



Making Opera Work: Bricolage and the Management of Dramaturgy

PAUL ATKINSON

School of Social Sciences | Cardiff University | UK*

ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic study of an international opera company, the paper reports a number of aspects of preparation, rehearsal and performance. It documents the creation of operatic productions as everyday, mundane work. Two themes are presented. First is the theme of bricolage. Starting from the concrete bricolage of creating artefacts in the 'props' department, the paper extends the metaphor to capture the dramaturgical work whereby cultural bric-à-brac is assembled in the process of creating an opera production through the rehearsal period. Second, this leads to a specific consideration of how vocabularies of motive are invoked by directors and performers in order to make sense of the narratives and characters of the opera. Motivational interpretation is shown to be a form of cultural bricolage itself.

*Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK

THEATRICALITY AND PERFORMANCE

In the course of this paper, I discuss some of the processes whereby participants ‘make opera work’. That phrase is deliberately chosen because it has (at least) two senses. On the one hand, I use it to capture the fact that the realisation of an opera – indeed any artistic production or performance – is collaborative work, socially organised and locally managed through processes of social interaction. Equally, I use the phrase to evoke the efforts that have to be put in to make an opera function, at a practical as well as an aesthetic level (See Buscatto, 2008 on ethnography and art-as-work). If a piece for the theatre is to ‘work’, then performers and artistic directors need to work together to find possible solutions to the task of turning text and music into a staged enactment. Irrespective of whether a given production is naturalistic or not, what happens on stage is a concrete realisation of the interpretative work of the participants, worked out over a period of time. Opera, of course, has the added complexity in that such practical outcomes are always constrained by the music, which inexorably frames the narrative and the action.

I focus on two aspects of the practical work of theatricality. First, I discuss the process of bricolage whereby the material world of the theatrical production is contrived, and the dramaturgical work of the production is also accomplished. Second, I focus on the interactional work of the rehearsal studio, where a different form of bricolage takes place: the search for workable motivational frames that can be invoked to make sense of the action in the opera itself, within the interpretive framework established by the production itself. I do so by drawing on C. Wright Mills’s notion of *vocabularies of motive* (Mills, 1940). Mills established that from a sociological point of view, *motives* are not to be understood as private mental states, but as repertoires of culturally available frames of reference.

I thus examine the process whereby the inert texts of the work are transformed into a working performance, in particular through the work of the director in interaction with the performers. The main text of the work is, of course, the opera libretto, consisting as it does of words and music. For some works there are other texts that may or may not be consulted, such as original production books, that can give clues as to the librettist’s or composer’s intentions. At the point when rehearsals begin in the opera company’s rehearsal studio, there are other texts and representations to be translated into practical actions and artefact – notably the set design and the designs for costumes and wigs. The texts that are the basis for the opera have to be realised and translated into embodied, practical action. Finding appropriate *action* is, therefore, the prime work of the rehearsal period. Within the interpretative framework set by the director, and within the physical, as well as symbolic, constraints of the stage design the director and the performers have to find the moment-by-moment ways of turning ideas into concrete actions, and texts into performances. There is, therefore, continuity between the practical bricolage of material circumstances and the motivational bricolage of the dramaturgy. In both contexts, the members of the company, whether they be technical staff, directors or singers, have to find and negotiate practical solutions to problems established by the work in question and the particular production they are creating.

PERFORMANCE IN PRACTICE: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

While the sociology of the theatre remained for many years an underdeveloped research field (Tota, 1997), the use of dramaturgical ideas was more popular. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of social encounters (*e.g.*, Goffman, 1959) was the most famous and the most pervasively influential use of theatrical imagery (Burns, 1972). In developing his metaphor, and in using the dramaturgical model as an analytic lens through which to examine everyday life in general, Goffman was in danger of basing his explanation on an unknown quantity. In the absence of any detailed ethnographic work in the theatre by himself or by others, Goffman had relatively little evidence to go on. Theatrical performance itself and the organization of theatrical work therefore remain an unexamined resource in Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. Recognising the absence of the theatre from Goffman's analysis throws analytic attention back towards the *theatrical* itself. In a sense, therefore, Goffman's sociology of everyday life serves to emphasize the continuing sociological neglect of practical theatrical work.

More recently, *performativity* has become a recurrent motif, derived from the work of authors such as Judith Butler (1987), who have taken the idea of the performative in speech-act theory and attempted to invest it with a renewed ideological force; in Butler's case, the enactment of gender. Yet appeals to performativity do not seem to be especially well grounded in empirical studies of performers or performances themselves. In general, contemporary social and cultural analysts have stressed the performative quality of social life and its cultural forms (Tulloch, 1999). Anthropological preoccupations with performativity are reflected in numerous published analyses of ritual, dance, spectacles and everyday social encounters (*e.g.*, Felicia Hughes-Freeland, 1998; Napier, 1992; Turner, 1987). The inherent limitation in these analyses is that they treat *performance* as so culturally pervasive that there remains little to say specifically about the performing arts or the extraordinary performances of art, music, dance or opera.

Clearly, there are at least two major senses to the notion of performance in contemporary social science. On the one hand, there is the generalised notion of repeated activity, through which concerted social action is undertaken. On the other hand, there is a more restricted sense, referring primarily to the enactment of events that are invested with a particular sense of significance, that have affinities with rituals, that may be endowed with specific aesthetic or other value, that require some degree of skill on the part of performers. Social scientists interested in the latter, more restricted but potentially more interesting array of topics have tended to come from a number of specific constituencies and traditions. Social anthropologists have certainly paid serious attention to performances in general. Given their characteristic topical interests, it is not surprising that the anthropological literature contains work on such diverse topics as Spanish bull-fighting (Marvin, 1988; Pink, 1998), Javanese shadow plays (Keeler, 1987), Senegalese praise-singers (Ebron, 2002), and the performance of national identity in Wales (Trosset, 1993), or Tanzania (Askew, 2002). In comparison, the majority of 'Western' performing genres in the 'arts' are given relatively short shrift. Notable exceptions include DeNora's (1995) historical sociology of Beethoven, Shevtsova's (2002) application of Bourdieu and Bakhtin to the work of theatrical production, and Orzechowicz's (2008) account of actors.

A similar observation can be made concerning music as a performing art. With a few significant exceptions, most of the sociological and anthropological work that has been devoted to the performance of musical forms has been far more preoccupied with vernacular forms than with *classical* music. One is more likely to find ethnographies of Argentine tango (Savigliano, 1994) or flamenco (Washabaugh, 1996) than of orchestral or chamber music, or indeed of opera. In part this reflects several academic mindsets. There is the division of labour between ethnomusicologists, who document performance conventions in *exotic* musical forms, and musicologists who study classical or art music, but pay relatively little attention to the everyday social realities of production and performance. Equally, too many sociologists of culture recapitulate the inverted snobbery that celebrates vernacular culture and overlooks the so-called classical or *high* cultural genres. Exceptions exist, of course, and key examples include Born's (1995) ethnographic study of the IRCAM centre for avant-garde musical composition (See also Faulkner, 1983; Kingsbury, 1988). One notable exception to the relative neglect of performing theatre in the context of western art performance is the sustained study of dance. Here there is a more direct continuity between anthropological studies of dance and the ethnographic study of western ballet and other dance forms (Buckland, 1999; Wainwright, Williams and Turner, 2006; Wulff 1998).

As a consequence, if we turn to the ethnography of the opera, we find that there is remarkably little published research in a number of relevant domains. First, the 'straight' theatre has been a relatively neglected research field, despite its extraordinarily rich opportunities for ethnographic fieldwork, discourse analysis, visual and semiotic analysis, and indeed, the full array of research strategies (Hastrup, 1998). Secondly, musical theatre, particularly opera, has received even less attention. Despite the high public profile of opera performers, off-stage dramas of management crises, divas' tantrums, scandalous productions, and global superstars, there have been no sociological or anthropological studies of opera companies. There are several studies of a broad, general nature, and there has been a good deal written about opera from a series of cultural-studies and political perspectives (see Evans, 1999; Martorella, 1982). But detailed ethnographic work on opera companies, opera houses or opera productions is almost completely missing. A key exception is the work of Denis Laborde and his anthropological account of the making of Reich's opera *Three Tales* (2000, 2008). Kotnik's anthropological monograph on opera in Slovenia makes a directly parallel observation to mine (Kotnik, 2010), though it too is not based on detailed accounts of performance. One is more reliant on the accounts of opera's *insiders* (e.g., Beeman and Helfgot, 1993) or more popular *backstage* accounts (e.g., Higgins, 1978) for the equivalent of ethnographic insight.

My own research, from which this paper is derived, is one of very few sociological or anthropological studies of opera-in-action. It is, therefore, a contribution to the growing literature on art and music as socially organised activity, and as collective work (cf. Acord and DeNora, 2008; Grazian, 2008; Menger, 2002; Rothenberg and Fine, 2008).

THE ETHNOGRAPHY

I spent several years with the Welsh National Opera Company, on a part-time basis, conducting ethnographic fieldwork; the research process is described in more detail elsewhere (Atkinson, 2004). While I was able to spend time in virtually all of the offices and departments in the opera company, I devoted most of my time to

observing the preparation of rehearsals in the rehearsal studio and in the theatre. Within my more general interests in the opera company as an ethnographic site, therefore, I concentrated mostly on the dramaturgical work that goes into preparing an opera. There is also a great deal of other work that goes on prior to the rehearsal period: the preparation of costumes and wigs, the construction and painting of scenery, the acquisition and creation of props, the preparation of the programme and the programme notes; and the like. There is a great deal of work that goes into an opera that runs in parallel with the rehearsals of individual singers and the chorus. Obviously the orchestra goes through their rehearsal period, directed by music staff and guest conductors. The technical department prepares the lighting from the lighting designer's plans. A 'complete' ethnography of just one performance company would be a complex task indeed. I observed the complete rehearsal period of several operatic productions, observing the work of Richard Jones (*Queen of Spades*), David Pountney (*Simon Boccanegra*), David Alden (*L'Incoronazione di Poppea*), Iannis Kokkos and Peter Watson (*Tristan und Isolde*), and Peter Stein (*Peter Grimes*). I also observed, on a more fragmentary basis, Patrice Caurier and Moshe Leiser (*Fidelio*), and Neil Armfield (*Billy Budd*). These are all major international opera directors¹. I also observed performances of operas from the wings and backstage in the theatre. I went on tour with the company, although this is not a major source of ethnographic material. I attended first-night performances and the first-night parties afterwards. I have participated in various other 'extra-theatrical' activities, such as fund-raising events, that arts organizations like WNO have to undertake on a regular basis, and which are also 'performances' in many key respects. In addition to producing and performing operas, the opera company produces and performs itself for a variety of audiences such as sponsors and patrons (Atkinson, 2006). Throughout the ethnography I have been preoccupied with issues of performance. The performance of the opera is an obvious topic in such a social setting. But I have also been interested in how the opera company performs itself, for the benefit of patrons and sponsors, and how the opera company participates in the creation of itself as a carrier of cultural value. The ethnographic monograph and other papers document key features of the everyday reality of the opera company, examining performance from a number of perspectives (Atkinson, 2004, 2006a, 2006b).

PROPS AND BRICOLAGE

I take bricolage here to refer to a kind of practical work in which the artisan or craft-worker uses whatever comes to hand in order to create practical solutions to problems of construction and repair. It carries connotations of ingenuity, and improvisation. Here I extend the idea of bricolage beyond the purely material uses of *objets trouvés* and artisanal 'making do'; I use the term to capture how operatic directors and performers can search for whatever everyday meanings, motives or metaphors can be invoked to make the dramatic action plausible and coherent.

There are several senses in which the work of the opera company rests on bricolage, in both a material and an interactional sense. In the process of creating an opera, there are multiple processes of translation or transformation to be accomplished. There is a process of improvisation in these acts of translation: that is, the practical artisanal work involved in using what is to hand, improvising effects and generally finding ways of turning ideas, verbal or visual, into practical objects and artefacts. For example, I spent some time observing the work of the props department. The

¹ Here I have referred to them as 'directors'; in some contexts of operatic work they might also be referred to as 'producers'.

department is, in itself, a fascinating location. Physically to be found in the converted stables block behind the WNO's main headquarters building², the department is like an everyday museum or archive of the company's past and present productions. The entire department is a glory-hole of props, plaster casts, parts, flags, weapons (securely stored) and curiosities. They rest on shelving, lean propped against the wall, or hang suspended from the ceiling. It is a workshop of ingenuity, wherein designers' and directors' ideas are transmuted, by the alchemy of craft skill and imagination, into practical solutions and effects that work. At one particular point in my fieldwork in the WNO, the department were working on the forthcoming new production of Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice*. The production, by Caurier and Leiser, included masks for the chorus-members in the two major chorus-numbers of the opera, for the 'spirits of the blessed' in the Elysian fields, and the chorus of Furies. The designer had provided the company with an illustrated book from which the particular designs of the masks could be derived in Cardiff. It celebrated the work of one French designer, and included mask designs for Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The masks therefore referred back to the actors' masks of the classical theatre. The props team had photocopied plates from the book, and had pinned them up as visual references. They were not copying them slavishly, but using them for ideas. Members of the props department were busy making the individual masks. Each was based on a plain moulding, taken from chorus-members' faces. They needed sixty-four masks in all, thirty-two for heaven and thirty-two for hell. Each was then individually decorated, in a manner that perfectly illustrated that elusive idea of bricolage. The masks' grotesque embellishments were improvised from all sorts of bits and pieces that were to hand in the props department. It was an iterative process, involving a certain amount of trial and error. Members of the department sat at a table, finding scraps of this and that with which to decorate masks, and working them into individual designs:

Alan was working on a blood-red mask. He was using coiled gilt wire. He tried out a loop of wire coiled round the mask's jaw-line, and asked Heather what she thought of it: it made a schematic beard. She and I both thought it looked dramatic. The nose of the mask is brass, and Alan said he would rub it back so that the brass would show through the paint. He then started to punch a series of holes round the bottom of the mask and to wind the coiled wire through them.

Later in the day he started to do the same above the eye sockets, punching holes with a small electric drill and coiling the wire, to form *eyebrows*. When he tried the mask on himself, however, he was worried, as the wire was rubbing his face. 'Who's it for?' Barbara asked. 'John King', he replied. 'He won't wear it if it isn't comfortable'. They discussed trying to pull the wire further through the mask, flattening the coil on the inside and padding it with foam rubber. In the end Alan decided to put the coils through separate eyebrow pieces and then to stick them on separately, so that the wire would not actually penetrate the mask. 'That's s shame', she said, 'I've just spent the last hour doing that'.

Meanwhile, Heather was working on a mask with a smooth face. She was working on the 'hair', adding strands of wool, netting and other stuff, building up a wildly straggling effect. She was smoothing plastic sheeting over the foam, trimming it and sticking it with thick yellow glue... She reached the point of painting the face, but not before she realised she had not cut out the nostrils, which she had to trim out of the rubber face. Alan suggested to her that she might spray the eye sockets and other deep parts a dark green colour, and then varnish over that.

² I use the ethnographic present by way of convention. The opera company has moved to the Wales Millennium Centre since the fieldwork was conducted.

Barbara spent the morning dressing the 'hair' and the 'head-dress' of the mask she was working on. It was covered with scrunched-up scraps of leather, so that the underlying head was completely wrinkled. The face had metal coils woven into it. She weaved artificial flowers into the head-dress, adding to an already elaborate arrangement. Later she started working on another head. It already had various knobby protuberances and she was attaching lengths of string and wool, to make a 'hair'-style resembling dreadlocks. She stuck some irregular patches of leather over the edges of the hair then cut small holes in them, snipping deftly with scissors, and pulling strands of wool and string through so that they looked as if they were growing, rather than being stuck on.

In some ways, this brief vignette from the props department is iconic of broader issues about the realization of opera. The production involves some specific ideas about the visual style of the piece. In its realization there is a mixture of precision and improvisation. The masks themselves have to be moulded with some precision. They were made individually for members of the chorus; the mouldings had to be precision-made. Equally, the individual decoration was improvised; the team worked within a general framework but used various forms of bric-a-brac to develop individual designs.

The enactment of the opera in the props department depends on the skilful management and manipulation of a series of material resources. It depends on the embodied skills, the artisanal skills, of the department's members. They need to be manually dextrous enough to translate ideas and designs into practical artefacts. In this case, the masks need to be made with sufficient accuracy to fit their designated wearers. The various ingredients need to be manipulated with adequate dexterity and precision. The props department members therefore need to have a practical understanding of the properties of the materials they work with: rubber, plastic, fabric, wire, paint, fabric and so on. Craft knowledge informs judgements as to their physical qualities, *i.e.* what will 'work'. This, of course, includes a working knowledge of the likely appearance of things. By no means all productions or designs are naturalistic. The *Orpheus* masks are themselves somewhat grotesque representations of the highly stylised masks of the ancient Greek theatre. Their designers and makers are not therefore aiming for something that looks 'natural' on the stage. But they have to be able to *control* appearances, and to understand how to achieve visual effects. When the suggestion is made to spray the mask's eye-sockets a particular colour, this is based on a working knowledge of how contrasting colours will emphasise the contours of the grotesque masks, and how they will be rendered visible for the audience. All props have this same quality; they are crafted with metaphorically and literally, an eye on their potential appearance from a distance. They are also crafted with a view to theatrical lighting. Colour, texture and visual emphasis are all judged in creating such effects. Each act of bricolage is therefore an act of *translation* and *transmutation*, whereby the 'base' materials are transformed into stage appearances. It is a form of alchemy.

When props and sets are naturalistic, the props department do not as a matter of course aim at a completely faithful replica of the 'original'. Of course, many props are the 'real thing' – a suitcase is a suitcase, a radiator (to which Florestan is chained in the dungeon scene in *Fidelio*) is a radiator. On the other hand, there are many production contexts in which the props are constructed to be representations or versions, rather than being replicas or originals. For instance, during my fieldwork period, the stage set (for *Queen of Spades*) called for a bed. Because of the design of the set itself, which included a set-within-a-set, on a 'truck' that could recede up-stage or come forward downstage, the bed was constructed with a false perspective.

Consequently, the craft skills of the props department involved not merely the joinery skills in constructing a plausible bed, but also translating a design idea into a full-scale version that preserved the essential idea of the foreshortened perspective. Translating the idea into concrete reality was thus dependent on the makers' 'eye'. The bed itself also had to be adjusted once it was introduced into the set. The movement from design to stage often involves such accommodations to the practical constraints of the set itself, modifications to the artefact, and an appreciation of what will work visually and structurally (e.g., clearly the bed needs to be robust enough to take the weight of a performer; a representation of a mattress needs to be fashioned to the same false perspective proportions as the bed-frame).

When Carmen is dancing to seduce Don José in Bizet's opera, she accompanies herself on 'castanets' made from fragments of a smashed plate. It sounds straightforward enough. The singer just needs to break a plate. But in practice, plates that are thrown down onto a stage do not break predictably, and indeed they may not break at all. The props department therefore had to use ingenuity to ensure that this small but significant action worked and did so predictably. It was no good giving Carmen ordinary cheap crockery such as might have been provided in a Greek taverna for ritualised plate-smashing as it could not be guaranteed to break into manageable pieces. Carmen cannot be expected to grovel around trying to find acceptably usable shards of china. So the plates were made by the props department out of white painted soft earthenware, rather than white china. More importantly, they were moulded with deep grooves on the underside ensuring that they would fracture along those fault-lines generating manageable pieces without sharp edges. Again, this was dependent on an artisanal knowledge of the properties of the materials to hand, and knowledge of the 'tricks of the trade'.

CULTURAL BRICOLAGE AND REHEARSAL

The combination of precision and improvisation observed in the props department can stand for a much broader sense of how the opera is made. There are general ideas and inspirations that are interpreted and made into concrete realities, whether those are designs or actions, while there are highly precise constraints within which the action must be developed. The temporality of the music and the physical dimensions of the stage on which the work is to be performed, of course, create the most specific of those constraints. Consequently, directors and performers together need to find practical ways of managing the embodied, material constraints and resources they are presented with as well as the musical and narrative demands of the opera itself.

There is a sense in which all performances and rehearsals are acts of bricolage. Even the text of a play or the libretto of an opera is like a found object. It must be turned to good use through improvisatory interpretations. The staging of a performance means that the material and symbolic circumstances of the production need to be brought into alignment. The physical constraints of the sets and the props, the costumes and the lighting all constitute material circumstances that production staff and performers alike have to find ways to work with and 'work around'. Working around is a recurrent feature of artisanal or craft skill, whether it be found in the work of craft artists or laboratory scientists.

There is a repeated pattern of activity whereby outcomes are negotiated between the director and the performers. During the early days of rehearsals, these can be flexible. Directors block scenes on the basis of general ideas. They have a picture of what they want, and they have ideas that inform the general look and shape of any given scene. But the detailed practicalities and the embodied realizations of those concepts are emergent properties of collective efforts. These negotiated outcomes are then crystallised and sedimented. They are, provisionally, established as the agreed outcome. By the time that the cast and the production team have finished the rehearsals in the studio, and the production has transferred to the theatre, most of the action has become more or less fixed. The artists who create the roles, or who re-create them during the rehearsals for a revival, therefore have an active role in making the roles that they embody. This stands in almost complete contrast to the work of the *covers*, or understudies, who have to shadow the original work of the leading performers and be able to replicate their performances if they are ever needed to *go on* because a singer is unwell or otherwise prevented from performing. Whereas the rehearsals for the main performers are aimed at creating a negotiated outcome, those for the covers are aimed at reconstructing a faithful mimesis of it.

The creation of a production is the outcome of a series of negotiations, compromises, approximations and improvisations. There is a constant process of trial and error, and the outcome is an emergent one. Production is essentially a process that unfolds over time. Principal performers and members of the chorus create the production under the director. The performers work hard to try to establish credible characters and coherent action. By the time that the production reaches the opening night, the production is established and fixed for all practical purposes. During the final rehearsal period in the theatre, including dress rehearsals and during the season's run, most performances are stable. The performers are well-drilled and well-used to their respective roles. The uncertainty and fluidity of the rehearsal period and the process of creating the production is replaced by the stability of the production as it is finally negotiated. An attentive observer who sits through successive rehearsals, dress rehearsals, the opening night and successive performances could not help but be struck by the predictability and stability of the final production. Of course there are occasional minor variations and sometimes there are glitches that disrupt that predictability. But the process from indeterminacy and flux towards closure is one that is incorporated or turned into embodied memory by each member of the cast and chorus. The performance is repeated with remarkable fidelity on successive nights in the theatre. Indeed, even when a production is revived and directed by a staff director with a new cast of performers, it remains a remarkably stable version of the original production.

While the opera is being created in the rehearsal studio, on the other hand, directors and performers have to work practically together in order to make the opera work. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from a studio rehearsal from a rehearsal of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, produced by Patrice Caurier and Moshe Leiser:

Towards the end of the opera Florestan, who has been kept unjustly in a prison dungeon, is given his liberty by the government Minister who has just had the corrupt Prison Governor removed and executed and whose sudden arrival at the prison provides a denouement to the drama. The libretto has the Minister saying directly to Florestan's wife Leonora, who has sought him out disguised as a young man, that *she* should unlock Florestan's fetters. So there is some discussion among the cast members about how this is to be accomplished, as she does not have the key in the first place. So should Rocco, the jailer, give the key to the Minister so that he

can in turn pass it on to Leonora or should Rocco give the key directly to her, perhaps in response to some gesture on the part of the Minister? If that is the case, one of the singers asks, why is the Minister addressing his words directly to Leonora? Moshe Leiser responds, “Let’s assume the audience has an IQ above zero”, to general laughter. The result is agreed to be a simple interaction whereby Leonora takes the keys from Rocco. It is also established that the key itself will be small one, “It’s a Yale!”, Moshe jokes. (At this point in the rehearsals they are miming the action with a ‘virtual’ key.) Unfortunately, the shackles will not actually come off over Florestan’s wrists, and so this little scene ends bathetically, with Leonora tugging fruitlessly at them, giggling.

In this little comedy of performance failure, which of course contrasts strongly with the actions being portrayed at this climactic moment in *Fidelio*, we can see the performers and the directors trying to turn the text of the opera into a practical reality. Here this involves attention to the material circumstances of the dramaturgy. The interaction between the text (libretto) and the practical activity of releasing Florestan from his chains needs to be negotiated at a practical level between the performers and the directors. Given that *Fidelio* is a ‘rescue opera’, this is actually a crucial moment in the piece. The fact that the shackles themselves will not come off in response to the ‘pretend’ unlocking is just one of the many occasions in the rehearsal studio or the theatre where material circumstances temporarily defeat the actors, leading to further improvisation and repair work. Since the narratives and dramatic action of operas are often far from literal-minded realism, directors and performers often have to find ways of rendering the action visibly plausible to the implied audience.

The negotiation of action in the opera also has to work around the constraints of singing. Operatic singing is an intensely physical, embodied activity (Atkinson 2006b). Not all physical activity on-stage is equally compatible with the demands of singing. Directors frequently want their singers to act in quite extreme ways. Opera singers cannot, in most contemporary productions, get away with static delivery of their arias and a minimum of theatrical commitment. They are expected to be physically engaged with a variety of actions. They are required to try to sing while lying, crouching, climbing and otherwise exerting themselves in ways that are not perfectly compatible with operatic singing. Consider the following episode from a rehearsal of *Queen of Spades* (Tchaikovsky) directed by Richard Jones, one of Britain’s leading opera directors, who interpreted the opera with a characteristically gothic spirit: He is rehearsing the soprano Susan Chilcott, singing the part of Liza. He wants her to sing one of her *big numbers* lying back against the wall in a semi-recumbent posture. He coaches her in order to show her exactly what he wants, adopting the pose himself and then having her copy his attempt. She tries to perform her aria like that. “No”, she says, quietly but with an air of finality, “I can’t sing it like that”. She gestures to show that her midriff is too compressed, so that she cannot *sing out*. The singer and the director then spend a few minutes engaged in an embodied negotiation, trying to find a compromise posture that simultaneously allows the soprano to sing comfortably and conveys the director’s desired visual and dramatic effect. There is, in other words, a species of *embodied bricolage* through which performers and directors work around the demands of opera and the physical constraints of sung theatre. One should note at this juncture and elsewhere in this discussion that this is not the same as improvisation. The negotiated outcome is based on a very clear idea on the director’s part. The performers in an operatic production are very rarely encouraged to *improvise*. Rather, the negotiated action is developed within clearly defined dramaturgical frames defined by the directorial vision. Within that interpretative

framework, however, the practicalities of action have to be *found*. Moreover, as the action develops in a step-wise way, line by line in the libretto and passage by passage in the music, the motives of the characters and narrative plausibility need to be pieced together and made sense of. The emergent nature of *the production*,, therefore, develops in the tension between the director's conception of the piece and the practicalities of performance. *Finding a way*, an expression often used, captures this dynamic. (cf Stanislavski 1967; Stanislavski and Romyantsev 1998).

These practical problems and the solution are paralleled by interpretative issues. Indeed, the *artistic* intentions of the director give rise directly to the problems themselves. It is, after all, what defines opera as live musical theatre, as opposed to an audio recording or a concert performance. Singers and directors together have to create characters and plausible narratives. They need to find ways of rendering on-stage action comprehensible to the audience. First, therefore, they need to make the action comprehensible for themselves and for each other. Just as the material props are the outcome of a process of translation, so too directors and performers must translate ideas into actions. The bricolage of material resources is paralleled by a form of cultural bricolage, whereby everyday life is inspected for usable motives and actions.

VOCABULARIES OF ACTION

The material bricolage of the opera is paralleled by a form of cultural bricolage. In constructing roles and action on the stage, directors and performers alike frequently search for recipes of motivation, a shared stock of personal types and characteristics, and typical narratives. There are, therefore, cultural repertoires that can be drawn on selectively in order to inform performances. They can be used by directors to encapsulate their own dramaturgical ideas, and by performers in making sense of their own characters and their actions.

Actors in the theatre or singers in the opera, and the director in both, find themselves faced with a particular kind of interpretative work. Unlike the everyday social actor, who creates speech acts in order to perform certain interactional tasks, the stage performer is already presented with the speech acts. The fact that in the world of opera such speech-acts are to be sung does not materially affect this observation, although it places considerable constraints on their actual performance. The performer must *find* what interactional work is being done and attempt to act accordingly. Or, to put it more precisely, he or she is presented with the spoken or sung words and from them must create speech-acts that are plausibly related to the ongoing action. The ongoing narrative and actions of the characters are themselves partly emergent from the successive acts of interpretation that are themselves retrospectively and prospectively motivated by the interpretations of the performers.

Performers do not need consciously to subscribe to the theatrical idiom of asking 'What's my intention here?' in order to participate in this interpretative work. For opera performers, it is an especially demanding activity. For the most part, it would be demanding enough *just* to sing the words and move more or less appropriately in the space defined by the stage and the set. But the great majority of productions are based on careful ensemble rehearsal and a thorough exploration of the characters. There is, therefore, a relatively protracted process that is a collective exploration of how words and music can be motivated in order to create plausible characters and possibly meaningful situations from the texts that are provided. While each director

has a clear interpretation of the overall piece in mind before production rehearsals begin, reflected in the overall design of sets, costumes and so on, the detailed management of scenes and encounters is managed on a here-and-now basis. The production proceeds step-wise; scenes are rehearsed out of sequence sometimes, depending on the availability of individual singers and the chorus). Rehearsal thus consists of a series of practical trials that reflect how performers and directors try to *find a way* to turn ideas and texts into staged social action.

In the course of this work, directors proceed through a mixture of pedagogic acts. They include practical demonstrations of how they want singers to move (*i.e.*, how they want them to walk, turn, gesture, direct their gaze and so on) and by searching for mundane vocabularies of motive that can be invoked to make sense of the behaviour that is implied by the text. They must work back from the behaviour to create the intentions that in turn transform behaviour into action.

The creation of action is an intensely physical, embodied activity (Atkinson 2006b). The world of stage action is not just one of words and music, it is thoroughly encoded in a repertoire of gestures. Protracted participation and observation of a series of operas suggests a number of things about the gestural quality of operatic production and dramaturgy. Although it is hard to convey it through concrete demonstrations, it is clear to me as an observer and to some performers that each director has a characteristic embodied presence and that, to some clearly perceptible degree, each staging is a projection through the performers of his or her own physical presence. Each director has distinctive ways of being-in-the-world, and of-being-on-stage. Each has a characteristic way of standing, gesturing and moving. The tilt of the head, the posture of the back and shoulders and the expressive use of gesture are all constitutive of how the director embodies not just himself, but also his/her display of how performers should approach a scene. What follows is an extract from my field notes to illustrate this. They were taken mid-way through rehearsals for Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. On this particular morning, the rehearsal was devoted to one scene involving a young valet and a maid. It is one of fairly broad comedy and sexual innuendo, especially as conceived by the director, David Alden, who is famous for his 'director's opera' productions. I wrote:

For a long period in the morning the two singers, a member of the music staff, the language coach sit in a circle, round the harpsichord, with their scores, talking with the conductor Rinaldo Alessandrini. While they are singing through the scene together, David Alden is by himself in the scenery. He dances, pirouettes and gestures in time with the music. He does so with his characteristic hunch of the shoulders and turn of the head. He sings along on his own, usually in a nasal falsetto that conveys the sleazy and sardonic attitude that pervades his interpretation of the work. He sprawls in the armchair that is a part of the set. [It is highly characteristic of David Alden's productions that chairs and sofas – often red – seem to feature prominently and are used for all sorts of expressive purposes, not just sitting on.]

And later in the same rehearsal:

David Alden repeatedly stresses that the valet (sung by a soprano) is a young boy. "He knows he wants sex with this woman. But doesn't really know what that means or what he really wants." This in turn has implications for how he wants the music to be sung and phrased. For instance, when the valet asks the maid to 'bite' him, David Alden mimics how he wants the biting to be acted, relishing the sexual aggressiveness of the gesture.

Equally, the performers each have their own ways of acting. Each is not a *tabula rasa* through which directors can act out their own ideas. My chance of watching protracted rehearsal periods and of the opportunity to see a small number of guest singers in different roles in different operas reinforces the view that each has her or his own idiolect of embodiment and gesture. The ultimate realization of the characters and the staged action is, therefore, emergent from the director's and the performer's embodied actions.

Finding a way and finding a motive are often accomplished by the director and the performers drawing on everyday vernacular modes of expression. For instance, during the rehearsals of that same scene, the valet sings that he would give the maid "cherries, pears and sweets". David Alden suggests that this is a rather childish gesture that emphasises the valet's immaturity. The director and the singers discuss what the valet means when he sings about things turning bitter and whether the maid could make them sweet again. The singer singing the maid suggests that "Perhaps he just means 'What if I can't do it? Will she help him?'". Then they talk about the valet's lines: "Perché se la superbia si ponesse/Su'l grave del sussiego/Io sappia raddolcimi da me stesso" [If pride should tip the scales of ponderous dignity, I could seek sweet comfort for myself]. One of the singers suggests that this is "Very knowing", suggesting that perhaps "He may have to look after himself if she won't make love with him." There is therefore a repeated shuttling between the text of the libretto, in this case couched in elegant and literary Italian verse, and the vocabularies of motive culled from everyday experience that are invoked to make sense of the libretto in practical terms. Here we glimpse how a frame of reference based on explicit sexual imagery is invoked to render the words and the actions plausible.

A more fleeting example is provided from the following brief extract from a piano and stage rehearsal of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*. David Pountney gives a series of notes to the singer playing Paolo, a villain of the piece who has successfully manipulated the election to secure the position of Doge of Genoa for his man, Simon Boccanegra. He is not happy with his entrance which he has Paolo repeat several times: "Don't make it so jaunty. It's not a comic entrance", he tells him. "It should be more purposeful – 'we've made it', 'we've made a million', 'we're going to cream off a fortune'", he suggests. Putting words into the mouths of the performers is a very characteristic way for directors to suggest motivational frames in order to suggest the sort of motivational states they want to see enacted. Noticeably, as here, this involves a metaphorical displacement since performers are encouraged to embody motive X in response to exemplar Y. Rather than repeating the psychological state or action required by the dramaturgy itself, the director will propose one or more *other* states and actions that can potentially elicit the required response on the part of the singer.

The search for metaphors and for musical expression go hand-in-hand. The following brief extract is from a rehearsal of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*, directed by Iannis Kokkos and conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras. Sir Charles and two of the principal singers, Isabelle Vernet and Katerina Karneus, have been singing through a scene at the piano, accompanied by the repetiteur, Russell Moreton.

Sir Charles says to both the singers that their recitative is too fast: "If I didn't know it was serious, just listening to it, I'd think it was comic opera". He says that when she is singing about [the character] Lentulo it could almost be as if she were talking about Leporello [a comic character from *Don Giovanni*]. He suggests to Isabelle that she especially should do it slower, 'Regal rage – the opposite of road rage'. Sir Charles also says to Katerina Karneus 'When it's not real Mozart, sing according to

the phrasing of the words and take no notice of the notes as written'. He says to Isabelle Vernet that at one point she needs to make sure she is singing a D natural; she is tending to sing above it. He also suggests to the repetiteur that he should play a diminished chord at that same point.

Here again we see the attempt to find a series of reference-points. The juxtaposition of references to another Mozart opera and road rage combines the esoteric and the mundane in the search for appropriate metaphor. The musical observations from the conductor also demonstrate a similarly pragmatic approach to performance – a mixture of precision and compromise with the demands of performance.

In pursuing the mundane metaphors and motives directors engage in a kind of cultural bricolage, drawing on their own repertoires for exemplars and similes. In order to 'find' a way of making sense of the opera, they invoke artistic images, literary antecedents, mass media, and, most commonly, they enact everyday vernacular interactions in order to suggest possible ways of acting. To that extent, therefore, there is an engaging reversal of Goffman's formulation of the dramaturgical metaphor with which I began. Goffman invokes the theatre in making sense of everyday life. By contrast, performers and directors use their own constructions of everyday life in order to make possible the conditions of performance. Orzechowicz (2008) has suggested that stage actors and directors are "privileged emotion managers"; operatic performers and directors are also experts in the dramaturgy of emotions and intentions.

The discursive construction of identities in the theatre and the musical theatre therefore depends on this repeated search for shared frames of reference. They enable directors' and performers' motivation of characters, and the plausible enactment of dramaturgical narratives both in the studio as well as in the public theatre performance.

CONCLUSION

I have presented a highly selective account of some features of the work of an opera company. I have done so in order to explore some features of the everyday organized *work* that goes into the creation of a performance. In initially pursuing the idea of bricolage, I have stressed how physical materials, gestures and performers' bodies are pressed into service in order to translate the abstract ideas of a work and of a production into practical concrete action. I describe how directors and performers find a way to accomplish things on stage. I have then gone on to consider in more detail how they find motivations and intentions. They provide an example of C. Wright Mills' notion of vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) in that the participants can actively search for motivational frames of reference that potentially make sense of the text that they have to enact and the narrative they have to perform. In contrast to Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, whereby the theatre is deployed in order to make sense of everyday life, in the practical work of the rehearsal studio everyday life is interpreted in order to make sense of the theatre. This reversal of the sociological gaze allows us to open up the theatre as a site for the interactional management of collective action and a site for the shared exploration of everyday motives, emotions and actions. Seen from this perspective, the theatre provides a rich research setting for the exploration of classic themes in interactionist sociology; the discursive construction of identities, the collective negotiation of meaning, and the emergent character of orderly conduct.

Clearly, the notion of bricolage has been widely used, even over-used, in the analysis of cultural forms. There is a danger of its losing any analytic specificity and becoming a catch-all term. In the course of this paper I have used it to capture some key features in the realisation of an opera. I have not intended to imply that bricolage captures all aspects of that process. Rather, I have used it to demonstrate especially how cultural bricolage informs the practical work of rehearsal and preparation. Vocabularies of motive therefore draw on varied repertoires of everyday practical understanding. They are informed by and, in turn, inform shared stocks of cultural knowledge to generate plausible drama. Through the work of cultural bricolage, directors and performers engage in a form of practical phenomenology; analysing social types, drawing on inventories of cultural knowledge and bringing them to bear in textual and performative interpretation.

I introduced this paper by making reference to Goffman's dramaturgy. I outlined a problematic relationship between the theatre as a metaphor of everyday life, and the everyday life *of* the theatre as a topic of sociological or anthropological inquiry. I conclude by returning briefly to this theme by posing the question: How are we to make sense of the relationship between theatrical operatic performance and mundane social action? The notion of cultural bricolage helps us to explore this in a sociological fashion. Clearly, the enactment of an opera is not a simply mimetic one. The text does not exhaustively prescribe how it shall be performed nor does the preparation of a dramatic performance rest on the direct mimicry of everyday activity. There are multiple acts of mediation and interpretation. Cultural bricolage is but one mechanism through which performance engages with a recognisable everyday life. Productions and performances can deploy other cultural codes, such as the scenic evocation of historical periods, visual references to cultural 'icons', or the enactment of recognisably 'authentic' conventions. By inspecting, selecting, refracting and combining cultural conventions, directors and performers create a dialogue between the *sacred* space of the theatre and the *profane* domains of the mundane.

Likewise, we can see that these dramaturgical metaphors inform our understanding of everyday life itself. Cultural bricolage provides one mechanism whereby social action is motivated and rendered accountable. Vocabularies of motive, vocabularies of emotion and codes of convention, both discursive and semiotic, are actively identified and invoked in the course of ordinary action. Symbolic, discursive and material resources are marshalled and worked on in order to generate coherent actions and situations. The theatre provides us with resources to witness how embodied, aesthetic and interpretative resources are drawn on and rendered visible (*cf.* Acord and DeNora, 2008). By such means, culture is performatively brought into being, and social actors can translate between alternative frames of reference. The theatre and opera thus continue to provide analytic metaphors through which everyday life is rendered visible.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Atkinson is Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University. He is co-editor of the journal *Qualitative Research*. Publications include: *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography* (AltaMira 2006), *Contours of Culture* (co-authored with Sara Delamont and William Housley, AltaMira 2008), and *Interactionism* (co-authored with William Housley, Sage 2003). The third edition of Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson's *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* was published by Routledge in 2007. He is currently working on master-classes as pedagogic and performative encounters.

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