

Muted Madness

JESSE SIMON

In addition to being one of the great operas of the twentieth century, *Wozzeck* is also one of the most resilient: between Georg Büchner's devastating dramatic strokes and Berg's endlessly rewarding score it can withstand nearly any directorial flight of fancy. Ole Anders Tandberg, who directed the new production that opened the Deutsche Oper's new season, seems to have accepted this fundamental truth. Instead of his usual bleak humour and confrontational imagery, he opted for a low-key almost deferential approach in which the nightmare of existence was constructed slowly and methodically. As with Büchner's drama, the force of Mr Tandberg's staging came not from any one moment, but from the accumulation of cruelty and banality that formed the foundation of *Wozzeck*'s world.

The relative restraint of the staging was all the more surprising given Mr Tandberg's recent productions for the Deutsche Oper. In both his brilliantly scathing *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and his highly divisive *Carmen*, he used physical awkwardness and icky rubber props to locate strands of pitch-black humour within the respective tragedies. In *Wozzeck*, however, humour was an impossibility. There were still a few disturbing images – including one scene with a lizard that one very much hopes was computer generated – but the delightful perversities were largely absent. Indeed, the staging admitted few pleasures, perverse or otherwise; the scene with Marie and the drum major – it was hard to tell who was seducing whom – was pitched somewhere between boredom and desperation; even the drunken revelry at the centre of the second act was drained of any sense that drinking or revelling might be something people do for fun. Instead there was only a lingering unease.

Mr Tandberg's choice of setting wasn't wholly conventional, but it worked well enough. The action took place in a large room that looked like the bar in the foyer of a small theatre, but the general emptiness, the chairs on tables and the lack of bottles behind the bar, suggested that everything was about to close (or hadn't yet opened) for the season. According to an interview in the programme booklet, the set was based on a café in Oslo, conveniently located across from the royal palace (hence the presence of soldiers) and not

Tandberg:
Wozzeck
© Marcus
Lieberenz, 2018

**Berlin, viernes, 5
de octubre de
2018.** Deutsche
Oper Berlin. Berg:
Wozzeck. Ole

Anders Tandberg, director. Johan Reuter
(*Wozzeck*), Elena Zhidkova (Marie),
Thomas Blondelle (Drum Major), Burkhard
Ulrich (Captain), Seth Carico (Doctor),
Matthew Newlin (Andres), Annika Schlicht
(Margret), Andrew Dickinson (The Fool),
Tobias Kehrer and Philipp Jekal
(Apprentices), Levi Mica Weber (Marie's
son). Chorus and Orchestra of the
Deutsche Oper Berlin. Donald Runnicles,
conductor



far from a park with a pond. While only someone intimately familiar with Oslo would have picked up on this, the set had its own bland immutability that grew increasingly ominous the more time we spent there.



Berg: *Wozzeck*. Donald Runnicles, conductor. Ole Anders Tandberg, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, October 2018. © Marcus Lieberenz, 2018.

The mood of unease was compounded by the comings and goings of the captain, the genuinely sinister presence of the doctor, and the dead-eyed revellers carrying Norwegian flags who occasionally came to drink at the café. While Mr Tandberg devoted considerable energy to the mood and rhythm of each scene, he seemed less interested in elaborating on the cause of Wozzeck's madness. There was a quiet inscrutability to his actions, the sense of a man going through the motions without thought or feeling, but his inarticulate befuddlement didn't necessarily add up to a murderer. *Wozzeck* is often presented as the tragedy of a man trampled by the world,

but in Mr Tandberg's vision it was the futility of the quotidian that seemed to be his undoing.

Yet Mr Tandberg's unwillingness to offer comment on the two human characters at the centre of the drama did not always work to the advantage of the singers. Johan Reuter's Wozzeck, especially, had a vocal intensity that demanded a more decisive vision of the character than the production was willing to provide. When he sung to Andres of the ground being hollow invested the line with an edge of genuine terror which the staging was content to ignore. There were no scenes in which Mr Reuter was not wholly compelling – his impassioned speech to the captain in the first scene and the desperate helplessness in his final scene with Marie were especially gripping – but one was left with the sense that he might have flourished all the more in a production that allowed for greater emotional response. Elena Zhidkova's Marie faced similar problems: although she had a number of vocally striking moments, most notably her scene with Wozzeck at the beginning of the second act, the production could not (or simply didn't bother) to weave Marie's pendulum swings between carnality and piety into a coherent character.



Berg: *Wozzeck*. Donald Runnicles, conductor. Ole Anders Tandberg, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, October 2018. © Marcus Lieberenz, 2018.

The secondary figures that give the opera its texture of cruelty fared somewhat better. The



Berg: *Wozzeck*. Donald Runnicles, conductor. Ole Anders Tandberg, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, October 2018. © Marcus Lieberenz, 2018.

Captain was pompous and ingratiating, prone to high-pitched moralising and weedy outbursts, but Burkhard Ulrich's expertly judged performance stopped well short of caricature; and Seth Carico provided the evening with a superbly malign doctor, whose generously warm tone and urbane lines did not convey academic indifference so much as a genuine contempt for all living things, a man whose barbarous impulses were kept in check by only the most tenuous connection to social convention.

When Mr Carico's Doctor and Mr Ulrich's

Captain had their subtly adversarial meeting in the second act, it was one of the few scenes to generate dramatic friction above and beyond what the production seemed willing to accommodate.

The orchestra was one of the evening's most reliable sources of pleasure: the brass and percussion underscored *Wozzeck*'s apocalyptic visions without overwhelming them, the detailed woodwinds gave the second act its distinctive unease, and the strings expounded on the moonlight and madness in the scene of Marie's death. The assured reading of Donald Runnicles applied a certain amount of polish to Berg's vestigial romanticism while keeping the opposing forces of the score in balance: the third scene of the first act swung effortlessly between the simple lyricism of Marie's song and the march of the distant parade while leaving room for the general disquiet that lay beneath both, and the interlude before the opera's final scene offered a summation of the tragedy without dipping into sentimentality. If Mr Tandberg's staging rarely wavered from its posture of ambiguity and detachment, the orchestra and singers ensured that the human tragedy of *Wozzeck* remained a vital force in the evening.