


Dutchman Lost in Tallinn

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 **Estonia Wagner: *Der fliegende Holländer***, Soloists, Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Vello Pähn (conductor), Estonian National Opera, Tallinn, 22.9.2016 (première). (GF)

Production:

Stage Director – Pamela Recinella

Designer – Yannis Thavoris

Lighting Designer – Matti Haskins

Video – Apparti Effimeri

Choreographer – Daniel Kirspuu

Cast:

The Dutchman, notorious oil magnate – Rauno Elp

Senta, Daland's daughter, a painter – Heli Veskus

Daland, an entrepreneur in chemical business – Ain Anger

Erik, a policeman – Kevin Ray

Mary, Madame of the brothel – Helen Lokuta

Daland's engineer – Oliver Kuusik

Old Senta – Malle Kaalep

According to the legend of the Flying Dutchman, he can only go ashore once every seventh year. It has been however 32 years since he last landed at the Estonian National Opera and a lot has changed during the intervening years. If the librettist and composer Richard Wagner had been present at the premiere of this latest production he would only hesitantly have recognized this as his work. Well, the music is intact, the sung text, as far as I could hear, has not been altered but everything else has.

Wagner wrote originally *Der fliegende Holländer* in one act, but revised it slightly to a three-act drama. Both versions are played today. In Tallinn there are two acts, the first of which takes place at a hotel in a Norwegian (?) port close to an oil platform, which has been damaged in a storm, and Daland, who is an entrepreneur in a chemical business, is there, together with an engineer, to inspect the damage.

The Dutchman is an oil magnate, possibly with interests in the platform, and he suffers from depressions. He is haunted by the Seven Deadly Sins, here in the shape of seven dancers with animal heads. Daland shows him some paintings that his daughter Senta has made. They depict the Flying Dutchman from the legend that Senta has learnt from her nurse. The Dutchman recognizes himself and buys a painting and wants to meet the artist. He even wants to marry her. End of Act I.

Act II takes place in Amsterdam's red-light district, where Daland has some property and where Mary, Senta's nurse, runs a brothel. Senta has her studio in the brothel. The spinning women in the original are here employees in the brothel. Erik, Senta's lover, is a policeman. He wants to marry her but she refuses.

Daland arrives and introduces the Dutchman to Senta. In the long duet they find that they are kindred souls. In a dreamlike sequence the studio is transformed into a gallery.

Half a year later Senta has her first vernissage and then Daland breaks the news that Senta and the Dutchman are engaged. There is a big party in a disco club with drinking and dancing, and the Dutchman gets delirious. Towards the end the Seven Deadly Sins appear again and drag the Dutchman to his damnation and death. Curtain! But in a video projection we get an appendix showing Senta 50 years later having finally managed to paint a portrait of the Dutchman.

The applause was initially rather tentative and I could imagine Richard Wagner tearing his hair in despair. I felt pity for him. Isn't this bending the rules for poetic license too much? I should be hardened by now, having seen so many operas, live or on video, being transformed, rewritten, butchered – call it whatever you want – but I always feel that if you want an opera about an oil platform, why not ask a present-day composer to write one with a tonal language of today?

I admit that this refurbishing of Wagner's work is ingenious as an idea. I admit that the staging has many fresh ideas, that the choreography of the riotous disco scene is witty, that the employment of video projections is inventive and Benedict Taylor's essay on *Modern myths at the marketplace of desire* goes a long way to try to justify this treatment of the work. But I am not convinced that Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* is the right work to tamper with for these purposes.

What I am convinced of is that the Estonian National Opera Company have done a good job, in all respects, in carrying out the director's wishes. It is in many ways a great show – even though it isn't in my taste – and musically it is certainly worth anyone's money. Vello Pähn – now beginning his fifth season as Artistic Director and Chief Conductor – secures excellent playing from his orchestral forces. The overture is truly overwhelming and he keeps the music moving until the end. The chorus has a lot to do and does it excellently. The sailors' chorus – in this version they are oil platform workers – is strong and jaunty, the 'spinning' chorus fresh and sonorous. But though they still sing about spinning their true occupation is somewhat more *risqué*.

Rauno Elp seldom disappoints and his vocally and physically intense reading of the title role is overwhelming, even though his voice today is slightly worn. Heli Veskus is, as Senta, world-class: powerfully dramatic but also able to spin a beautiful pianissimo. The long duet with the Dutchman, 'Wie aus der Ferne', is a vocal highlight and it is preceded by Daland's 'Mögest du mein Kind', magnificently sung by guesting Ain Anger, since twelve years a member of the Vienna State Opera ensemble. Kevin Ray is a strong-voiced Erik but his acting is a bit over-the-top, while his tenor colleague Oliver Kuusik, as the engineer, sings lyrically beautifully in his little aria. The versatile Helen Lokuta has little to sing as Mary but steals the stage visually whenever she appears as the sexy blond Madame of the brothel.

Readers who are less prejudiced than I am, may well stomach this modernisation of *Der fliegende Holländer*. Those who are like me will find a lot to enjoy musically.

Göran Forsling