was dressed in white, with a prayer shawl after his first rescue

failed. Eichmann, sung by bass Priit Volmer in a sepulchral tessitura, swept on and off the stage in a black leather cape, with silver epaulets and a white wig.



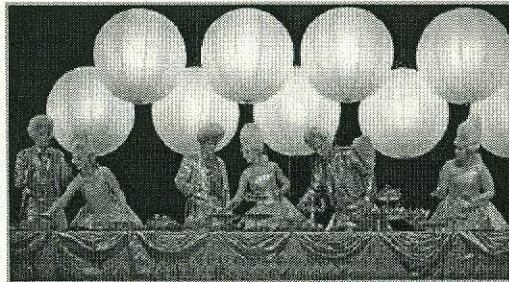
Russian diplomats singing atop Wallenberg's cage in the Gulag

somewhere in the Gulag.

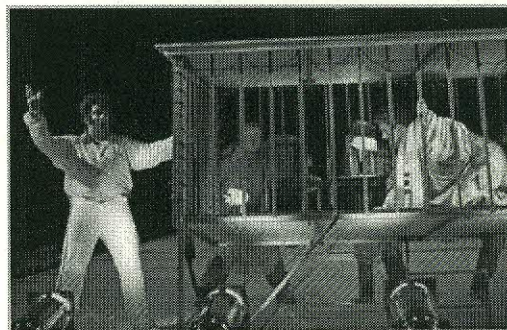
It is a stinging satire – two acts and 19 scenes, moving from Stockholm and Budapest to

A Star of David took shape in the darkness as members of the Estonian Opera Chorus, each holding a candle, gathered on stage in the Prologue to muse about **Wallenberg**. Several scenes

centered on a long banquet table bathed in color – gold in Stockholm, black in Budapest (for Eichmann's reception), red in Moscow, where a pair of comical Soviet offices clutched mikes and mimicked the doublespeak given by the Russians to inquiries about **Wallenberg** over the years.



scene in Stockholm



Wallenberg-as-Elvis taunts **Wallenberg**, caged in the Gulag

There were three Wallenbergs: the diplomat, heartbreakingly portrayed by Estonian baritone Rauno Elp, **Wallenberg** - as - Elvis

Presley, who cruelly taunted his alter ego in captivity (tenor Mati Turi), and a yogi in loincloth who performed amazing contortions in the final scene as a Jewish mother repeated offstage a haunting description of her family in ashes.

The 19 singing roles included diplomats with funny walks and a quasi-rapping German officer whom **Wallenberg** intimidated Scarlet Pimpernel-style (the real **Wallenberg** was influenced by the 1941 film "Pimpernel Smith," where a character based on the fictional French revolutionary hero outwits the Nazis). There was A Woman, who tried to comfort **Wallenberg** (there are no love scenes in the opera), the Jewish mother movingly sung by Aile Asszonyi, and a trio of Gulag prisoners grateful to have shared confinement with the famous man.

'**Wallenberg** Circus,' the grossly irreverent finale, opened with a merry little waltz sung by the chorus. Everyone was there to join in, including Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, a Russian *matryoshka* (nesting doll), Americans, Russians, and characters from earlier in the opera – even the ever-spiteful Eichmann. A smiling Ronald Reagan sang of making **Wallenberg** an honorary **American** citizen (which he did in 1981). A spastic **American** general bragged about **Wallenberg**, whose mission was in fact partly sponsored by the U.S., and Jacob **Wallenberg** basked in his nephew's celebrity. Reagan look-alike, baritone Väino Purra, had four hands, two of them Eichmann's hands reaching from behind Reagan's back.

The Estonian National Opera Orchestra, led by Music Director Arvo Volmer, went Bayreuth one further by performing completely out of sight beneath a raked stage floor (Volmer's idea).

TV monitors supplied sight lines for the singers, and helped temper **Tüür's** brass and percussion-rich score for the 700-seat, neo-classic theater.

Tüür's pungent, post-modern score makes no concessions to neo-romanticism. Painful stabs of brass occurred often, and his use of tubular bells for alarms recalled his mentor, Estonian composer Lepo Sumera's Symphony No. 2. Traditional harmony and melody happened at telling moments, such as **Wallenberg's** first entrance, where he was wreathed in a warm halo of sound. The 'Death March' was appallingly catchy, with SS troopers "walking" their fingers and drumming their hands as Jews were stripped of their coats en route to Auschwitz. Swedish passports rained from the sky as **Wallenberg** mourned the Jews to a moment of aching Arvo Pärt minimalism.

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