

José Cura the Stage Director

Besides being one of the world's greatest tenors, José Cura is a polymath, a Leonardo da Vinci of our time.

(Seen & Heard International, November 2015)

A natural storyteller, José Cura immerses himself in the humanity of each opera, reducing the libretto to its core, distilling the music to its essence, analyzing the history to understand its origins and adapting it to reflect the realities of modern day sensibilities. Whether discovering the heart in Calaf, the soul in Canio or the tortured mind in Otello, the result of a Cura production is theater at its most challenging and most rewarding.

Cura's career as director began in earnest with an exciting tour de force in Rijeka, Croatia, in June 2007. Serving as director, set designer, playwright, and star, Cura fashioned an intriguing concept piece combining narrative, ballet and opera set against the backdrop of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. He displayed a bold, imaginative, and innovative approach that allowed him to push back the artificial limitations of the opera world without destroying the underlying purity or losing his deep-seated reverence for the art.

La Commedia e Finita, Rijeka: ***Ovations to Cura's direction. That's in recognition to the first work of José Cura—one of the greatest opera singers, conductors and composers of nowadays—as stage director.*** Vjesnik, June 2007

La Commedia e Finita, Rijeka: ***This was a great success for the first directorial effort by the internationally renowned tenor. Cura, in his début as a stage director, created a new way of thinking about 'Pagliacci.' During two weeks of unflagging work as director, set designer, writer, singer, and also as actor performing his self-written monologue,***

Cura gave his extraordinary passion, energy and enthusiasm to this show. Juntarji List, June 2007

La Commedia e Finita, Rijeka: ***Ovations for 'La commedia e finita.'*** Cura's directing is all about bringing out the feelings, the powerful and primitive passions, the dynamism and theatrical fervor, and it is geared toward taking advantage of the complete space (the side boxes, the stalls). There is no doubt that it kept the audience engrossed. The spectacular is the brainchild of José Cura, with Cura himself in the triple role of director (his debut), set designer and singer, even playwright. The results testify to the many-sided, multi-talented personality of the Argentinean artist whose generous, exuberant and imaginative nature is reflected in the show he created and developed that is both complex and replete with facets and which has a direct and intense impact on the audience. It is obvious that Cura plunged into this project with all his passion and creative vigor, bringing to the stage a show that is so well structured, articulated and intense that it was able to draw the audience in, and give them cause to ponder—so much so that at the end, his engagement, like that of the other performers, drew sustained applause from the packed house. La Voce del Popolo, June 2007

In May 2008, director Cura mounted *Un ballo in maschera* for Oper Köln. His staging paid homage to Verdi's tragedy by restoring the sense of political controversy found in the original, focusing on the intrigue of the insiders against the outsider that inevitably leads to catastrophe. Recognizing the nuanced racism in the libretto (for example, Riccardo's "*Dell'immondo sangue dei negri*") and adapting his staging to better allow his lead singer, who happened to be black, to underscore the tragic poison of bigotry, Cura presented a real world, contemporary *Un ballo*. His inventive take on the work made a bold announcement that here was a regisseur unafraid of risks, a bold visionary who invited the audience to an opera rich in experimental colors and modern realities. If his directorial approach perplexed critics, it was

nevertheless understood and embraced by the delighted audiences who flocked to the sold-out performances.

Un ballo in maschera, Cologne: ***Cura makes Riccardo a kind of Othello figure who has to deal with the racism of his society, a debatable approach but justified by the main actor (who is black). Developing one's own ideas for a staging is not forbidden but one cannot shake the impression that Cura's ideas are arbitrary and not justified. [...] José Cura has begun his directing career, even if the birth of a new director did not happen on this night.*** Online Musik Magazin, May 2008

Un ballo in maschera, Cologne: ***José Cura offered the idea that the action taken is based on racist motivations. Cura, who also designed the set, makes everything about political intrigue and nothing about love—but the singing is all about love and rarely anything else since Verdi and his librettist had removed all political allusions in 1859 on instructions of the authorities in Rome and Naples. If one did not have the program, it is probable that the racist aspect of Cura's staging would not have even been recognized.*** Aachener Zeitung, May 2008

Cura scored a significant success in Karlsruhe in October 2010 when he accepted the formidable task of set and costume designing, directing, and starring in a new production of *Samson et Dalila* (available on DVD). Cura created a staging that blended contemporary ideals with traditional sensibilities.

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: ***Cura knows his job and has mastered the director's craft. The singer-director offered up a plausible version that omitted superficial updating. Not that Cura abstained from referring to the present time; he unquestionably comments on threats with which the world is faced these days. In his view, the themes molding this opera are power and domination, sex, betrayal, fanaticism, and killing driven by religious zeal. Thus, in Karlsruhe there were scenes of violence, brutality***

and warlike barbarity, of seduction and hypocritical eroticism, in which lust for power, hunger for revenge and unbridled blind passion characterized the actions of the players. By contrast, the children were vessels of hope and shining lights: the Philistine and Hebrew children, who wanted to play peacefully together in spite of the opposition of their relatives, repeatedly found ways to prevent the worst. The dynamism of Cura's production was captivating in many respects. For all its economy, the set design, a desert landscape with three stage-high watchtowers, "an abandoned oil camp" (Cura), had an optical appeal of its own. The most hauntingly powerful moment was the excitingly intense and sensitively acted seduction and fake love scene, where Samson found himself continually entangled in a white stage-high veil or net—code for Dalila's web of seduction. Rheinpfalz, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: There have been singular opera evenings that are etched on one's memory, never to be forgotten. The first night of Saint-Saëns' opera 'Samson et Dalila' at the Badische Staatstheater ended with standing ovations and was an absolute triumph for all participants. José Cura was responsible for directing and design and indeed, with this accomplishment the singer-turned-director could hold his own with anyone. He succeeded in modernizing the work and at the same time giving it a beautiful aesthetic character, a feat which is a rather rare occurrence. Cura has thought the work through well and given it a perfectly comprehensible contemporary look without doing violence to it. His concept is quite reasonable: he shifts the biblical action into the contemporary Middle-East conflict and has the whole thing take place in a closed oil refinery. He shows Samson, the revolutionary, as a terrorist of today and his motives remain the same as in biblical times. The second act shows Freudian dimensions in Dalila's sustained manipulation of the unsuspecting Samson. The gigantic veil that dominates this act becomes the symbol for the spider web in which the unscrupulous Philistine

ultimately entraps the hero. Cura never forces his ensemble into a strait-jacket but leaves them all the freedom they need in order to sing, understandably so since he is, after all, a singer himself. Altogether this evening was worthy of a festival, and one which was a credit to the Badische Staatstheater. It is no exaggeration to speak of a great moment of opera, one that will go down in the annals as top-rate at Karlsruher Staatsoper.
Der Operfreund, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: The stage is bathed in darkness; burning trash barrels provide the only light and warmth. Playing children burst onto the stage where their naive-carefree activities are broken off by the adults, in some cases by force. The adaptation and shifting of the ever-present themes surrounding power, greed and domination into the children's world becomes a major element in the production's design. The three-in-one union of director, costume designer and set designer does not inevitably lead to a single-handed artistic success, but this was nevertheless José Cura's evening; he was outstanding in every respect. One doesn't have to transfer this subject matter from the Old Testament to the present time (three shut-down derricks), but that it can nonetheless succeed in a very coherent manner with an interpretation that is inherently logical and absolutely sensitive was clearly shown by this production. The audience celebrated the artists with frenetic applause.
OperaPoint, October 2013

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: José Cura has a message: violence always begets violence. When the underdogs prevail they in turn become the oppressors. His message fits this opera, which the Argentinean star tenor knows inside and out. Cura uses symbolic images to illustrate his concepts. Between old oil derricks representing human greed he placed the choir and extras in a tableau with a dark orange backdrop that shows the misery of the oppressed. Children at play bring the scene to life, with the children of the victors playing with the children of the

defeated until parents chase the others away. This moment is not in the libretto or the Bible: José Cura introduced the children to show that all the hope for the future lie in the friendship of the children on both side. Again and again Cura builds small scenes in which the children place themselves in harm's way to protect their friends from the other side. At the end, when Samson buries himself and his enemies under the collapsing oil derricks, the children run off stage together to symbolize a world free of violence and counter violence. His message is clear. The applause at the premiere showed real empathy between the singer-director and Karlsruhe. Badisches Tagblatt, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: In Karlsruhe José Cura was given the special opportunity of simultaneously directing, designing, and singing the lead role. The experiment was successful, bringing a much celebrated triumph to the theater and to the singing-director: the exceptional project lent wings to the ensemble and created an artistic result that would do credit to any international operatic stage. Cura makes no effort to conceal the fact that the excesses of the Regietheater are not his style; nevertheless, his version of the Samson story is not historically accurate and seeks a middle course between a careful update and a clear focus on the core message of the Biblical drama. Set in a gloomy oil field in modern times, the production references the current conflict in the Middle East without exploring more deeply the political dimensions. In this respect, the production remained a bold one, motivated by the atmospheric and committed to a point of view. For the more intimate scenes of the second act with its fateful meeting with Dalila, Cura surprised with powerful metaphors that stunned most particularly in its simplicity. The warm and enthusiastic encouragement he earned at the end was not just for the highly gifted singer-actor. Opernglas, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: José Cura would have been called a 'jack of all trades' in earlier days; nowadays he is

multi-talented. He offers himself in Camille Saint-Saëns' opera 'Samson and Dalila' as director, designer and eponymous hero. No question he is able to do it. What he does is professional. It is strong and discussable and certainly not a show act for Kultur-Boulevard. The first and third acts do not play out in either a 'large square in Gaza City' or inside the temple of Dagon but instead in an abandoned oil camp. And it is not the temple that the blinded and abused Hebrew muscle man Samson causes to collapse with the help of his God; it is the drilling rigs that are beginning to topple when the curtain falls. Cura also invents the role of the children: that the kids ("Children are the letters we write to the future") from warring nations play peacefully together and protect each other from their own leaders is one of the better takes from the clever program booklet. Badische-Zeitung, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: Karlsruhe has a new hero in José Cura who, in this production at the Badisches Staatstheater, sings the title role and is responsible for directing and designing the show. Cura is best-known internationally and primarily as an interpreter of verismo roles and yet he has another passion: directing. For this season, Cura has produced a 'Samson et Dalila' for the Baden audience that was enthusiastically cheered and celebrated at the premiere. Not much was missing for this performance to rank as first-class on the international opera market. A soloist who sings fantastically and directs so the audience loves him, not every opera house has such heroes. Das Orchester, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: This 'stroke of genius' by the composer Saint-Saëns overflows with enchantingly beautiful music but for directors it is considered a hard nut to crack. The story can be staged as a biblically-costumed drama or be updated by hook or by crook. José Cura, for years now an outstanding portrayal of Samson, takes a third road: the opera as timeless parable about

power, powerlessness, violent forceful control and oppression. He places his version in the Near East, on an oil field, in an area of contention between two ethnic groups. Saint-Saëns has them as Jews and Philistines but this bloody dispute could play out in many a region. Under Cura's direction, the dubious hero destroys derricks, and three at that, at the end of Act III. Technically and scenically a sensational surprise effect, supported by Saint-Saëns' potent, ingenious score. The jubilation and cheering for all participants at the end was more than well-deserved. DPA, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: There could hardly have been a more spectacular premiere: no less a figure than José Cura had taken over the production and staging of the opera 'Samson et Dalila.' His concept proved completely logical and benefited from intensive work with the soloists and choir. His production, set in modern day between high, threatening derricks which are made to collapse spectacularly at the end, shows that the perpetual cycle of oppression of one people by another in the name of God persists to this day. At the same time, he leaves no doubt that he sees the hope for a peaceful future in the children. The sophisticated and atmospheric light created a suggestive effect on stage and left a lasting impression. The opening night jubilation, which continued during the celebration following the premiere, set a high standard for the rest of the season. Orpheus, November 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: José Cura, who directs, designed the show and sings the title role, managed an impressive balancing act between the concrete history of 'the way it was' and the generalized interpretation of 'it can happen again.' Looming over everything in Acts I and III were three massive towers. Cura's idea to involve children stressed the revolutionary spirit of the production. Cura finely illuminated everything, not only as the main character but in his existential expression in

both voice and presentation. Pforzheimer Zeitung, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, Karlsruhe: ***Cura thinks in pictures that remind us of the cinematic wide screen, thereby creating impressive quasi-realism. Enormous, universal applause on opening night.*** Opernnetz, October 2010

Samson et Dalila, DVD: ***It is not often that this work by French composer Camille Saint-Saëns can be found on the opera stages of German-speaking countries. Two years ago, the Argentinean tenor José Cura mounted the composer's opera 'Samson and Dalila' for the Badische Staatstheater Karlsruhe. It is a production which received a great deal of attention from beyond the region and which Cura's marketing company is now presenting as a DVD under the Arthaus Music Label. It is certainly out of the ordinary—a music film no less breathtaking than the mis-en-scène itself. Cura, who also sings the lead role, moves the Phoenician prison camp to an abandoned oil-drilling site. In doing so, he wants to show that for 3500 years, money has been ruling the world—but also that human beings have become enslaved to love. He shifts the action to the here and now, and the High Priest even presents himself on stage in a tie. Cura intends to show that history repeats time and again. He succeeds brilliantly all the way to the downfall of the prison camp where a ray of hope remains: Samson sends the young people away. Two extremely worthwhile hours of viewing.*** Der Neue Merker, 2012

Samson et Dalila, DVD: ***José Cura's spectacular mis-en-scène of Camille Saint-Saëns' opera 'Samson et Dalila' has now been released on DVD [by] Arthaus. Cura's concept seems perfect for a conversion into film; the suggestive scenery makes a strong impression on the TV screen, especially since the atmospheric lighting was captured extremely well. And the interminable cycle of the oppression of one people by another in the name of God, which in turn results in equally brutal methods by the***

freedom fighters, comes across as even more poignant due to the detailed views and close-ups. Lucidly staged, the hope for a peaceful future, which the director sees in the attitudes and actions of the children, comes to light beautifully. That one of the visually most impressive productions of the Badische Staatstheater has been captured on DVD is certainly to be welcomed. Manfred Kraft, 2012

Samson et Dalila, DVD: Under the passionate leadership of tenor José Cura, playing the title role and directing, this recording of the performance of 'Samson et Dalila' given at the Badisches Staatstheater (Karlsruhe) in 2010 is of a particularly effective dramatic power, somewhere between expressionism and realism. Editing and framing emphasize both the solitude of individuals and the captivity of a people, linking individual fate and collective revolt in a way of chiaroscuro, in a succession of paintings that gradually disintegrate and are finally swept away by the breath of history. Visually, the production, staged by Cura, assumes his demonstrative bias: between the towers and the pendulum pumps of an oil field, it is the darkness of a symbolic night illuminated by the braziers and the almost Promethean torch lit by Samson; it is the image of a captive people swept away by the revolutionary momentum of Samson / José Cura; it is the bloody and realistic presentation of the blows, the tortures, the murders, the fantastic apparition of the gigantic shadow of the High Priest behind the veil protecting Dalila and the priestesses; it is even the scissors that Dalila holds in her hand and that Samson, already blind, does not see when she sings "A god more powerful than yours." Many of the Manichean oppositions that are already present in the libretto and expressed by the music are redoubled in the staging. All remains true to the spirit of the work. It is understandable that all the action takes place on the same oil field, because it here refers to the human greed and the great loneliness of the individuals opposed by the trade and the conflict. There is no sanctuary dedicated to Dagon, just the oil field, with

the final ceremony taking place between the drill-towers, modern columns of the new temple, which Samson collapses at the end in a large blast. An explosive 'Samson and Dalila.' Forum Opera, December 2012

Samson et Dalila, DVD: ***This DVD showcases José Cura's ambitious attempt to bring Saint-Saëns' 'Samson and Dalila' to the stage at the Badisches Staatstheater (Karlsruhe) in 2010. He shows that he is not iconoclastic - and that he understands his craft. He does not need a historic frame for his 'Samson' but rather creates a contemporary setting: what you see are poles, ladders and cranes that define oil rigs probably in the Middle East, with fire blazing from oil barrels, plus people in everyday clothes. But as he portrays the potent brutality, the whole thing gains power of persuasion. Director Cura does not evoke excesses that would disturb events, and if he brings in ideas (the children of the Philistines and Hebrews play together), at least they are reasonable. For Karlsruhe it was a great evening; for the rest of us, this is a very interesting contribution to the 'Samson' catalogue.*** Online Merker, October 2017

Samson et Dalila, DVD: ***José Cura shows off his many talents on this disc. Not only does he sing the main role but he also designs and directs this production; he has also written a brief introduction to the production which is helpful in explaining much to the viewer. His concern is more with the religious fanaticism displayed by both sides, the Israelites and the Philistines, rather than with depicting either side as morally superior to the other. Indeed his aim is to show that only by destroying both groups of extremists can a fresh start be made by the survivors after Samson's destruction. This is a tremendously satisfactory performance of the opera in musical terms.*** MusicWeb International, February 2013

Keeping his promise to return to Nancy to present an opera for the rising artists who had participated in his master

classes, Cura designed, directed, and conducted Puccini's *La rondine* to international acclaim.

La rondine, Nancy: Apart from early works 'Le Villi' and 'Edgar,' 'La rondine' remains the least known and least performed operas from the fully mature Giacomo Puccini, yet this was the work chosen by José Cura to lead, both as director and conductor, a troupe of young artists with whom he has had the opportunity to work in the master classes he gives each year in Lorraine at the invitation of the Association Nancy Passion Opera. In charge of all aspects of the performance, Cura was also in charge of the staging, the sets, and the costumes. His work was most respectable and even appealing, moving the action from the Second Empire to the Fifties and extending the metaphor of the bird cage, where the swallow (la rondine) will return to self-imposed confinement. The direction of the actors led to a perfect naturalness; the costumes were elegant; and the sets, colorful and well lit, constantly appealed to the eye. Resmusica, May 2012

La rondine, Nancy: The series of performances of 'La rondine' at the National Opera of Lorraine is the culmination of a project that started five years ago with master classes led by José Cura. From among those singers was formed a troupe that would perform in Puccini operatic comedy, direct and conducted by the famous artist. Certainly the ubiquity of the production in general arouses skepticism but it must be acknowledged that the result proved to be a very good performance. Admittedly this Puccini work with its lightness and chatter cannot be compared to 'Madame Butterfly' or 'Tosca,' but the ending, with the heroine returning to her golden prison just as the swallow returns to her nest reveals an effective intelligence in staging the scene, testifying to a skillful know-how in distilling dramatic tension. ConcertCassic, May 2012

La rondine, Nancy, May 2012: Puccini's 'La rondine' flew northeast to the Opéra National de Lorraine in Nancy for

a new production conducted, designed and produced by tenor José Cura. Cura is a well-known pedagogic figure here, where he has conducted master classes, and although it was an undoubted risk to allow the tenor a free hand in all aspects of the production, the exercise produced a highly enjoyable performance of Puccini's underrated score. Cura was eager to reveal the seriousness of purpose behind Puccini's work, not as a Viennese-style operetta, but as a work dissecting the female psyche that could stand beside the works of Richard, rather than Johann, Strauss. The composer's well-known penchant for exploring cruelty and female suffering is well served. This complex psychological tussle was directed with skill by Cura, who chose to set the action in designs and costumes of a post-World War II period. Act I looked like the atrium of a four-star hotel, Chez Bullier featured bistro tables and a Chagall-style backdrop of the Eiffel Tower, and the final act was a Côte d'Azur seaside setting, complete with sand castles and deckchairs. Puccini's much-revised ending was cleverly staged by Cura: as Magda rejected her lover to return to her former life as a kept woman, the marquee on the beach collapsed to reveal Rambaldo, Lisette and Prunier waiting to welcome her back to the stultifying atmosphere of her loveless relationship; Magda fainted, and her inner life died. Opera News, August 2012

Cura continued his multi-platform approach to performance by staging and starring in *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in Liège in November. Dressing the stage with the brilliant colors of Buenos Aires' La Boca neighborhood and infusing both operas with the Latino sights and sounds of the tango and bandoneon, Cura unified the two verismo masterpieces into a single work that ultimately transcended the individual ones. This immensely likable production, with its colorful sets and thoughtful characterizations, was an excellent showcase for Cura's strengths as an opera director and set designer: fidelity to the composer's intent, attention to detail, musical intelligence, and dramatic originality.

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Liege: *By inviting José Cura to stage Mascagni's 'Cavalleria rusticana' and Leoncavallo's 'Pagliacci,' the ORW has pulled off a successful coup. First and foremost because the Argentinean tenor has managed to merge the evening's two works successfully in beautiful temporal and spatial continuity. The set is a replica of the scenic Caminito alleyway in the heart of the Italian Quarter of la Boca in Buenos Aires and all the characters in the course of the two operas live there or arrive uninvited like the comedians of Canio's troupe. The realism is immediate, powerful and poignant, tastefully colored, but without excessive local color. And it works, from start to finish, with a bandoneón player taking care to ensure nostalgic continuity by playing during the intermission whereas the two composers monitor the on-stage show, Mascagni incognito and Leoncavallo by appropriating the famous recitative of the prolog to 'Pagliacci.'* Le Soir, November 2012

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Liege: *If one longs to recover from the stress and strain of the German 'Regietheater', the thing to do is to visit one of the opera houses in neighboring French-speaking countries. José Cura has now staged 'Cavalleria rusticana' and 'Pagliacci' at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie. Within the framework of this production's handsomely illustrated scene (he also designed the stage set), Cura has carried out a number of ideas that are truly original. Play-acting begins even before the music starts. Pietro Mascagni is leaning against a wall of the restaurant and watching the lively scene on the small square; the sound of screaming and squabbling comes out of the houses. At the beginning of 'Pagliacci,' Leoncavallo also comes on stage. It is he, not Tonio, who takes on the rendering of the "Prolog," the Credo of Verismo. A splendid idea. These days, it is no longer quite so easy to achieve the same effect as fifty or even a hundred years ago with these most frequent examples of verismo operas but José Cura has definitely done it with his adaptation and proves that with clarity,*

inspiration and delight in detail it is definitely still possible to stage a work in a traditional manner and be of interest to the audience. At the end one could really cheer wholeheartedly; the audience made its enthusiasm known in a 20-minute ovation. Der Opernfreund, December 2012

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Liege: *The Argentinean, who is evolving from a star tenor into a 'stage-all-rounder,' is making his third guest appearance at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie. This time, he sings, acts, directs and does the stage design for the veritable twins of Italian operatic verismo: Pietro Mascagni's 'Cavalleria rusticana' and Ruggero Leoncavallo's 'Pagliacci.' In his staging, Cura shifts the action to the beginning of the 20th century, a short time after the composition of the opera. On an Italian piazza he skillfully interlocks the two works into an opulent local epic, a Sicilian small-town saga. The Liege audience, applauding enthusiastically, will surely remember the evening still for long time. Aachener Zeitung, November 2012*

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Liege: *José Cura transposes 'Cavalleria rusticana' and 'Pagliacci' into a unique setting, a reconstruction of Caminito Street in the La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires, home to a large Italian community. This warmly welcoming and successful stage design allows itself some liberties with what's reality. The characters of Mascagni's opera reappear in Leoncavallo's: the server in Mamma Lucia's establishment, for example, is none other than Silvio, who dies by Canio's hand, and it is Mamma Lucia who speaks the last words in 'Pagliacci', "La commedia è finita!," instead of Canio, while the pregnant Santuzza, Lola and many other characters appear again, but as extras. Another good idea: an actor and a singer personify Mascagni and Leoncavallo respectively, with the task of performing the "Prolog" falling to Leoncavallo instead of Tonio. From a distance both observe the drama taking shape, as if they were seeking food for thought for a future opera. Isn't that exactly the essence of verismo? A*

bandoneón player increases the nocturnal and nostalgic atmosphere in which the area is shrouded during intermission. This touching, picturesque and human show rests on traditional, but skillful and clever acting that is sensitive and always situation-appropriate. A production of great audience appeal and worthy the reputation of the Opera Royal de Wallonie. ConcertoNet, November 2012

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Liege: José Cura's new production of the two classics 'Cavalleria rusticana' and 'Pagliacci' are proof of the high artistic level in Liege. At the performance on Sunday afternoon the enthusiasm about Cura's singing and his production brought the audience to his feet. Cura not only sets the two works in the same stage setting and has the troupe of actors play in the same square where the fatal conflict between Turiddu and Alfio began, but he also integrates most of the protagonist in both parts. Nedda's lover Silvio works as a waiter in Mama Lucia's tavern; he's like a second son to her so that at the end Mama Lucia loses not only her real son Turiddu, but also mourns the death of Silvio. A bandoneón player connects the first piece to the second by playing Argentinean tango during the break. Cura was inspired by his Argentinean homeland in designing the set, relocating the story to Caminito, a pedestrian zone in the La Boca district in Buenos Aires. At the end there is an ovation for all participants that changes to a hurricane when Cura appears. Conclusion: José Cura enchants with a production that leaves nothing to be desired. Online Musik Magazin, November 2012

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Liege: We are used to these two one act operas being shown on one evening, but in the production in Liège, tenor and director José Cura goes further, combining them to a thematic unit. And he did so successfully. Cura accommodates the stories for both operas in a consistent stage design: the Italian quarter of his homeland Buenos Aires in the 1920s when his own ancestors arrived. One by one he had the streets of the quarter recreated and the resulting image, by no

means kitschy, is of appealing beauty. He tells the story in a realistic way, needing no artificial ideological or philosophical superstructure to maintain tension. All performances are sold out. BRF Online, November 2012

Traveling to Argentina in 2013, José Cura designed, directed and starred in *Otello*, a production which brilliantly combines traditional elements with modern theater within theater effects. Using the Teatro Colón's revolving stage as a silent character, Cura reimagined Verdi's tragedy as an uninterrupted whole, one scene blending into another with cinematic continuity to increase both tension and veracity.

Otello, Buenos Aires: ***We must applaud the staging of José Cura, based on three stage sets, mounted on the revolving plate, representing an exterior courtyard, the main hall of the palace, and the bedroom of the leading couple, which were rotated on the wooden platform with such precision that every scene occurs in the right place, creating an almost cinematographic framework. An example of this was seen at the end of the third act when Otello—totally driven mad—is lying on the floor of the courtyard but rises up at the beginning of the fourth act and steps towards the main room while the stage rotates, there to sit in a chair to meditate, then with a new turn of the stage to go to the conjugal bedroom where he murders his wife.*** Cienradios, July 2013

Otello, Buenos Aires: ***In this the 200th anniversary of Verdi's birth, this new production of 'Otello' at the Teatro Colón has been much anticipated —not only because of the position of the work in Verdi's oeuvre but also because of the presence of José Cura, both in the title role and as producer and scenographer. The result is a passionate and gripping portrayal, with Iago omnipresent as the architect of events, and if not in the action then overseeing it from the side and with a click of the fingers moving it on, Otello, with his emotions largely in check but with moments of the deepest tenderness towards Desdemona contrasted with extreme outbursts, and***

Desdemona the loving wife becoming almost child-like as she moves inexorably towards what she knows is her fate – her “Ave Maria” sitting hunched on the ground at the foot of her bed full of pathos. The scenery was cleverly constructed on the revolving stage with three (unequal) elements, the largest the front of the castle, leading to an interior room and in turn to Desdemona’s bedroom, enabling easy flow from one to another as well as in rotation showing snapshots of behind the scenes happenings. Seen and Heard International, July 2013

Otello, Buenos Aires: *A theater was filled with tenor José Cura, who this time fulfilled the role of singer, set designer, stage director and lighting director. From the start he made his mark, transmitting passion and energy, locating the action with three scenes mounted on the rotating stage—the courtyard, a room and the bedroom — ideal for the Colón— with good touches and credible characters.* MW, February 2013

Otello, Buenos Aires: *The introduction to the opera proper is a passage by Cervantes on the battle of Lepanto, perhaps the same battle that Otello has just won against the supposedly invincible Turkish army. While the nod unites the worlds of Shakespeare and Cervantes, one fears a mise-en-scene full of personal “occurrences.” But no: outside the debatable prologue, Cura follows the contents of Verdi’s opera. And he explores them intelligently, according to two basic ideas: one is the stage realization of the continuity of the drama; the other is a radicalization of Iago. The fluidity of the scene pays tribute to Verdi’s extraordinary musical and dramatic achievement, and Cura obtains it through an admirable use of the revolving stage, not only to create three different spaces - the courtyard and the two interiors of the palace (main hall and bedroom), but also to enable a constant circulation and effective temporary illusions. The turn defines the spaces and also the characters. Iago remains off the platform for much of the work, and even eventually comes to spin it as a demiurge and engine of*

the drama. The general approach is impeccable; Cura's production concepts shine. Clarín, July 2013

The director returned to Buenos Aires two years later with his Liège production of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. What was viewed in Europe as a beautiful love letter to his homeland now became an artistic extension of the folklore of the city: Cura successfully wrapped the two famous Italian operas in the sights, sounds, and colors of the country. *Cav* and *Pag* may have been sung in Italian, but with Cura at the helm they displayed the soul of Argentina.

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Buenos Aires: Generally speaking, adaptations of time and space involve some contradictions that can generate coarseness or awkwardness. The actual or symbolic cultural landscape of a Sicilian or Calabrian town in the 19th century is not the same as the Buenos Aires neighborhood of La Boca at the beginning of the last century. However, these are minor details if the general theatrical ideas have sustenance and rationality. And Cura has them and uses them assuming all risks. In the beginning, before the symphonic sounds of Mascagni sounds, Gardel's voice is heard singing the emblematic and porteñísimo tango of Filiberto. There is no contradiction. It is just an introduction to scents and colors of a specific place. Finally, a different touch: when the first opera is completed, the curtain is not closed nor is there a return to full theatre lights. In semi-darkness, as the audiences chooses to stay or leave, in the center of the stage—that is, in the Centre of Caminito—Juan Kujta, with all his fine sensitivity, reels off tangos and milongas with his bandoneon. Very original and well carried out theatrical ideas. La Nación, July 2015

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Buenos Aires: The production of the operas 'Cavalleria rusticana' and 'Pagliacci' as designed by José Cura was very intelligent, full of details and with good direction of the acting. The bandoneonist who stayed in the interval playing his

tangos, the man who sits smoking off to one side, the waiter arranging the tables, the sign "five months later," the funeral procession of Turiddu and the silent dialogue between Lola and Alfio at the start of 'Pagliacci' and many other signs sought to unite the two Verismo works as if they were one. The presentation [of 'Pagliacci'] was very well done, the characters moved naturally and Cura staged the most violent scenes in a convincing manner. We can say that Cura did very well [and] the production was a success. A homogenous production of 'Cavalleria rusticana' and 'Pagliacci,' very intelligent, with many important details... a sight to see. El Apasionado, July 2015

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Buenos Aires: The Teatro Colón presented a show designed by the multifaceted José Cura called 'Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci at Caminito' (a tribute to Italian immigration of the 1900). Some of the ideas are irreverent, a few extraordinary, but José Cura's ideas never leave the viewer indifferent. Una Voce Poco Fa, July 2015

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Buenos Aires: José Cura needs no introduction, except to let the reader know of the breath of the activities of this artist. He has long mixed his activities as a singer with that of composer, stage director, and orchestra conductor. It is silly to think this is favoritism, for any artist who is elected by the Prague Symphony Orchestra as resident artist must be taken seriously. Cura imposes an indigenous Konzcept by placing the action in the neighborhood of La Boca. If in 'Cavalleria' the action was traditional and did not presage the tragedy to come, it was in 'Pagliacci' (with Cura as Canio) where things got interesting. After the Prologue, a figure in a white mask appeared, inviting people from La Boca to witness the show at 11PM. Later, when Canio realizes that he is about to lose his Nedda, he sits and tears off the mask, revealing a deformed face, wounded, still bleeding. This was the real Canio, whose face showed his inner psychological wounds. This scene was very well thought out, intelligent, and one that gave us chills to see.

His two productions moved well, his ideas were clear and well executed. Mundo Clasico, July 2015

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, Buenos Aires: It is tradition that these two short operas are presented together but in this case, the bet by José Cura was a little greater: he presented both titles as two different moments in the life of the same community. In addition to uniting Sicily and Calabria, he also changed this village to Caminito Street in the neighborhood of La Boca... the staging is impressive. This double—premiered by Cura in Belgium in 2012—with its fatal mixture of jealousy and passions, is more than worthy of being enjoyed and applauded. MW, July 2015

While some opera productions are created to travel the world, others are meant to be rooted in time and space; so it was with José Cura's *La bohème* for the Royal Swedish Opera. Studying the cultural history of the country to create a synthesis between the hot-blooded Italian composer and the legendary artists of the north, Cura replaced Puccini's bohemians with some of Sweden's most influential names: August Strindberg (Rodolfo), Edvard Grieg (Schaunard), Søren Kierkegaard (Colline), Edvard Munch (Marcello), and Tulla Larsen (Musetta). The acclaimed production was fully embraced by the audience and this *Scandinavian bohème* has become a beloved part of the repertoire.

La bohème, Sweden: World-famous tenor José Cura began directing opera productions in 2008 and in 2012 received the offer to do 'La bohème' on the national stage. [...] Puccini went straight into the action without an Overture; in this set, Grieg's tribulation with composing "Morning Mood" at the piano opens the show. Munch's paintings 'The Kiss,' 'The Sun,' and 'The Scream' are strikingly projected on the back of the stage and offer great interaction with the epic. The performance is unusually even from the main to the smallest supporting roles [and] has the elements to make it into an honest artistic success. DT, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *At the piano sits Edvard Grieg, playing his "Morning" and suddenly we are right there, in the middle of the Main Square in Stockholm. When the Royal Opera puts Puccini's popular opera 'La bohème' among the roofs of the old town, it's hard not to be seduced by the scenes. The set changes with Munch paintings and with inspiration from both Kristiania bohemian and August Strindberg's "Red Room." The multi-competent director José Cura (set design, costume, make-up, and lighting) has been clever about the story of the soul of the Scandinavian artist who burns his manuscripts to keep the attic warm. The author Rodolfo has been transformed into Strindberg, the composer Schaunard has become Grieg, the philosopher Colline emulates Søren Kierkegaard, the painter Marcello is Edvard Munch and the cabaret singer Musetta is his mistress Tulla Larsen. Only Mimi remains the same as the young woman with the cough and the cold hands. Dramatically everything hangs together.* Dagens Nyheter, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *[...] to escape from worldly worries for a while in such a strong performance, yes, this is a TERRIFICALLY pleasant experience.* Eskilstuna-kuriren, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *'La bohème' in Scandinavian is a beautiful version, good looking, touching, and professional.* Kulturbloggen, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *The show is tenor José Cura's baby. He has done it all: director, set designer, lighting, costumes and make-up. After a walk in the Old Town and a visit to the Strindberg Museum, he decided to place one of operas favorite stories in Scandinavia in a 1800s setting. The four bohemians who freeze in the attic in Paris now frees in the old town and are called Strindberg, Munch, Grieg and Kierkegaard (instead of Rodolfo, Marcello, Schaunard, and Colline). Mimi is the only one who retains her original name and she is created from the angelic*

creature in Munch's painting "Two People" who participates in the action to get the others to realize what is important: namely, love. I think the cast gets a prequel that allows them to become quickly sketched, fuller subjects of the imagination. Edvard Munch's carefully selected paintings are beautiful, evocative resources that correspond elegantly with the libretto. Expression, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *'La bohème' had its long awaited premiere at the Royal Opera last night. It was a very fine opera experience and perhaps what explains the successful premiere is that one man, José Cura, was primary responsible for the directing, costumes, staging and lighting. His interpretation makes it easier to understand the story of the Bohemians, not least through a clear directorial effort. In most other productions you understand the story and sequence of events by listening to the music but Cura makes it so much clearer theatrically. For example, it becomes apparent that Rodolfo falls instantly in love with his Mimi. It is one of the show's highlights. There was a standing ovation and it was only right and proper and well deserved!* OperaLogg, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *Nordic bohemians convince with vocal splendor. [It is] imaginative, with good humor and much charm.* SvD, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: *Argentinean tenor José Cura looks like a veritable jack of all trades: he is responsible for the directing, set designs, costumes, lights, and for [opening night] only as a figure in his own set. Inspired by a visit to the Strindberg Museum, he has made a 'Scandinavian la bohème,' with the frozen bohemians located in Stockholm, just before the turn of the century when the opera was written. It is not, therefore, a temporal update but rather a geographical movement. Cura creates a fictional world where the bohemians become 1800 artistic figures. Mimi retains her own name, but the poet Rodolfo has become*

Strindberg, the painter Marcel becomes Edvard Munch, the musician Schaunard is Edvard Grieg (a few notes from him have also found their way into the score) and the philosopher Collin is Søren Kierkegaard—that the idols belong to different generations is not at all problematic in this opera reality. Cura combines naturalism and symbolism in a way that both Munch and Strindberg could have felt at home in the bohemians' drafty attic. Psychologically, it is admittedly difficult to see Strindberg as a wistful poet but the temperamental quarrels between Marcel and Musette probably reflects quite well the wrenching relationship between Munch and Tulla Larsen, the red-haired woman we recognize from several of his paintings. His pictures pervade the entire set, often as large screens. Sometimes the notion is clear, sometimes elegant—when Rodolfo / Stringberg and Mimi meet their first kiss melts together with Munch's 'The Kiss.' A Munchified view of the main square is the set design for Act II, where the Christmas Eve dinner is enjoyed in an outside terrace in a somewhat un-Swedish way. But the Stockholm environment contributes greatly to the feeling of home in this set. Cura even changed the Italian text sung on stage. The bohemians exclaim "Till Berns, till Berns" and the street sweepers who gather at dawn cry "Vi ses vid Danvikstull." Despite the slightly complicated concept, it was performed easily and imaginatively, with good humor and much charm. Svenska Dagbladet, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: [...] an elegant transfer from the quarters in Paris to the Old Town. Expressen, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: Puccini wasn't a big fan of overtures in operas, preferring to dive right into the action. But he gets one in this new staging of 'La bohème,' with strains of Edvard Grieg's 'Morning' sketched out on a battered piano. Grieg? Well, yes, because this is Stockholm's 'Scandinavian bohème,' where Puccini's Schaunard is recast as Norway's most famous composer alongside

August Strindberg as Rodolfo, Edvard Munch as Marcello and Søren Kierkegaard as Colline. The conceit and its realization are the work of the Argentinean superstar tenor, sometime conductor and now director-designer José Cura. It is sung in Italian, but with proper names changed, so we hear of “Augusto” and “Eduardo”; Musetta is “Tullita”, after Munch’s lover Tulla Larsen, and Marcello’s painting of the Red Sea becomes one of Munch’s studies of Tulla’s flood of flowing red hair. The elegantly conceived set, inspired by Stockholm’s old town, and effective 1880s costumes present nothing unusual, though the stage is for the most part backed by projections of Munch’s paintings. It’s a roaring success... the wit is genuine and there is a sufficient number of lovely touches—particularly Colline’s surrendering his philosopher’s wig and coat—to ensure nothing blocks the waterworks. Financial Times, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: It flatters our vanity that the Argentinean superstar Cura has come here and sees Sweden in Puccini’s indestructible opera. It’s love—he sees us and on stage he sets up August and Edvard and they go to the Red Room in Berns and the celebrations that take place on the square at the Christmas market. Munch’s paintings are displayed on the screen. Cura has therefore done it all—directing, stage design, costumes, lighting and make-up—and the beginning is tantalizing with several small transformations. What remains is a good set. Sveriges Radio, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: The end result is a wholly engaging performance, fresh with the Nordic setting and the revamped characters. There are many comical moments in the original and Cura never underplays them. This ‘Bohème’ is grossly entertaining and there were laughter and giggles a-plenty during the premiere evening, but the love-scenes and the tragedy, sketched in act III and culminating with Mimi’s death, were indeed heartrending and many a tear was shed during the finale. José Cura is indeed a phenomenon. Besides being one of the world’s

greatest tenors he has primarily singlehandedly controlled all the various functions that build a performance. A polymath, a Leonardo da Vinci of our time. With the assistance of the Royal Orchestra and Chorus on their most Italianate behavior and with Daniele Callegari so flexible and lenient towards the singers, this performance was the ideal synthesis of music and words. All in all an utterly satisfying production of 'La bohème.' The migration from Paris to Stockholm works without a hitch. Seen and Heard International, November 2015

La bohème, Sweden: The premiere of 'La bohème' in a Scandinavian version received a standing ovation at the Royal Opera House. Tenor José Cura, who directed, has chosen to place the performance in the Old Town of Stockholm. The production is beautiful, stylish, touching and professional on all levels. It is worth seeing if only because it is so nicely executed and thoughtful and in-depth. In today's Sweden, where so many performances have minimalist sets, it is wonderful to experience one that does not skimp on the staging: we are really placed in an attic populated by Bohemians in the old town in the 1800s. This production tells the story strongly yet still speaks to the modern audience. I hope colleges and other schools with young people book tickets: it presents just the right ideas to allow people discover the great world of opera. Kulturbloggen, November 2015

Puccini's last, great, unfinished masterpiece exists with only hints of what might have been, had the great maestro lived to complete it; the production which José Cura directed, staged and starred in during the 2016/2017 season in Liège suggested intriguing possibilities. By crafting *Turandot* as a fable, Cura was able to emphasize its fairytale aspects—the grim, claustrophobic environment; the long darkness of fear giving way to the brilliant new light of hope; the intelligent, good-hearted hero caught between good and evil; the symbolic sacrifices made in the battle between the two extremes; and the gradual revelation that evil can indeed be

transcended with the gift of unselfish love. Without exploitation, Cura returned the heart of this opera to its proper place.

Turandot, Liège: *Renaissance man José Cura was at once star tenor, director and designer of the show, Cura's best ideas came in his treatment of Ping, Pang and Pong—a trio of characters who often irritate rather than charm. He treated them as three principal characters of the commedia dell'arte, Pantalone, Arlecchino and Dr Balanzone, before dressing up in their official Chinese costumes for the riddles. This brought a darker brooding quality to the trio, who were even touching as they spoke of their past lives.* Opera News, November 2016

Turandot, Liège: *More than merely slavish illustration, José Cura succeeds in recovering the "Turandot tone" so unique to Puccini's career and so difficult to define: that of an epic choral work in which China unfolds in all its magical sensuality but also its cruelty. At the same time, the kitsch—a pitfall so common when it comes to Asia—is avoided by thorough work on lighting and costumes. The ingenious way in which the children's choir is integrated into the action deserves to be highlighted. This 'Turandot' was a captivating show, one which opened with great fanfare the opera season at Liège. The bar has been placed very high.* Forum Opéra, September 2016

Turandot, Liège: *Faithful servant of Puccini, José Cura was here in more than one role. Indeed, although the Argentinean is known for his operas, perhaps some are unaware that he composes, conducts, and for the last ten years has been staging operas. He does so with seriousness and intelligence. In reference to the original fable, Cura convened a group of children, who through a series of fun activities (painting, Legos, and so on) on the front edge of the stage announced the program ("Dal deserto al mar"). Rather than spreading outward, the Imperial City rose toward the rafters to allow the choir to be placed in the side galleries and 'buried' dungeons in*

the stage floor with little more than the torsos of the prisoners shown—creating an ingenious sounding board as much as a symbolic jail. While the students dress their teacher as the Mandarin, three accomplices wearing masks usually associated with Commedia dell'arte arrived to further connect reality and fantasy as the Ministers [Ping/Pang/Pong]. They offered the comic touch (phallic sword, Spiderman t-shirt). The sublime production was dedicated by Cura to his former singing partner, the divine Daniela Dessi. Anaclese, September 2016

Turandot, Liège: The famous—and often sulphurous—director Calixto Bieito had already tried to bring an original solution to the unfinished finale of Puccini's 'Turandot:' in Toulouse, in 2015, he let the singers finish the performance in evening dress. Here in Liège, José Cura goes further: he radically removes the usual Alfano finale and leaves the score in the state it was in on November 29, 1924, the day of Puccini's death in Brussels: the opera ends with the death of Liu. During the brief lament that follows, Timur transforms into... Puccini, who stretches and dies among his [opera] characters. A little girl crosses his hands on his chest. The moment is moving. The Argentinean tenor is an excellent director, which the Liege audience had already noted in his diptych 'Cav' - 'Pag.' Struck by the Imperial Gate at the Forbidden City in Beijing, Cura recreates it in a sober way: a U-shaped building, leaving a place for the choir, essential character of the work, and placed simply to the left and to the right of the gate. The management of actors is effective; as a bonus, lights and costumes make an important contribution to the oriental atmosphere. Except for a few puerile details (ministers undressing to reveal underwear inspired by comic books, large multicolored plastic balls representing the jewels offered to Calaf), the visual aspect was a new stage success for Cura. A masterful production. Crescendo, October 2016

Turandot, Liège: *The unfortunate situation [of Turandot's 'birth'] explains the sensible option chosen by José Cura to limit the staging to only that which truly belongs to Puccini, namely up to the first scene of the third act. The staging and decors were completely suggestive, not excessive as sometimes happens in 'Butterfly' or 'Turandot.' Costumes and decors were as good as they were tasteful and the dramatic movements were evocative and expressive where necessary. The choir acted as an independent character, as in a Greek drama—again a perfect choice by Cura. Although Puccini wrote for a large number of voices here, this approach (with the chorus grouped and raised) was better; the attention remained with the three central players, Calaf, Turandot and Liù, the choir and orchestra. The only possible conclusion: this 'Turandot' was without a doubt a splendid accomplishment that could equal that of La Scala or the Met. Performances of this level place the Opéra Royal de Wallonie Liège on a larger international level and make us want to attend other productions at this opera house. Klassiek-Centraal, October 2016*

Turandot, Liège: *José Cura, one of the best-known tenors in the Italian repertoire, is also one of the few singers who can assert himself as a director and, in doing so, look far beyond the bounds of the singer's life. In Liège, he not only directs Puccini's last opera, 'Turandot,' but also creates the stage design and performs the role of Calaf. Cura's production offers more than just an exotic, colorful or irrelevant chinoiserie. Although he remains loyal to the spirit of Carlo Gozzi's fairy-tale character, his reading suggests that the story is a passionate plea for the inviolability of true love: Cura celebrates the slave, Liù, who dies for love rather than the cold-blooded Chinese princess. Consequently, Cura ends with the fragment of the unfinished and renounces the sumptuous wedding and happy-ever-after ending of the blue-blooded princely couple that Franco Alfano added after Puccini's death. Darkness dominates. Representational architecture of the "forbidden city" is weakly illuminated. The extras and*

most singers are dressed in muted colors. Only the group of brutish female thugs guarding the princess shows up in white while Turandot appears in a white pantsuit, first veiled and in the role of the hangman. Only the trio of ministers wears richly decorated Chinese garments, one of the few typical symbols of the production. Throughout the performance, the children's choir sits on the lip and the sides of the stage, supervised by the Mandarin, who at the beginning explains some of the play to them. It's just a fairy tale, suitable for children, although a brutal fairy tale, but not more brutal than the Brothers Grimm. A fairytale in which Liu's self-sacrificing love defeats Turandot's threatening claim to power. With this approach, Cura creates excitement. Overall, he succeeds in creating a very enjoyable work. The audience offered thanks for the both the vocalism, production, and cast that towers over others. Opernnetz, September 2016

Cura has long expressed interest in *Peter Grimes*, the dark, ambiguous masterpiece from Benjamin Britten; in 2017 he directed, staged, and starred in his own vision of the work, bringing a bit of the British coast to Bonn in a production that emphasized the cruelty of the many against the one, the lack of understanding of the masses toward the different, the absence of empathy toward the outsider. Using evocative lighting and a single, multi-functional, rotating set to establish the claustrophobic, intolerant atmosphere of the 'borough,' Cura framed the tragedy to emphasize the deadly effects of societal cruelty towards the unconventional individual.

Peter Grimes, Bonn: *On a scene by scene basis, Cura directed the proceedings with a great deal of assurance and success and brought great energy to the drama. Of particular note was his masterful handling of Act 1, scene 2, situated in The Boar. This is a particularly busy scene with a lot of fast moving activity, and yet one in which all the characters were given the necessary space to express themselves. No incidents were lost amongst the hubbub. Grimes' sudden entrance was suitably highlighted,*

bringing everything to an abrupt halt. One interesting decision made by Cura, given that he created a traditional production, was to portray Mrs. Sedley as a semi-comic character. In the first scene of Act 3, he had her dressed à la Sherlock Holmes, sniffing out the whereabouts of the missing apprentice. Although it is not unknown to play Mrs. Sedley in this way, it is a risky decision. It worked well and confirmed Cura's instinctive understanding of theater. As scenographer and costume designer Cura produced a traditional and an imaginative set with Victorian/Edwardian costumes, in which dark colors predominated. This palette aided the creation of the heavy atmosphere that overlays the work. In the center of the stage was The Boar public house, which doubled as the church, situated next to a tall structure that doubled as a lighthouse and as Grimes' house. A rotating stage allowed the scenes to change rapidly, moving us from outside to inside the structures. The floor of the stage was a shale beach, with winching equipment to haul the boats in from the sea. As Grimes' story unfolds, the set falls into decay, shadowing his mental decay, so that by the time of his suicide, The Boar/church is just a hollow frame. The overall effect was visually very pleasing and allowed a number of evocative and memorable mise en scène, such as in the final act. At this moment Grimes is seen pulling his boat up onto the beach, with the mist blowing in from the sea, the stage rotating slowly so that Grimes really appears to be struggling under the boat's weight. Bonn's 'Peter Grimes' engaged the audience throughout the evening. It was certainly very pleasing to the eye and generated an emotionally charged atmosphere.

OperaWire, May 2017

Peter Grimes, Bonn: *This premier in Bonn was eagerly anticipated, bringing fans from a long distance to witness a special debut. José Cura not only developed the demanding title role in a remarkable way but also, as director, ensured that the production was gripping and authentic. (He was also responsible for the stage design and the costumes.) And what was offered to the audience*

at this exciting premiere impressively underscored with how much meticulousness and care Cura approached his manifold tasks. Cura convincingly worked out that Britten's work is an ensemble opera in which a whole village stands against the outsider Grimes, who is ostracized and driven into isolation. The hunting of the hapless fisherman in the last act, with the bloodcurdling "Grimes" shouts, became an insistently and unsettling moment strengthened by Cura's convincing directorial leadership. Threateningly fishing nets hang over the building and add to the dark and menacing atmosphere which dominates the whole opera. A convincing idea is the binding together of the beginning and the end of the piece: during the prolog Grimes stands in front of a scrim, the body of his apprentice lies in front of him, the court, witnesses and village people visible only as shadows behind the curtain: Peter has already been symbolically excluded. At the end there's Ellen Orford in front of the same scrim, behind which again are the villagers as she, who has stuck with Grimes to the end, is now excluded and might become the next victim. In his directorial approach Cura portrays the title role much more positively than do many productions. Most of all his Grimes is a victim of the jealous and narrow-minded residents of the fisher village who force him to death. The performance was a plea for the ensemble theater and that only together one can create great moments of opera. This in turn can only succeed if there is somebody who can bring together everybody and if there is a coherent overall concept. José Cura provides all this in Bonn, and he also offered a touching and vocally terrific role portrayal. No wonder the audience all stood up for standing ovations when the tenor came on stage for the final applause. Das Opernglas, May 2017

Peter Grimes, Bonn: Co-produced with the Opera de Monte Carlo, Britten's 'Peter Grimes' is the first offering of the opera season in Bonn in a new staging by tenor José Cura who also took on the title role. The whole presentation was high quality with the musical performance at a very

good level. The set is composed of a building, a sort of small house with a bell tower. Through multiple rotations of the stage, the building becomes a church, tavern, fisherman's hut, and, in the final scene, stripped of its walls, simply a devastated building, like the character of Grimes who is forced to commit suicide. The image of the dead child is unveiled on stage and taken away by other boys in white clothes, these little angels reappearing at the last moments with Peter in his boat, the 'Boy Billy.'
ResMusica, July 2017

Peter Grimes, Bonn: *For travelers who have been [to Britten's hometown] and who now sat among the first-time viewers of José Cura's gripping staging of 'Peter Grimes,' the encounter with the stage must have been a moment of déjà vu. Cura, who is singing the title role in addition to directing and staging the opera, has recreated the small watchtower which stands on Aldeburgh's rocky beach for his Bonn production. He has also lovingly designed other details, such as Grimes' fishing boat whose origins also finds its model in the English coastal reality. A more authentic setting for the story of the fisherman heading for a tragic end than Cura's staging could hardly be portrayed. The confrontation between Grimes and his fellow citizens are made clear in the prologue. In front of the stage is Peter Grimes; at his feet is his dead apprentice. Grimes name is called three times by Mayor Swallow, who is seen with other citizens as shadows behind a scrim. The fisherman is accused of causing the apprentice's death. At the end of the hearing, he realizes that his acquittal will not change the judgment of the community. When he picks another apprentice, the borough folks eye him suspiciously. One could see the death of this new apprentice as a self-fulfilling prophecy. After the first Sea Interlude, the screen is raised with the view of the watchtower, which will re-interpreted through the course of the evening with the help of the revolving stage and moving walls as Auntie's pub, the church, and Peter's hut.*

Cura meets the dark atmosphere of the opera precisely. Even if a few things may seem a bit cliché, like the many glued-on beards, it is easy to overlook it because Cura's work is psychologically accurate, right up to the three white-clad boys who appear to Grimes in his madness and give him comfort. Cura also succeeds with the mass scenes as in the festival in Moot Hall, in which a couple of costumed orchestra musicians perform onstage while the mayor approaches Auntie's 'nieces.' General-Anzeiger, March 2017

Peter Grimes, Bonn: *Director Cura does not put the figure of Peter Grimes in the center; rather he traces a somewhat naturalistic image of the village community. The individual figures are pointedly drawn, the bigoted character of the people in this coastal town becomes clear. Cura plays Peter Grimes as a melancholy, but quite sympathetic, outsider. During the prologue, he stands in front of a semitransparent curtain, behind which one sees the villagers as a silhouette—thus the exclusion becomes tangible from the beginning. In the end, Ellen will most likely be the next victim. In modern parlance, Cura tells the story of a horrible bullying case. The historical costumes, the accuracy in detail, the genre-drawing of the villagers (sailors with classic sailor beards), all submerged in sepia tones—that is nicely done. Standing ovation.* Online Music Magazine, May 2017

Cura's *Peter Grimes* moved from Bonn to Monte Carlo at the beginning of 2018, to equally remarkable acclaim.

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: *José Cura designed an exemplary show. The artist assumed a protean role, singing the title role, directing, setting the stage and designing the costumes. He was able to create a satisfying production because he understood the scope of the complex psychology inherent the role. The ensemble was encased in good-taste classicism, the movement of the crowd was natural without awkward poses, and the star tenor approached the hero by giving him the nuances of a*

Lord Byron, a sort of an uncultivated intellectual who seemed animated by a poetic gift. Podcast Journal, February 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: A magnificent 'Peter Grimes' at the Monte Carlo opera... After a series of sold-out performances at the Bonn opera (co-production), 'Peter Grimes' premiered at the Salle Garnier on Friday, 23 February. Tenor José Cura, adored by the Monegasque opera scene, interpreted the title role while taking care of the staging, the sets, and the costumes: the result was a pessimistic vision of a fishing village on the east coast of England that Dickens would probably not have rejected. Musicologie, February 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: The Monte Carlo Opera presented Britten's opera 'Peter Grimes' whose insistent and oppressive intensity is perfectly rendered. José Cura, both directing and starring in the title role in this production, offered a classic and literal point of view on the work, whose purpose, still very modern, does not need updating to find echo today. The Prologue puts Grimes on the stage in front of a white curtain on which are projected the other characters in shadows. The rest [of the action] takes place in a building doubling as the tavern and the church, above which looms a kind of lighthouse that serves as Grimes' home. Installed on a turntable to quickly vary its aspects, the concept worked perfectly. Ôlyrix, February 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: To mount 'Peter Grimes' is to question the inner drama: is he a victim, an executioner, or both at the same time? In this new production at the Opéra de Monte Carlo, directed by star tenor José Cura, the first option prevails, with a choice of a powerful confrontation between the fisherman and the crowd, clusters of humans moving in beautifully orchestrated choreography. Cura offers a traditional and realistic vision of the village (with the inn and church mentioned in the libretto) in the seaside town in Suffolk. Although

very present in the music, the sea is less so in this staging, although there is a boat and the many fishing nets that litter the ground at the opening are then raised to be suspended in the flies. Here they will stay for the duration of the show before being reused for the last scene, when the nets come down little by little during the last chords, trapping all the inhabitants within the village. Opera Online, February 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: Co-produced with Bonn Opera, José Cura's reading of Britten's 'Peter Grimes' (Cura also sings the title role) is not limited to the salt spray and accursed solitude of the sailor. The setting he designed does not deny a certain realistic pragmatism, enhanced by the dim lighting, [but doesn't allow] this illustration to become overwhelming. The rotation of the stage reveals different facets of the unique setting where the promontory of the lighthouse and the hut of the fisherman abut a low structure, serving in turn as a tavern or church, according to the scene, the sanctuaries for the borough, irritants for the harshness of Peter Grimes. But the effectiveness of the staging serves as social illumination more so than does the poetic abstraction to which some would be tempted to reduce the Britten work because of his evocation of the mystery of the seas.

Even the restraint of the Prologue, during which Grimes appears alone in front of a blue-gray canvas like the sea under the moon and on which the shadows of the court are projected, the magistrates and townsfolk reduced to voices as in mental ruminations, shapes the premises of an interpretation; [the direction] is sensitive to the psychological complexity of the character and to the situations that restores the dialectic between nature and society, as evidenced in both the score and the libretto. It is not necessary to dispense with the letter to allow the spirit to live. No transposition, no alibi of modernity: Cura's work focuses first on highlighting the incarnations. Anacalse, February 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: *The Monte Carlo opera has just shown, for the first time and in a coproduction with the Bonn Opera House, Benjamin Britten's 'Peter Grimes' (1945), a work of disturbing beauty. The prodigious José Cura performed the title role as well as directing and designing the staging: impressive! The opera begins with the judgment of Peter Grimes, whose apprentice's death at sea remains mysterious. The prologue becomes surreal in Cura's vision, something from nightmares: a scrim isolates and separates the fisherman from the whole community, whose threatening, larger-than-life shadows loom as they demand justice. Grimes holds the dead apprentice until three young boys, dressed in white and moving slowly, come to escort him [from the stage] at the end of the hearing. The first act plunges us into a village street, then inside the tavern owned by Auntie. Fishing nets hang from the flies and a tower, reminiscent of a lighthouse, overlooks the other buildings: this is where Peter Grimes, who refuses to leave [the borough] despite overwhelming hostility, lives. The church scene is one of the most intense moments of the staging. A window in the shape of a cross lets the audience glimpse the faithful who settle in but also reveals those who approach to watch what is happening outside—hypocritical voyeurism.*

The outcome of this opera, as implacable as an ancient tragedy, is chilling. Peter Grimes seems lost, hallucinating; he hears his name hammered and muffled in the distance, like an echo that finally ends but remains in the head. Emerging from a mist he drags ashore his burden, his boat, in which we recognize the boys in white from the end of the prologue: the memory of all his apprentices? In a song strangled by tears, he sings words of desperation: "The water will drink all my sorrows, and the tide will change." The villagers fill the last scene. The music is the same as at the beginning of the first act: habits resume as if nothing had happened. Fishing nets descend to trap community, trap them in their prejudices

and in their blindness. Was the one they destroyed guilty or innocent? Fragil, March 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: *A feat and a masterful evening: thus, in just a few words can we sum up this outstanding production of 'Peter Grimes'—arguably Benjamin Britten's masterpiece—that was shown for the first time at the Monte Carlo Opera. The feat was accomplished by the Argentinean tenor José Cura; this "protean artist," also a renowned conductor, assumed the staging, the sets, the costumes and the lighting for this production, while incarnating the eponymous character—a particularly overwhelming job! We can only bow to this extraordinary performance, especially the quality in all areas. The rotating stage was particularly clever and functional. In the small town on the east coast of England, the tavern becomes, in no time at all, a church and the turret which overlooks both is transformed with a pivot (of the stage) to the two-story, modest home of Peter Grimes. The lighting—magnificent—contributes to the magic, being at once realistic, naturalistic and dreamlike and something more, something from a true psychological thriller. And if the result is masterful it's because José Cura knows how to keep the audience captivated by trusting the admirable libretto which focuses on depicting a community of fishermen, harsh and inward-looking, where the tiniest of suspicions inflates into a persistent rumor, ultimately transforming questions into certainties. In this narrow and limited world, is Peter Grimes guilty of mistreating his apprentices and killing them? Are their deaths truly only unfortunate accidents whose strange recurrence rests on unfortunate coincidences? The challenge of this rich and complex work is to ignite suspense, to solicit the imagination of the spectator and to leave the end open... Cura, rather than depicting a violent and cruel monster whose pursuit of profit is his driving force, offers us the profile of a sometimes aggressive man who is suffering because he feels uncomfortable and who tries to express, awkwardly and in vain, his moods in a society hostile to his aspirations and indifferent to his pain. Confronted*

with incomprehension, suffocating, he is led to suicide as his only way out of a drama provoked by intolerance and sectarianism. The approach Cura takes, at least in this production, is certainly not to make a villain but a victim of this cursed hero. And how could we not highlight his very precise direction of the actors, with each of the many roles being emphasized with detailed characterization and admirable accuracy? In the face of so many perfections one must consider that this spectacle will be included among the historical evenings of the Monegasque scene. Metamag, March 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: *The title of this review refers to the comparison, odious as it is, of the staging of 'Peter Grimes' by José Cura now seen in Monaco with that of Werther presented by another singer and stage director seen a while ago in Lyon. There [in Lyon] was deviation, overacting, coloring and madness in the peaceful and quiet bourgeois world; here [in Monte Carlo] it was restraint, fidelity to the text and formal stability in the community of hardened fishermen. In total, this staging was faithful to the text, perfectly legible, the set scenes were perfectly coordinated, with even a few moments dreamlike and easy to decipher. The scenery influenced the work of the stage director: a tower attached to a house—placed on a turntable—represented successively the school, the tavern, the church and Grimes' home.* OperaActual, February 2018

Peter Grimes, Monte Carlo: *The Monte-Carlo opera has produced for the first time Benjamin Britten's "Peter Grimes," a work of disturbing beauty. The prodigious José Cura performed the title role and directed: impressive! Cura draws a portrait of a poignant humanity, and his commitment is total. He directed the staging, the sets, costumes and beautiful lighting. More than ever, opera seems to be a total art.* Fragil, March 2018

In June, Cura presented his reading of *Nabucco*, Verdi's third opera and first unqualified success, to the Prague audience.

Emphasizing the family drama over the political one, Cura created a stylized tableau using color and costumes as reference points and a unique stage framing that directed attention to the action point of each scene. The production enters the Prague repertoire with additional dates in season 2018/2019.

Nabucco, Prague: *Eleven years (after beginning his career as a director) and 12 productions later, Cura offers a polished and experienced production team. This opera plays out as a conventional costume drama, a straight slice of Biblical history. In that respect, it's spectacular. Cura designed the set, a forced-perspective trapezoid that initially frames the action and pulls in the audience. Over the course of the evening it rotates and sheds its skin to suggest outdoor settings, enhanced by bold thematic backlighting with costumes done in bright primary colors that reinforce the narrative and characters. This can be breathtaking, as when Abigaille makes her first entrance looking like a scarlet sorceress. It all works together, and as a thoughtful and integrated fusion of sets, lighting and costumes, it's brilliant.* Bachtrack, July 2018

Nabucco, Prague: *Perhaps it was Cura's rich experience that led him to stage 'Nabucco' as a rather static, quiet acting concept in which the singers could fully concentrate on singing. However, Cura (additionally responsible for the set and lighting designs) also chose a very distinctive color scheme for the entire production, based on perfectly contrasting and harmonic shades. All the stage elements were plugged into that color scheme—from the one-colored backdrop to the stylized costumes with occasional historical aspects. The whole concept had a number of avant-garde art elements, so while the Assyrian High Priest, for example, had a "traditional" Assyrian mitre and beard, the Jews were dressed in costumes with alienated abstract geometric features, with a general outline referring to the aesthetics of the interwar period. The resulting impression, thanks to the surrealistic components and the play of colors, was very*

fresh, but the historicizing elements and the relatively traditional story of the opera prevented the performance from becoming just a fantasy of color. The emphasis on the art aspect of the production was also reflected in the work with choirs and soloists who, rather than performing dramatic situations on the stage, were arranged in positions and formations referencing the tradition of living paintings. In some moments—including the famous choir of remembrance of Zion—Cura was able to build on that impression. The staging was strictly defined, as if the vivid and contrasting colors were rich enough to fill the stage. The whole performance basically featured a single backdrop—a wooden construction that, in the first scene, quite convincingly suggested the interior of Solomon's temple interior and in the following scenes, with some of the walls removed, was changed with the use of small accessories (throne etc.) to adjust the space into a throne room or garden. Among other more significant features, it is worth noting the opening projection of the inscription carved in the lettering into the clay plate depicting the conquest of Jerusalem Nebuchadnezzar II and the fiery pit where the Jews in the final image go to the martyr's death. Overall, it is necessary to appreciate that with 'Nabucco' Cura has managed to create a very specific and original production which quite successfully combines a conventional concept with an imaginative and pleasantly visual one. Harmonie, 29 June 2018
