University of Alberta

Giving Voice to the Stage:

Michael Levine's *Eugene Onegin* and the Polyphonic Set

by

Melissa Kathryn Victoria Cuerrier

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Drama

©Melissa Cuerrier
Fall 2013
Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.

For My Mom, Dad,

& Aidan

Abstract

Canadian designer Michael Levine has become one of the most in-demand artists of the international theatre, and opera scenes. His collaborations with renowned directors such as Robert Carsen, and Robert Lepage have launched him to the forefront of design today. This thesis explores the many facets of his groundbreaking production of *Eugene Onegin,* performed in 1997/2007, at The Metropolitan Opera in New York. Using primarily semiotic and phenomenological theory, it will elucidate the many layers of interpretation and communication prevalent in his work. Beginning with the Process of Adaptation, the paper will then lead through a discussion of Levine's development as a scenographer, and finally analyze his set and costume designs for *Eugene Onegin.*

Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis has been an exhilarating, stimulating, and at times desolating experience. I cannot imagine what the process would have been like without the support of my friends, family, professors, and department. I have an opportunity on this page to thank them, an opportunity I take great joy in capitalizing on.

Thank you to the Canadian Opera Company, and The Metropolitan Opera who were kind enough to open their archives to me. And especially thank you Michael Levine, who took time from his busy schedule in order to grant me an interview.

Thank you Aidan: you supported me throughout the entire process of deciding to go back to school, and then you helped me stick with it. Thank you Mom and Dad: you patiently grammar checked, and listened to me cry when I was struggling. Without the constant encouragement from all three of you, I would have given up long ago. I would like to thank my master's cohort, John and Justine. We met almost every week to commiserate and advise each other. I feel so lucky to have met these two intelligent, funny, talented people. A great many thanks must also go to my supervisor Stefano. You were consistently offering constructive criticisms, encouragement, and advice. You were also willing to dedicate vacation time (and really any time) to helping me progress with, and finally polish this work.

Thank you also to the Department of Drama, you have now seen me through two degrees, and I will miss being a part of your family.

Table of Contents

Introduction: What is Scenography? **1 - 10**

Chapter 1: The Process of Adaption, *Eugene Onegin*
From Pushkin's Pen to Tchaikovsky's Ear **11 - 35**

Chapter 2: Michael Levine,
Canadian Design Superstar **36 - 47**

Chapter 3: *Eugene Onegin* **48 - 87**

3.1 Audience Reception **48 - 60**

3.2 Scenographic Analysis **60 - 80**

3.3 Costume Analysis **80 - 87**

Conclusion **88 - 91**

Appendix I: Interview Transcription **92 - 111**

Appendix II: Watercolour Renderings
of *Eugene Onegin* **112 - 121**

Works Cited **122 - 126**

Introduction

The role of scenic design has evolved and transformed throughout the last century. No longer confined to being a decorative element, scenography has emerged as a vital part in the production of theatre. Designers strive to give the stage dynamism, and in so doing they devise a world containing more than the given circumstances of time and place. Designers are instead constructing a character who supports the story and whose function evolves within a production.

The impact of the designer within the *mise en scène* is undeniable, but the exploration of the designers' influence is often overshadowed by the prominence of the director. My thesis will in part fill that void. I do not suggest that design and direction are not collaborative efforts, but rather that the tendency of most academic studies is to focus their attention towards the prowess of the director. To further complicate matters, the axiom that 'good' scenic design is invisible, that the set should be a silent partner in a play's production, persists in current dialogues on the role of scenic design. As early as 1933 it was suggested that "The best 'sets' . . . are those which you forget as soon as . . . the lights go up again in the theatre" (Werndorff 445). I argue that scenographers have the opportunity not only to support a production, but also to aid, amplify, and enhance the understanding of a performance.

These complexities are consistently understudied in academia and are problematic in both theatrical and cinematic studies. In his seminal book, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination*, Tim Bergfelder, the Head of Film and Research at the University of Southamton, writes: “Very few key studies have analyzed how set design functions . . . and even fewer studies have been concerned with the impact sets might exert on audiences beyond their subservience to [the] narrative” (14). This statement summarizes the critical need felt in studying theatrical scenic design, suggesting the necessity of locating design both within and without its use in production. Elaine Aston maintains that “In most academic institutions drama has, until relatively recently, been taught as a branch of literary studies, as dramatic literature and hence divorced from the theatrical process” (2). Throughout this thesis I intend to explore the methods designers employ to amplify the potential for meaning by creating sets that are allusive, ambiguous, and capable of creating opportunities for deeply meaningful intersections within performances.

Questions regarding design’s role and future in the theatre are at best, nebulous. Every designer approaches the task of interpreting a show in a personal fashion. The manner in which they execute the design of a stage is decided by variables including but not limited to: their education, the level of collaboration or interaction they have with the

director or actors, their aesthetic preferences, budget, time, or location[1]. In order to carry out a concise and well-defined conversation, I will limit the dialogue of this thesis to the discussion of a singular designer, and a singular work. I chose to focus on the 1997/2007 production of *Eugene Onegin,* performed on the New York Metropolitan Opera stage. The artistic team for this staging of the opera included director Robert Carsen, lighting designer Jean Kalman, and set and costume designer Michael Levine. Although the relationship of the set and lighting design in this production is profound, I will be focusing exclusively on Levine's contributions and collaborative efforts throughout this paper.

Michael Levine has become known for his unorthodox yet visually stunning opera designs, as well as for his ability to balance operatic spectacle with a deeply meaningful visual vocabulary. Levine epitomizes through his work the notion of a dynamic set, he "sees himself as a storyteller, the visual specialist on a production's creative team whose role is to bring an illuminating perspective and point of view to character, motive, and storyline" (Gooding). Levine iterates this philosophy in his own words saying, "My goal is to unharness and unleash the energy of a work. The stage-audience duo gives completion to a work. I want to create a space the audience can believe in, tell a story the audience can complete in its own way and make the work its own" (qtd. in Gooding). To accomplish this, Levine designs sets that signify both specifically and

[1] Location in this instance can mean either the physical location of the theatre or the designer.

universally. Using naturalistic elements like earth, water, or leaves, he connects to the audience on a visceral level and creates a stage that is instantly iconic, indexical, and symbolic. In removing the cultural, geographical, and historical visual markers of the text, Levine's design abstracts the story creating a very interesting frame that both locates the story in the setting that the playwright gave us, while at the same time amplifying the potential to make meaning. Moreover, Levine's choice of reducing or eliminating altogether bulky set pieces and furniture amplifies the ability for what is visible to become allusive, and evocative.

Some of the questions I intend to tackle through my research of Levine's work are: How much can his scenography add to the understanding of a production? Through what means does it communicate? How much does it really affect a performance? With the aide of a generous grant from the University of Alberta's Faculty of Graduate Studies, I travelled to New York to view production photos, stage plans, and archival materials from *Eugene Onegin*. I also travelled to Toronto, Ontario, where I was permitted to access the archives at the Canadian Opera Company, allowing me to understand more fully Levine's development as a designer. Most especially, I was able to interview Michael Levine through the power of Skype[2]. A written transcript of that interview will appear as an appendix to this thesis. I am fascinated by how Levine's design is an authoritative communicator in the stage environment, and intrigued by how his artistic choices create layered

[2] Excerpts from this interview will appear as Cuerrier/Levine in the citations.

meaning through a non-realistic setting. He creates a polyphonic and ambiguous visual text, which explodes the temporal and spatial frame of the story by refusing to locate it in a specific time and space. His non-realistic design invites the audience to project their imagination and creativity, inviting them to become co-creators of the space.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the process of adaptation, exploring the metamorphosis of *Eugene Onegin* from novel, to opera, through to contemporary production. Every new production of a theatrical or operatic work can be said to be an adaptation; both the director and designer approach a show with new reasons to mount it, and new insights to present through its production. The design process, due to its highly individualized nature, is often unfamiliar to the lay person. When undertaking a design of a production, the designer's practice often includes reading not only the script, (or in the case of opera the libretto) but reading the source material as well. Researching the differences and the changes through different media can help elucidate and inform the world the stage design will seek to create. The chapter will examine Piotr Illyich Tchaikovsky's purpose and methodologies in adapting Alexander Pushkin's novel into an opera. The difficulties and criticisms Tchaikovsky encountered with this work are surprisingly similar to those encountered by the Carsen/Levine staging.

Chapter two will engage primarily with Michael Levine's personal theatrical process, and explore how his opera work is paradigmatic of

deceptively simple design. I explore how Levine's design facilitates the proxemic of the performers on stage, influencing their textual delivery and physical characterization. The chapter will reveal his collaborative efforts, and the evolution of his design philosophy. Focusing in particular on his innovative use of ludic materials onstage, in combination with his minimalistic choices, I will show how Michael Levine's stage designs take on a life of their own. I will argue that through his negotiation between scenic and performative elements Levine exemplifies the very trends in contemporary scenography that scenographer Josef Svoboda describes as organic to the staging as a whole: "The setting should evolve with the action, cooperate with it, be in harmony with it and reinforce it, as the action itself evolves" (Burian). Levine revels in using non traditional building materials like water, mud, and leaves, and relishes their innate mutability, counting on their unpredictable motion on stage. When I use terms like 'a life of their own' I am suggesting that these elements have a personality. They are voluble and ambiguous; they move in unexpected ways, triggered by the action they frame; and they respond to the actor in surprising directions, exceeding the imagined intentions of designer and director alike.

The final chapter of this thesis will examine how well the design functions with the operatic works in question. The medium of opera typically encourages lavish, megalithic sets to support its grandiosity. Levine has "dusted the cobwebs off opera design," consistently displaying

a gift for bypassing traditional ostentatious opera design tendencies (Ashenburg). I will begin by exploring the critical and audience reception of this production of the opera. Engaging with these responses and criticisms presents an opportunity to analyze Carsen and Levine's choices. Following this, I will engage in a detailed scenographic and costume analysis, exposing the intentional simplicity of Levine's design choices. Using predominantly semiotic theory, I will probe *Eugene Onegin*'s atmosphere and mood, and its notions of time and space.

The aim of this thesis is to examine Michael Levine's designs both within the context of the production, and without, so as to fully understand the scope of the adaptive and creative choices his work embodies. However, before launching into this exploration, I would like to preface this work by establishing a definition of scenography, a frequently used term whose meaning remains unspecific. Pamela Howard dedicates an entire book attempting to solve the very question of *What is Scenography?*[3] She includes a preface to her book wherein she asked fifty-one designers for a definition, and for which she received fifty-one very different answers. Some responses were poetic and mysterious. Chyssa Mantaka suggests it is "The secret Mandala of a play," (xvii) while Julian Crouch enigmatically answers, "Scenography is secret narrative, the hero journey of things [*sic*]" (vviii). Certain designers were more practical, such as Ioanna Manoledáki who claims scenography is, "The transformation of drama into a system of visual signs" (vxii). The response, however, that

---

[3] Published by Routledge, 2009.

gave me pause belongs to Cindy Limauro, Professor of Design at Carnegie Mellon. She stipulates that scenography is "Visual and aural storytelling but often interpreted as scenery and costume design" (xix). Limauro's response insinuates that there is a difference between the processes of scenic (or set) design, and scenography. This difference is not often recognizable on a completed stage, but is instead apparent only when examining the methodology of the designer. Reflecting on the nature of design, I feel the difference can be articulated thusly: When a 'scenic designer' receives a script, he or she begins the process by identifying the material needs of the show. If actors require a window, or a table, the set designer starts from there, and creates a set around those requirements. They may realize these requirements in a realistic, stylized, or abstracted manner. The important element to note is that the scenic designer's process begins from a place of pragmatism. By contrast, when a scenographer receives a script, he or she begins by identifying the themes and essences of the piece, and attempts to find a way to signify those onstage. Often employing metaphor and symbolism, this holistic approach can create a far more evocative and powerful end result in the design of scenic, lighting, and costume elements on stage. Howard works towards her own definition of what scenography is through the book and comes to the following conclusion:

> The scenographic composition that unfolds to the spectator should unify performers and objects in a series of poetic statements that

> capture the essence of truth and reality and offer both recognition and surprise . . . the use of colour within a pictorial composition is like a composer's choice of musical scale . . . Use of colour to summarize and evoke the emotional life of a play is often my first and most truthful reaction to a text. It can be used to release the emotional resonance of a play. (52-53)

I feel that 'set design' operates starting from the details (script requirements), working out towards a finished design; whereas 'scenographic design' begins from a place outside of the physical stage, and works its way down towards those details. Neither approach is inferior to the other, nor ineffectual or unskillful in practice. However, as will be explicated further in chapter three, I feel that the scenographic approach allows the designer to engage with not only the scripted materials, but also with the audience.

This distinction is unimportant to many designers, including Michael Levine. Despite this, he also provided Howard with an answer for her book, explaining scenography "Is a physical manifestation of imaginary space" (xv). However, when asked in an interview if he considered himself a scenographer, he found no reason to differentiate, and uses the terms (as many do) interchangeably. He states, "A scenographer would be someone who designs scenes, so it's appropriate, but I call myself a production designer . . . because people don't understand scenographer or set designer" (Cuerrier/Levine). Although I too will use the terms

designer and scenographer interchangeably throughout the thesis, it is important to clarify that I feel Levine does in fact engage scenographically with the stage and stage texts.

With so many individual factors paired with a mutable vocabulary, it is no surprise that the design process has proven challenging for many critics, audiences, and even other theatre artists to comprehend. Designers are occasionally interviewed in various media, but there still remains a lack of understanding regarding their work and the total effect of their contributions. I question if this lacuna is formed simply because actors and directors can answer questions directly, whereas one must strive to interpret what scenic elements are attempting to say. The existing critical work regarding this production of *Eugene Onegin* focuses on director Robert Carsen and his contributions, often failing to mention that this was indeed a collaborative production and that Michael Levine was involved from the very early stages of this project. It is my hope that the work of this thesis will add to the growing dialogue on these complex subjects of both design, and designers.

Chapter 1 - The Adaptive Process

Every new production of any play, opera, or movie can be called an adaptation. Every director, designer, and actor brings to a production the diversity of their training, educations, and experiences which combine with the performance text to create a unique interpretation of the show. The adaptive process in creating the 1997 Metropolitan Opera's production begins by understanding the evolution of *Eugene Onegin.*

Summarizing the characters and key plot points of *Eugene Onegin* is relatively simple. The title character inherits some property in the country, and while there he meets a beautiful young lady, whose head is full of romantic notions. She falls in love with him, writes him a letter declaring her feelings, and is rebuked for it. Several years later Onegin finds himself at a party in Moscow, where he sees the young lady, now transformed into an educated, erudite, princess. He recognizes and finally declares his love for her in a letter, but it is too late. She is married; she chooses to honour her vows, thus rebuking him. Both the novel and the opera can be reduced to these few points.

Though the above summarizes the arc of the story, neither the novel nor the opera would have become icons of the Russian canon if this was all that could be said of it. The most emotionally climactic moments, such as the duel between the eponymous hero and the poet, Vladimir Lensky, or the letter writing scenes are essential in any production of

Eugene Onegin. Through the opera, the tale is communicated over the course of three hours. The profundity and complexity exhibited through the lexical dexterity of Alexander Pushkin, and the orchestrations of Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky have enticed audiences and critics alike to visit and revisit their works. One of the most controversial productions of this opera has become the performance staged at The Metropolitan Opera in New York, originally mounted in 1997 and then remounted in 2007.

In the late 1990's, Robert Carsen and Michael Levine undertook a radical re-envisioning of the opera, adapting it once again for contemporary audiences. In order to provide an in-depth analysis of the 2007 production of the opera, a brief exploration of the plot, structure, historical context, and the adaptation of the material is required. Directors and designers collaborate throughout their endeavors in adapting a production to a new time, space, and audience and often face similar trials to those encountered during the process of the literary adaptation. Tchaikovsky encountered a great deal of criticism throughout his work with *Eugene Onegin*, which has perhaps set a precedent for artists attempting to add to, refocus, or indeed adapt *Eugene Onegin* for contemporary productions. When Carsen and Levine revealed their re-imagining of the opera, the reception it received from critics and audiences proved surprisingly similar to that of Tchaikovsky's. Critics were polarized between admiration for, and condemnation of the production.

The beauty of Levine's scenography is that it evokes multitudes of information through minimalistic scenography seeking only to support, rather than overwhelm *Eugene Onegin's* tale. The process of adaptation is often the process of reduction, and selectivity. Addressing the choices made with the adaptation of *Eugene Onegin,* elucidates the logic behind Carsen and Levine's controversial production.

The purpose of either Tchaikovsky's or the Carsen/Levine's adaptations is not to belittle or butcher Pushkin's epic. In discussing this type of extremely negative perception, and how adaptations are sometimes received, Linda Hutcheon succinctly summarizes that there is a dichotomy between the familiarity with which a spectator approaches an adapted work, and contempt for the changes presented in that work. The work of adaptation includes a selective process, where certain elements will be highlighted, while others may be eliminated or transformed. She defends this process of adaptation stating that, "multiple versions of a story in fact exist laterally, not vertically: adaptations are derived from, ripped off from, but are not derivative or second rate" (169). Tchaikovsky strove to update, preserve, and highlight one aspect of a novel containing multifariously diverse themes. Boris Gasparov correctly points out that "There seems to be nothing particularly wrong with Chaikovsky's [sic] libretto until we begin to look at it with the task of defending Pushkin's novel in mind" (61). So too is there "nothing particularly wrong" with Levine's stage designs except that they fail to meet certain opera goers

expectations of a “postcard from St. Petersburg” (Wynne). Perhaps it could be said that the novel and operas proffer differing foci, and that the process of adaptation provides the opportunity for enhancing and unravelling the complexities inherent in the work.

Pushkin’s verses oscillate between identifying social issues in Russia, and servicing the codification of ‘Russianness’ or *Narodnost* [4]. These include: romanticizing the countryside, alternately criticizing and venerating the metropolitan, peppering the story with incidental tales of tangential characters, all while recounting the fictional biography of Onegin. Tchaikovsky’s composition considerably narrows these. He simplified the story by reducing the primary cast to just three characters: Onegin, Lensky, and Tatyana. Due to both the concentration on the romantic aspects of the story, and the nineteenth century obsession with the diva in opera culture, the focus of the opera shifted primarily to Tatyana. In reinterpreting the work as a memory piece, the Metropolitan Opera production once again shifted that primary focus restoring it to Onegin. They accomplished this by changing the chronology of the narrative. Showing the letter from much later in Act I during the musical prologue, and adding scenes like Onegin’s wistful walk through the Act II ball, consistently reminds the spectator exactly whom the central character

[4] “*Narodnost”* summarizes both an aesthetic movement starting in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and its present day definition. One of the outcomes of Romanticism was the development of Nationalism. During the early nineteenth century, the Russian cognoscenti were actively deciding what was “Russian.” They were consciously deciding both how they wanted Russia to be perceived by its citizens, and internationally. *Narodnost* came to be a term encompassing the representation of Russian identity in art, language, literature, music, dress, mannerisms, and architecture.

of this opera is. In addition, these scenes remind the audience that they are not watching events unfold, but rather are being shown memories of what has already happened. This shifts the mindset of the audience from one of anticipation, to one of reflection.

Pushkin published his 'novel in verse' *Eugene Onegin*, as a serial throughout the 1820's. Finally published as a collected work in 1833, Pushkin's contemporaries deemed it the first Realistic novel. Although *Eugene Onegin* could be said to simultaneously embody both Realist and Romantic literary ideals, making it representative of the transition from eighteenth to nineteenth century literature. Unanimously admired for creating a portrait of an epoch, Pushkin's novel invites the reader to imagine the Golden Age of Russia, by illuminating both the beauty and the harsh social realities of that period. Containing "wry social commentary, and endlessly subtle nuances of characterization," *Eugene Onegin* enjoyed incredible popularity in aristocratic and plebeian homes alike (Fisher 17). Pushkin was hailed in his own lifetime by contemporaries such as Nikolai Gogol as the 'National Poet'.[5] He is credited with creating the Russian/national literary style, and being the embodiment of Russian *Narodnost*. Pushkin's renown is shown to have grown to almost mythic proportions in "that serious Russian scholars credit him with having created their literary language" (Terras 357).

Pushkin wrote between 1813 until his death in 1837. The feeling in the Russia of 1813 was hopeful. Having just defeated Napoleon, Tzar

---

[5] *Some Words on Pushkin,* 1834.

Alexander I was instituting societal and political reforms, and there was a new surge of pride in 'Russianness'. Painters, composers, and writers became a driving force in iconizing exactly what it meant to be Russian. Less than ten years later, all of this promise and optimism had drained away. In 1825 an uprising of soldiers, scholars, and artists protesting the new Tzar Nicholas' seizure of power was brutally suppressed. Many of the characters in *Eugene Onegin* are named after Pushkin's friends and colleagues who perished in what is now known as the Decembrist Uprising.

Pushkin was writing in an age of transition. Aside from the succession of the Tzar, he witnessed the evolution of Neoclassicism to Romanticism. Tchaikovsky on the other hand was composing at the perceptible end of an era. He wrote music to honour the dimming glory of imperialist Russia: "By updating and transforming Pushkin to his own contemporary times, Tchaikovsky was artistically portraying a golden age that was about to disappear" (Fisher 16). The ebullient *Narodnost* of Pushkin's Russia had faded, replaced by an increasingly unstable monarchy, the new threat of Marxism, and an uncertain future regarding Russia's role in arts and literature. Tchaikovsky was aware of these things and strove, through his compositions, to preserve the Russia he adored. It is no wonder Tchaikovsky chose Pushkin's iconical Russian work to adapt and perform. Pushkin and Tchaikovsky shared a love of classical music, a love of the sophistication of Western Europe, and

“possessed an aristocratic sensibility” which engendered their obsession with the upper classes (Fisher 15). Tchaikovsky wanted to preserve the beauty of a period he saw fading, and perhaps more importantly he wanted to share that which was ideally Russian with international audiences through the medium of opera.

The question of ‘why’ an artist might choose a certain work for the purposes of adaptation is prevalent in many discussions on the subject. Transposing a work into a new medium can expose it to audiences who might have been unaware of the source material’s existence. Although Pushkin’s popularity was irrefutable within Russia, it has been suggested that its “merits [had] been insufficiently recognized outside” of Russia (Vickery ix). In choosing one of the arguably most cherished Russian works as the source material for adaptation into an opera, Tchaikovsky invited and received heavy censure. These included complaints regarding the oversimplification of the story and ranged to accusations that the opera was a “violation of Pushkin’s poetry” (Gasparov 60). The most oft quoted quip can be found in a letter from Ivan Turgenev to Leo Tolstoy in which he extols Tchaikovsky’s music as being “undoubtedly remarkable” yet disparagingly states, “But what a libretto!” (Gasparov 60). The reason for this unanimous castigation may be explained through Hutcheon’s observation, that “adaptation commits the heresy of showing that form [expression] can be separated from content [ideas]” (9).

The other reason one might choose to adapt a work is that the purpose behind its initial writing or composition, the answer to the question 'why create this at all', has changed. Pushkin wrote to reflect upon current events, and perhaps to engender political and social change. His commentary was largely philosophical, inviting an intellectual response. Tchaikovsky composed instead from a place of nostalgia, emotion, and romance. He was reflecting on Russia's recent past, his intent was to elicit a passionate and sentimental response. Although Carsen and Levine's staging provokes a retrospective attitude, they ask you not to reflect on Russia, but on the consequences of a single man's actions (Onegin), and the results of his pride. In stripping the lavishness of imperial Russia away, they locate their subject in a very intimate manner. Their choice to remove distracting pomp and theatricality allowed the story and its themes to become more accessible. It seems simple to say that each permutation of any classic onstage attempts to communicate with their audience in a new, striking way, but it is far more difficult to accomplish. In laying bare *Eugene Onegin,* Levine and Carsen were able to focus on the ideas of time, memory, and how memory operates. These ideas are universal, and this is what is meant by 'accessibility'. Semiotician Anne Ubersfeld identifies one of the key issues in performing classics onstage: "The fundamental problem concerning time in the theatre is that the time must be situated in relation to a here and now which is the here and now of performance and also the spectator's

present time ..." (134). Ubersfeld is talking about accessibility, and the distance that develops between the spectators understanding of a production, and their ability to empathize with its characters. This, and the problem of accessibility, is precisely what the Carsen and Levine's staging attempts to solve.

In transposing *Eugene Onegin* from novel to opera, Tchaikovsky separated the form from the content. Due to the popularity of the source material, he was at first reluctant to proceed with any adaptation of *Eugene Onegin* due to the fact that "its story was imbedded with too many theatrical drawbacks. Its plot was wild, bizarre, and slender" (Fisher 16). To accomplish the task of adapting the poem to a new medium and era, Tchaikovsky was forced to employ bold artistic strokes. He removed the most vocal and present character, that of the narrator, entirely. With regards to the poem's expansive text, he mercilessly condensed the eight canto book into a three act opera. He necessarily changed the voice from third person to first. He strengthened the resolve and simplified the motivations of the characters. He minimized the breadth of themes from including reflections on life and art and society, to quite simply that of love unfulfilled. The process of this adaptation was not, as some suggest, to massacre an epic.[6] Rather the intention was to "offer a commentary on the source text" and more importantly offer "a revised point of view" (Sanders 18-19). The world Pushkin creates is one left open to

---

[6] The great Russian novelists Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy exchanged letters complaining about the "sacrilege," and even Tchaikovsky's close friend Hermann Laroche wrote of the "violation" of Pushkin's epic in his initial review of the opera's premiere. (Gasparov 60)

imagination and interpretation. Through his composition Tchaikovsky concretized ambiguously existing elements, and concentrated the focus of the audience on the aspects of the story he wanted to tell. With regards to his opera, Tchaikovsky stated “if ever music was written with genuine enthusiasm, with love for the subject and for its characters, then it is the music of ‘Onegin’” (qtd. in Zekulin 282).

Tchaikovsky loved the source text, he wanted to preserve the story and expose his beloved Pushkin to new audiences. Between the Pushkin’s publication and the conception of the opera, etiquette and appreciation for romantic gestures, like writing a heartfelt letter, had changed. Gasparov suggests that “fifty years later, readers would see no reason whatsoever why Onegin could not answer Tatyana’s call for love with, at the very least, more sympathy” (87). Tchaikovsky presented elements, like Onegin’s motives and reactions, in a more contemporary light.

The revisions to the role of the narrator, as well as to the length of the composition, the characters, and other dramatic emendations, allow the researcher a better understanding of Tchaikovsky’s aim. In examining the similarities between the two works, as well as the two authors, one can perhaps better understand the advantages inherent in adapting Pushkin’s original work.

Tchaikovsky’s first task in approaching *Eugene Onegin* was to dramatize the story. He attempted to extract and use directly the dialogue

from Pushkin's verses in his libretto, however "[within the novel] Direct and intimate dialogues between the novel's heroes are all but nonexistent" (Gasparov 76). Further complicating matters is the fact that the narrator continually digresses, speaking on subjects ranging from a gentleman's toilette, to folktales and mythology, and often embarks on a commentary of the social and political attitudes of the period. Despite this, Tchaikovsky endeavored to incorporate as much of the Pushkinian poetry as was possible. The narrator - whose ironic, satiric, lyric voice epitomizes the poetic work - could not have been transferred directly, rather his voice had to be transformed into the score of the opera. Hutcheon states that in adapting the novel to an opera, there is a translation "in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system [words] to another [music]" (16). In this case, the transposition is quite literal. The novel's characters are given lines to sing, but the narrator undergoes a metamorphosis from omniscient and verbal to omnipresent and aural.

Tchaikovsky places the responsibility for narration and commentary on the score itself. It is through his orchestrations that mood, foreshadowing, setting, time, and place are manifested. One of the oft-lauded aspects of Pushkin's opus is that it locates its story against the quotidian backdrop of rural Russia. Regarding the musical score, Gasparov suggests that "what made the case of Onegin unusual was the closeness of the situations on stage indicated by such music to real life" (78). 'Real life' in this instance suggests making recognizable, through the

audible, “tangible social spaces in which the opera’s characters act and express themselves” (Gasparov 78-9). Throughout the first act, charming fragments of peasant music and bucolic flutes[7] evoke not only the quotidian countryside, but a Romanticized version of the Russian past. He uses music to describe that which Pushkin’s narrator strove to convey. Tchaikovsky’s use of the polonaise and mazurka, dances common in Russian balls of the 1830’s but out of favour by the 1880’s, would have acted as agents suggesting time and place. Even today the mazurka in particular is identified with The Golden Age of Russia.

Pushkin’s aim was to write a novel about the Russia he knew, and create characters that were believable. Tchaikovsky wanted to perpetuate the tangibility of a tenable realistic world, but set it in the romanticized domain of opera. Gasparov talks at length regarding how the differing quality of sound between a waltz and a polonaise reflects “the difference between a provincial gathering... and the glittering but cold magnificence of a St. Petersburg ball” (79). Both artists are consistent in their desire to have Realism on the stage. Pushkin’s narrator offers a quip about “hiss[ing] off Cleopatra, [and] Phaedra,” which Tchaikovsky echoed in his resentment of operas like *Aida* [8] (Pushkin 13). Tchaikovsky would be quoted claiming that he could not empathize with “a Pharaoh or some demented Nubian” (qtd. in Zukulin 282). Both authors had tired of contrived and massively orientalized stories about mythic heroes and

---

[7] The sound of flutes I refer to may actually be played by oboes in the orchestra.

[8] Tchaikovsky specifically “resented the triumphal march in *Aida* because it was not related to an actual... situation.” (Gasparov 79)

heroines. Tchaikovsky grounds the characters in Realism through the musical score. Instead of stupefying the audience with an effusive score, “the music . . . serves as a barometer of her [Tatyana’s] emotional state” (Zekulin 287). Neither the music nor the plot succumbs to Aida-esque pandering, Tchaikovsky unflinchingly maintained the opera’s naturalistic foregrounding.

Pushkin’s narrator and Tchaikovsky’s score strive to elucidate “essential insights into the psychology of the protagonists” (Zekulin 291). Using the score as narrator also serves the development of symmetry throughout the piece. Onegin’s letter in Act III and his following declamation of love echo not only the sentiment, but the musicality from the end of Act I, where Tatyana had written about and declaimed her own love.

> ... Just like Pushkin’s narrator, it [Tchaikovsky’s orchestration] provides commentary (frequently - and this is particularly the case with Onegin- in the orchestra) by recalling material heard earlier in the opera, the words or circumstances of which now appear in an ironic light or which emphasize the tragic... (Zekulin 291)

Tchaikovsky deftly dealt with the problem of the narrator by bestowing that distinctive voice to the musical score. However, his greatest challenge was in defining the roles of the principal dramatis personae. Gasparov succinctly summarizes the problem in stating that “Pushkin’s characters lack finitude” (60). This critique encapsulates the

most appealing aspect of the novel, and the greatest challenge in composing this opera. In the novel, one has the opportunity to contemplate many subtleties, and imagine different paths characters might have taken. These characters and the world they inhabit are open to the reader's interpretation. Pushkin's characterization of Lensky provides a clear example of this. The author is not explicit whether Lensky was to have been Russia's next National Poet, or simply a youth with literary aspirations. He leaves it to the reader to decide if Lensky would have eventually received accolades for literary achievements, or ended his days elderly, happy, and drunk in a rural pub. The narrator equivocates using the indefinite adverb "perhaps" saying, "Perhaps he was for good intended / Or at the very least for fame . . . Perhaps a special niche created / For him at an exalted site" (Pushkin 138). The narrator further confounds the reader with this alternate ending to Lensky's life had he not dueled:

> But then again the poet's portion
> Might well have been quite commonplace
> The years of youth give way to caution,
> Slowing the soul's impetuous pace.
> Of poetry he might have wearied, (Pushkin 138/9).

Tchaikovsky cannot afford to be so ambiguous. To successfully evince tragedy within his opera, the motivations and aspirations of the characters had to be made blatantly obvious to the audience. Opera lacks the wealth of time afforded by an individual when reading the novel. When one has a

book in hand, one has the time to read, reread, ponder or argue alternate interpretations of textual passages, while the opera has only three scant hours with which to present its arguments, and to tell its story.

Pushkin takes the time to ponder whether or not Lensky's talent would have developed, and to explore several possible futures Lensky might have experienced. The verses quoted above explore these possibilities by suggesting that Lensky could have become either a master or a mediocre poet, or simply given poetry up as he grew more mature. In Pushkin, Lensky's death arguably becomes symbolic of the death of possibility. This abstraction would not translate well into the opera. Tchaikovsky had to make a poetically poignant moment theatrical, vitalizing it for an audience, and making definitive choices for a strong performance. He needed to establish the "finitude" Gasparov identified in his critique.

In choosing to endow his character with unequivocal greatness, Lensky's death is made utterly tragic. Within the opera Lensky is presented as an unquestionably talented poet, whose star is rising. Tchaikovsky removes the ambiguity provided by the narrator, providing instead a compelling and tragic climax to Act II. Lensky's death is transformed from a cerebral questioning of 'what if' to an emotionally transcendent moment. Instead of being presented with the death of an abstract notion like possibility, the audience witnesses a young, talented man being sacrificed for pride. This is the overreaching purpose of

adaptation; it refocuses the story, allowing structured insights and an increase in the potential for emotional response.

The stanza quoted above serves also to exemplify Tchaikovsky's greatest challenge in approaching *Eugene Onegin*: the novel is written as a ponderous narrative that wanders and doesn't necessarily answer every question it raises. The motivations of the characters in the literary world of *Eugene Onegin* are often purposefully left out. In fulfilling the requirements of a libretto, Tchaikovsky first reworked the composition from the third person into the first. In correspondences with his brother, Tchaikovsky expressed both his love of the original characters, and his desire to adapt them. He described his "indescribable enthusiasm and pleasure" in reading *Eugene Onegin*, but argued that in order to make it work as an opera, he needed to better define these characters emphatically stating, "I need people and not puppets" (qtd. in Zekulin 282).

Tchaikovsky had to make character choices to further the plot of the opera, in order to create a compelling operatic scenario. No revisions are as debated as those visited on the title character. In order to create climactic moments throughout the opera, Tchaikovsky often truncated beloved sections of the original. After the duel, Pushkin writes fourteen stanzas conveying the loss, and discussing the aftermath of Lensky's death. Tchaikovsky has Onegin sing a simple 'no' and ends the scene, intentionally leaving the audience reeling from the death. A cursory examination of Onegin's final moments further demonstrates why it was

vital that Tchaikovsky make these changes. Pushkin writes "She goes. He stands in desolation" and proceeds to write another four beautiful stanzas, but the tone waxes alternately lyrical and satirical, never tragic (195). Tchaikovsky captures the moment, driving it to a quick and emotional conclusion. In changing the pace, tone, and reducing the length of Onegin's final lines, he "leaves us with a sense of justice when Onegin becomes shattered after Tatyana spurns him" (Fisher 21). These final moments where Onegin admits that he can love, and be a husband to Tatyana, are expressed too late. Where one can imagine debating Pushkin's Onegin in a philosophical manner, Tchaikovsky impels the audience towards an almost savage glee at the shaming of a miserable man. Tchaikovsky further drives the principles of the Romantic era home with the final lines Onegin sings, as we watch his heart crumble, "No! No! No! No!" a direct echo from his aria from after the duel in which he had killed his best friend. Lensky personifies his younger more optimistic self; Tatyana represents a future with hope and possibility. Although Tatyana does not die, strains of music from Lensky's death motif can be heard, revealing that a symbolic death has taken place. Tchaikovsky frees the audience from its relationship to the source text. His composition serves to foreshadow and emphasize the connections between the characters and events.

Neither Pushkin nor Tchaikovsky attempted to create realistically flawed characters, rather they attempted to create flawed human beings

for the literary or literal stage. Where the two authors diverge is in intent: "Pushkin intended, through his satire and irony, to debunk and ridicule [society]" whereas Tchaikovsky's intent was to focus on the relationships, and domestic story (Fisher 29). As Fisher aptly puts it, "Tchaikovsky transformed Pushkin's characters and placed flawed but colourful human beings on the opera stage" (29). Pushkin's Onegin had certain erudite sensibilities, Tchaikovsky's Onegin embraces fully the role of the outcast Romantic anti-hero.

The most incredible example of character revamping in *Eugene Onegin* is the addition of the role of Prince Gremin. Simply referred to as Tatyana's husband in the Pushkinian text, Tchaikovsky grants him both a name and a large solo! Certainly the point of an adaptation is to add "hypothetical motivation, or [for] voicing the silenced and marginalized" (Sanders 19). For Pushkin, it does not matter who Tatyana has married, only that she had done so. Tchaikovsky identified and rectified this shortcoming in the novel. Although his role and importance are marginal, Gremin is not silenced as he has four lines of verse in stanza 17 of chapter eight [9]. The fact that Tatyana has married is the crux of the novel, and it is fair to question why no time is spent describing her husband. Pushkin took the time to describe a typical meal at Talon's, but cannot write at all about the perceived obstacle to Onegin's happiness? For Pushkin, trivializing the role of Tatyana's husband encouraged the focus to

[9] As mentioned, Pushkin never names Tatyana's husband, but for the sake of clarity in this paper I shall refer to him as Gremin regardless context (novel or opera).

remain on Tatyana and Onegin. In the development of Gremin's character, Tchaikovsky saw opportunities for drama, and provides the aforementioned 'voice of the silenced'.

Prince Gremin, the invention of Tchaikovsky, is the only character in *Eugene Onegin* who is successful at love. His is the only love that is fulfilled or remotely romantic. In presenting a successful relationship, Tchaikovsky presents a foil for the other dysfunctional relationships throughout the opera. One often overlooked example is the relationship between Olga (Tatyana's sister) and Lensky (Onegin's best friend). Having been childhood friends, Olga and Lensky become engaged at an undisclosed time. At Tatyana's name day celebration, Lensky challenges Onegin to the famous duel, and dies. However, rather shortly after he is killed in the duel, Olga is found to be newly engaged to a handsome soldier. "Not long did his beloved weep, / Soon was the youthful bride forsaking / A grief that went not very deep" (Pushkin 147). It is implicit that the haste with which she finds another lover borders on the distasteful. Tatyana and Onegin, on the other hand, are presented as being a suitable match. They are similar in age, fortune, and appearance. The Larins and their neighbours believe that Onegin intends to marry Tatyana, but that they are simply taking their time. Pushkin writes,

> Some, going further still, asserted
> That wedding plans had all been made
> And simply had to be delayed

Till modish rings had been located (56)

The assumption of the neighbors is that the couple is just looking for the right ring, and perfect moment to make their announcement.

Finally, one can consider the relationship existing between Tatyana and Gremin. They are not a perfect match, and Tchaikovsky preserves this from the novel. The only description Pushkin gives the reader is in detailing Tatyana and Gremin's entrance to a ball: "The hostess sees a lady nearing, / In tow a weighty general" (176). The prince is old, a "grey headed warrior," but he truly loves and adores his wife (Tchaikovsky). Throughout his aria Gremin extols her virtues and it is implied that it has been through his support and encouragement that Tatyana has blossomed into an enviable, elegant, princess. What proves charming about their romance is that it is not only Tatyana who has been enriched, but Gremin himself. He sings "I shan't disguise the fact that I love Tatyana to distraction! / My life was slipping drearily away; / she appeared and brightened it" (Tchaikovsky). He feels that through their love she has brought him "life and youth, yes youth and happiness!" (Tchaikovsky). The aria shows Gremin is the only character who both recognizes and is able to articulate the love he feels. His character exists to show what the future might have been between Tatyana and Onegin. Onegin could have been the one to lead Tatyana's transformation from inexperience to sophistication; the tragedy of Onegin is not that he does not love, but that he comes to know it too late. In the finale Tatyana illustrates the

knowledge of their missed opportunity, and sings “Happiness was within our reach, / so close! So close!” (Tchaikovsky).

Tchaikovsky also chose to emphasize the symmetry already present in *Eugene Onegin*. The adaptive process Tchaikovsky employed reduced the number of characters and the conflicts present in the novel. Through this reduction, plot elements are made explicit and given clear prominence. In Act I, Tatyana is the unsophisticated, artless youth who heedlessly throws her tender emotions at an emotionally unavailable but refined gentleman. In Act III, it is Onegin who has lost his tact and poise in the face of the elegant and refined Tatyana. Tatyana’s final speech in the novel and final aria in Act III of the opera directly parallel those of Onegin’s speech/song reacting to Tatyana’s letter in Act I. Onegin experiences a total reversal of fortune, a peripeteia, which is distinctive of classical tragedy. Tchaikovsky worked to ensure that this reversal is clear through the use of leitmotifs and libretto. The country ball of Act I is mirrored by the urban ball of Act III, each acting as a commentary on one another. In Act II, the duel between Lensky and Onegin occurs because Lensky felt the accusatory shadow of cuckoldry upon him. At the end of Act III, Onegin is actually attempting to cuckold Gremin. The symmetrical elements illustrated through these setting and plot devices were maintained and enhanced through the adaptive process.

The most important symmetrical elements analyzed in critical works of either the opera or novel of *Eugene Onegin* are the two letters

respectively written by Tatyana (Act I) and Onegin (Act III). The device of the letter is used by both author and composer to express the main characters' inappropriate emotions, wishes, and reveries. Both Onegin and Tatyana understand that their letters won't be gladly received, and that the act of sending them is extremely inappropriate. Tatyana writes, "It's in your power, I concede it, / to punish my naiveté" (Pushkin 69). While Onegin predicts within the letter itself that his words will not be appreciated: "And I foresee your proud expression / of bitter scorn for what I send" (Pushkin 186). This contrivance is so important that Pushkin highlights it by breaking his otherwise rigorously maintained iambic tetrameter. Interestingly, Tchaikovsky freely stated that the letter motif was the element requiring the most dramatization.

Certainly the loudest criticisms of Tchaikovsky's work are due simply to the reductive nature of adaptation: the opera does not, and cannot, contain all that the novel does. Ulrich Weisstein eloquently defends the condensation of text for an opera, suggesting that "The drastic reduction in the quantity of text, in conjunction with the highly sensual nature of music, necessitates a simplification" (19). The course of critically examining Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* should not lie exclusively in discovering what was left out, but rather what is gained through the process of adaptation.

The most palpable gain in adapting from a novel to a performance is time. In three hours, the audience is taken through the machinations

and succession of events comprising the remodeled tale of *Eugene Onegin*. Clearly reading the book takes more time, not only due to its length, but also to "the complex vocabulary that Pushkin often utilizes, cause[ing] the reader to refrain from reading the novel very quickly" (Torgovitskaya 23). In employing a narrator to facilitate the telling of Onegin's saga he allows both the reader and that narrator to employ a great deal of retrospection. The story unfolds at a leisurely pace, enabling the readers to engage with the text in a thoughtful, cogitative manner. It can be assumed that most present day readers require substantial time to decipher Pushkin; he peppers his verses with both coeval references and archaic allusions commanding contemplation and investigation. Pushkin's bibliophiles took years to read the work. Although, this was not perhaps by choice as Pushkin began writing *Eugene Onegin* in 1823 and, publishing it as a serial, did not complete his opus until 1831. The thrill and addiction of reading a serially published work is one of the fundamental aspects that Tchaikovsky reconstitutes in creating a fast-paced performance.

New York Times columnist Terrence McNally tells us that "The triumph of successful operas and musicals is how they reinvent the familiar and make it fresh." *Eugene Onegin* is inarguably a successful opera. It has been produced time and time again, around the globe. Tchaikovsky certainly wanted his music to be heard, and wanted the financial success that came with having a popular opera, but in choosing

this subject he had additional motives. Pushkin's celebrity in nineteenth century Russia is well documented, but it is Tchaikovsky's adaptation which allowed for the expansion of *Eugene Onegin*'s fame internationally.

Pushkin has proved to be notoriously difficult to translate. The hitherto most famous translation is Vladimir Nabokov's, but it is comprised of four volumes and features heavy notation and rewriting. It has been criticized for losing the poetry and flow of the original. In adapting the material into opera, Tchaikovsky preserved the poetry, while making the story accessible to wider ranges of audiences. The most ridiculous criticism one encounters with regards to this opera is that because its popularity overshadows the original work this somehow diminishes the power of the novel. Gasparov quotes Soviet musicologist Boris Asafyev to expose this derisive tone evident in much of the critical discussion surrounding the opera:

> After Chaikovsky's [sic] death, the opera's popularity continued to grow, matching or superseding the fame of Pushkin's novel. In 1941 Boris Asafyev acknowledged, somewhat bemusedly: "I am afraid even to utter this, but I think that the ratio between those who have read the novel and heard the music of *Eugene Onegin* would come out not to the advantage of the novel: it would turn out that the listeners (many of whom, alas, never read the novel) have been more numerous. (Gasparov 59)

The strength of Tchaikovsky's adaptation is that it can stand alone, without obliging the audience to have read, or even have knowledge of the source text. However, just as Tchaikovsky adapted the work for his contemporary audience, current productions reevaluate and as Levine says, "take[ ] pieces that are all dusty off the shelves and clean[ ] them up to make them shine anew" (qtd. in Gooding). The work of adaptation is continuous, allowing for new audiences to engage with the production regardless of the passage of time.

Chapter Two - Michael Levine

Michael Levine is perhaps an unfamiliar name to many, and yet his work is widely known and extremely recognizable. His costume and scenographic designs grace stages throughout Canada, the United States, Japan, and Europe, and they can also be found on multiple book and magazine covers[10]. For more than thirty years he has striven to deepen his understanding of scenic design, its uses and reception, and its ever evolving role in theatre and opera. He has become especially known for his use of ludic materials onstage, his ability to sculpt spaces, and most importantly for the emotional and visceral responses his designs engender in international audiences.

Levine's ability to manipulate the stage space is due to an intrinsic understanding of both spatial and human forms. He credits this and other fine art skills to having received an early and thorough education at the prestigious Thornton Hall, a private high school in Toronto. Levine describes it as having been "an unusual high school in that it gave a classical education" (Cuerrier/Levine). In the eleventh grade, he began his artistic education with extensive art history and drawing classes. After graduation he attended the Ontario College of Art for further foundational studies, before finally attending the Central School of Art and Design in London, England. Immediately after graduating in 1981, he began an

---

[10] *Reading the Material Theatre,* by Ric Knowles uses an image of Levine's *Oedipus Rex* at the Canadian Opera Company, 1997

apprenticeship under two designers at the Citizen's Theatre in Glasgow. The timing of this engagement proved perfect because the theatre decided for their new season to do a new production every two weeks and Levine was asked to design three of these. Upon returning to Canada he had three full productions under his proverbial design belt and this garnered attention from the prestigious Shaw Festival for which Levine designed *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1983. At only 23 years of age, Michael Levine had already become an established, international designer.

Thirty years have passed since those early shows, today Levine continues to work and collaborate with many celebrated directors of theatre and opera. Robert Carsen, Robert Lepage, and Atom Egoyan are just a few of the artists who choose to work repeatedly with Levine, a decision speaking to both his excellent work ethic, and superior design abilities. Levine has won awards[11] in Canada, France, England, Scotland, and the United States, all while working consistently in his field. However, identifying why Levine has been so successful is not as immediately apparent as one might assume. To say that he is 'award winning' and a 'good designer' does not answer the questions of what he is doing to win awards, or what constitutes either 'good design' or a 'good designer'.

For Michael Levine, design is never a solitary activity. It is a sad truth that the nature of the production cycle in North America is typically

---

[11] *Chevalier des Arts et Lettres* (1981), Toronto Arts Award (1997); Edinburgh Drama and Music Award (*Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung* 1993), Four Dora Awards (1986, two in 1998, and 2006), Critics Award (France) (1991), Gemini Award (1997), Distinguished Artist Award from the International Society of Artists (2011). (*Encyclopedia* Rewa)

short. Oftentimes a designer and director will meet only a few times in producing a design for a show. Indeed, for many Canadian and American productions, the set and costumes are being built even before the first rehearsal, with neither time nor budget allowed for alterations. Levine's process is very different.

The art of design for Levine is the art of collaboration, listening, and reflection. When speaking in interviews about working with directors from around the globe, Levine has shared stories of late night drinks and many hours spent together in his studio. (Cuerrier/Levine, Rewa) Although he does create work on his own, he doesn't present design solutions to his directors, but rather design options. Perhaps this is part of why many of his designs contain elements of malleability, and create a stage world offering complete freedom for the *mise en scène* to unfold. He related an example of this in recounting his design process for the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Madame Butterfly* (2006).

> Anthony [Minghella] wanted to inform the telling of *Madame Butterfly* with the use of *bunraku* and *kabuki*. He was very interested in viewing the piece with Japanese culture, references, and storytelling. I was quite proud of the design because there was a sort of simplicity to it... Nothing was set prior to the rehearsal period, we hadn't figured out how we were going to approach any of the scenes. I provided a set where you could have *shoji* screens that could move anywhere, and different entrances and exits... it

> was, in a way, a kind of magic box in which he [Minghella] could create the production. (Cuerrier/Levine)

Levine does not pull a design concept from the air and forcibly run with it, rather it develops after a long period of reflection, evaluation, and discussion with the director and the other designers involved in a production.

Scenic design is always evolving, influencing or being influenced by the artistic movements surrounding it. With regards to Levine's work, many critics have employed sensational headlines such as "Minimalism comes to the Metropolitan stage with a vengeance" (Silverman). This is illustrative of a derisive feeling amongst some critics and theoreticians. Classical musicologist Robert Donington explicates this, suggesting the current trend to put "a modern twist to the production is necessary in order to bring an earlier opera the comprehension of a modern audience. [But that] It is, I think, a self-defeating proposition, severing as it does the indivisible unity of style required [in opera]" (10). This critique illustrates the biased assumption that a non-traditional approach to opera design is akin to gratuitous reworking. Many critics tend to amalgamate starkness with frugality, vastness with laziness - and monumentalism with needless over-designing. Although Levine's designs are described as being minimal, the more apt descriptive term would be essential. He freely admits that he doesn't like to have useless or purely decorative items onstage. "I think if it doesn't mean anything, just get it off the stage"

(Cuerrier/Levine). For him, everything onstage must serve a purpose. For Levine the purpose of design is not to update nor to needlessly apply a new interpretation of an opera on a contemporary stage. He speaks consistently and eloquently of his desire to release the narrative from the bonds of artificiality, and of engaging the audience both mentally and viscerally.

Levine has at times been harshly criticized for his work and, alternately, has been lauded for "dusting the cobwebs off opera" (Ashenburg). This praise too, however, is a misunderstanding of both the role and intent of design. The role of design, according to Levine, is not to decorate a stage or illustrate a story, but to reveal the quintessential purpose at the heart of the show. This is a heady responsibility, but he does not face it alone. When beginning his collaboration on *La Bohème* (2001) with Carsen, they were unsure of how to begin until he queried "Is *La Bohème* a story about Paris in the 1890's?" (Cuerrier/Levine). He went on to understand that it was not, and that "the production is about a group of friends who love each other and then lose each other; it's about mortality and love and friendship" (Cuerrier/Levine). In the light of this revelation, Levine embarked on an emotional interpretation of the settings. The design for *La Bohème* threw out the walls and the clunky set changes. Furniture and scenic elements defined spaces without the confines of walls created by traditional flats. The problem designers consistently face with this opera is that while the scenes of the first act are

theoretically set in a small, poor, studio, they are technically performed in grand opera houses. The studio of Rudolfo has a tendency to fill these stages, and as Levine rightly points out, "[It] doesn't actually ring true to an audience, because they're in this huge studio, and you think: They're poor, well why do they have such a big space?" (Cuerrier/Levine). By confining the studio to a small space center stage, physical walls are not required. The definition is imposed through lighting and furniture placement. In allowing only a tiny square of light, the singers were forced to employ "Every time somebody had to move something, or had to sit down. . . [there was] this kind of crazy lovely choreography that took place" (Cuerrier/Levine). Once freed from the bonds of naturalistic walls, the floors and vertical spaces of the stage were also liberated. The floors were covered in paper, but not just any white sheets. Upon examining the sheets, one finds that they are in fact the writings of Rudolfo, and the paintings of Marcello. They are surrounded by their work; their work literally fills and creates their stage world. Levine describes it analogically when he says that "It was like they were in a sea of their own work," and that, due to the whiteness of the set, it "felt like winter" (Cuerrier/Levine). These choices illustrate an ability to find a perfect metaphor for the production. By not locating the characters historically, by not confining them to a mimetically disappointing set, the psychological aspects of the show are instead brought to the fore. Rather than showing a picture of a theatrical version of Paris in 1890, the audience is shown what it felt like to

be in the madness of a Parisian street, and the cramped nature of those tiny studios.

The purpose of Levine's designs is to support the narrative, and to paraphrase Natalie Rewa's reflections on Levine, to continually and actively engage the visual with the verbal and musical expression as they unfold (*Scenography* 183-4). A definition of modernization in the theatre would include the act of updating a production, or making it accessible to contemporary audiences. Listening to Levine describe his process with *La Bohème* makes it clear that he is not in fact attempting to revolutionize, modernize, or minimalize scenic design in the opera, he is attempting to essentialize it.

In order to create a stage world that communicates the essential nature of the story, Levine employs a wide arsenal of artistic and technical tactics. He is set apart from other designers in his understanding and manipulation of perspective, his ability to sculpt spaces, his inclusion of ludic elements, and his understanding of the human form present onstage.

The use of ludic, or unpredictable elements in the theatre is perhaps Levine's most evocative design tactic. He is known for using actual water, mud, leaves, and blood[12] in his productions. Theatre typically simulates or finds a means of representing any feature which might not respond in an identical fashion during every performance. Both actors and technicians rely on a series of cues, with little to no room for

[12] Although Levine uses the word "blood" in an interview, the lake in *Parsifal* was filled with stage, not animal, blood.

variance to reproduce the same show over the run of a production. Surprises are meant only to be experienced by the audience, and never by the cast or crew. Levine's insistence on using real substances, like mud or blood, interferes with theatre production's status quo.

The problems inherent in utilizing actual mud, for example, are many. Mud can soil or stain costumes. It can ruin carefully applied make-up and hair styling. It is called unpredictable because one cannot predict where it might end up: even if it is only supposed to go on a leg, or an arm, it can smudge, transfer, dry, or move in ways no rehearsal can predict. If the actors or singers are wearing microphones, there are dangers to both the person and the equipment. Mud or water can create sound effects, even if they are undesired. Because it can end up elsewhere on the set, it can be the source of more maintenance for the technicians, or more danger (slippage for example) for the actors. It could even end up on unsuspecting audience members. With all of these issues, why would a designer or director desire or insist upon using such capricious elements onstage?

The answer is in part, because of all of those potential problems. It is exhilarating to witness or engage with unpredictable things in the theatre. The very danger that these elements render, fuels actor's and audience's engagement with the scene. Levine uses terms like, "strangely sexual, luxurious . . . [and] visceral" to describe the use of blood onstage

in his 2013 production of *Parsifal* at the Metropolitan Opera[13] (Cuerrier/Levine). Although the production did not use actual animal blood, but rather stage blood, it nevertheless did nothing to lessen the spectator response. Levine identifies with this reaction, saying "There's something about it that feels very alive. . . I think [it] touched people emotionally" (Cuerrier/Levine). Blood is always shocking onstage. The sight of a significant quantity, in this case a literal lake of blood, provoked an intense spectator response. This experience is described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* as "synaesthetic perception," wherein one sees a thing (blood in this instance) and it "appeals to all our other senses as well as sight" (205). The sight of blood conjures in the spectator's mind a response wherein they pseudo-experience the disquieting feeling of the touch and smell of blood.

Levine has continuously experimented with unusual and uncontrollable elements in his design work. Early in his career, he collaborated with Robert Lepage on the acclaimed productions of *Tectonic Plates* (1988) and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1992). The use of water in *Tectonic Plates* and mud in *Midsummer* continues to spark critical responses today. In *Tectonic Plates*, a pool of water covered most of the stage. The actors sat in it, there were chairs and props in it, images and lights were projected in and through it. It acted as an interactive element, which the actors could use, exploit, and fight with. This was not a water ballet, or a show about swimming, so asking 'why choose this?' and 'what

---

[13] Directed by Francois Gerard.

made this such a powerful visual and scenographic technique?' are valid questions.

The pool was approximately one meter deep, allowing actors to submerge themselves, or walk through it. As Rewa adroitly surmises, "the pool was incorporated into an imagery of mutability that contrasted the connotations between water and land, exhibiting the changeability of the actual and imagined relationships between them" (*Scenography* 192). Initially, a plan view of Earth's tectonic plates was projected onto the stage floor, including the water area. Later, as various fine artists masterworks were projected into the same pool, the floor becomes simultaneously land, and ocean, and as the play develops, it becomes a means for commenting on exploitation, art provenance, and human nature. During the scene of the art auction, the actors had to fight the resistance the water produced. As the water combated their movement, actors literally climbed onto each other's backs to purchase the masterworks being sold during the scene. The set manages to afford a sense of time passing and different eras intersecting, while providing a platform for the performance's needs. In the creation of this pool, Levine purposefully plays with the spatiotemporal elements of time, place, and culture.

Besides his use of ludic materials, Levine's greatest skill is his understanding of the relationship of the human body onstage. It is not uncommon for a designer to forget that actors will inhabit the designed space, altering it and infusing it with new meaning. Levine not only

understands that the actors' body will exist in his settings, but is able to manipulate the scale of the body, and the spectators understanding of what the actor's body relates.

In 1998 Levine designed the sets and costumes for a production of *Oedipus Rex* with the Canadian Opera Company. Here Levine truly essentialized the opera, stripping it to its barest requirements: a throne. Creating an amazing facsimile of the city of Thebes is not the *raison d'être* of the opera, facilitating the story of the people within it is. To that end, the fifty-five men and women of the chorus become the platform upon which Oedipus' throne sits. Christopher Hoile's review eloquently describes the scene, "Oedipus seated on an oversized chair atop a writhing mound of bodies while men search for familiar faces is unforgettable. The chair may be a throne but [it] dwarfs Oedipus as if no one man is adequate to wield power over others." The Canadian Opera Company wanted to emphasize the role of the citizens of Thebes, who in the classical text are dying of plague. In this version, parallels are drawn to one of the more frightening plagues of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, AIDS. Instead of the audience being told that people are dying, the chorus fills the center mound on the stage, pleading and dying in plain view. Their bodies are at once singer, plague victim, and scenic element. The set is not just information about the era, or commenting on the happenings of the opera. Using the chorus members as scenographic elements consistently contributes to the establishment and creation of the narrative throughout

the opera. It achieves the aim identified by critic Arnold Aronson, who states that since the "1960's [directors and designers] have attempted to rid the stage of lingering nineteenth-century sentimentality while emphasizing the fluidity of inner and out worlds" (123). The plague, the feelings of hope and hopelessness, the sense of dread, are all elements the chorus conveys through both their song, presence, but these emotions are especially communicated though their participation as part of the scenic composition

Levine has continually pushed himself to evolve, and to look deeper into every production he is asked to design. He approaches each challenge with a keen eye and keener ear, listening for the answers to the questions of 'why do a show,' and 'what are we trying to say.' Throughout his work, the most important and consistent element is his earnest desire to lay bare the essence of a production, and free it from the trappings of decorative drivel. Of the many productions he has collaborated on throughout his career, perhaps the most controversially received production was The Metropolitan's *Eugene Onegin.* It's daringly minimal, and yet its many layers are polyphonic, offering a multiplicity of meanings.

Chapter Three - *Eugene Onegin,* Audience Reception, Scenographic Analysis, and Costume Analysis

3.1 - Audience Reception

Audience and reviewer's responses to the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Eugene Onegin* wavered between awe and dismay. The fact that spectators responded so viscerally to the design and *mise en scène* acts as a clarion call for a critical response. Addressing the question of why was this production so mercurially received spawns several complex dialogues. Marvin Carlson observes that "the complexity of theatre, combined with its ephemerality, presents formidable methodological problems" (490). Those problems often stem out of theatre's most vital strength, which is the close collaboration of many participants in the creation of a production, including artistic, technical, and production staff. This collaborative nature ensures that although theatre professionals possess differing skill sets, and employ different methods of production, they cooperate and pool resources to create a theatre piece.

The act of critically assessing a production is further confounded by theatre's ephemerality. Production runs are often brief, and even if they are remounted (as with *Eugene Onegin)* the actors, conductors, musicians, and technicians may not be the same artists who engaged with the first production. If one wishes to review a production, but cannot

themselves see it, one must rely on recorded spectator responses and the critics' observations. However, the audience's response to a production is informed by a variety of unknowable cultural, emotional, and educational backgrounds. Yet most post-production assessments of a play or opera are often entirely reliant on these individual remembrances. Theatre's ephemerality is part of its charm, but creates problems in studying a specific performance. That difficulty is somewhat lessened today, as many shows are being recorded due to either a plan for re-mounting, sales, or simply for superior archiving. However, any investigation of a production is then reliant on what the camera operators and editors feel is important to reveal to the spectator.

In order to engage in the conversation regarding this specific production of *Eugene Onegin*, questions regarding the changing role of the stage and stage setting must first be addressed. This will lead to an examination of the obstacles to that change. Additionally, a thorough scenic and costume analysis of *Eugene Onegin* must be pursued, to address specifically the importance of this production in the discourse taking place about the evolution and future of scenography.

The role of the stage has always been to frame and support the actors as they impart the narrative of the play or opera. In certain eras, this framing has been quite literal: the function of the stage decor was purely decorative. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evermore ornate and ingenious devices were engineered so to recreate

theatrical fantasies that would inspire awe in the audience. This resulted in an exhibition of incredible skill that had little to do with tone or text, and proved ultimately distracting. These largely decorative stage devices were "almost always, only an adjunct to a production, not necessarily an integral part of it" (Payne 1). They were sometimes beautiful, sometimes ostentatious, but always delightful as one can notice in the enthusiastic reviews of the period. However, some directors and theatregoers found that 'delight' could be intrusive, undesired, and - when juxtaposed against a dramatic or tragic moment - even awkward.

As modes and reflections on art changed, so did the purpose behind the visuals onstage. Throughout the late nineteenth century Impressionism, Secessionism, and Symbolism opened a dialogue on how art was viewed and interpreted. Abstraction quickly became a mainstay of the art world. As critics and viewers learned to appreciate the paintings and sculptures they were seeing in galleries, the theatre - and especially dance - also began experimenting with the abstracted form onstage. Sergei Diaghilev's ballets *Scheherazade,* and *The Firebird,* with Léon Bakst's designs took Paris by storm. Later, artists such as Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall would work on canvases for galleries, while alternately painting drops and flats for the stage.

Theatre design's role is in a constant state of evolution. Throughout the nineteenth century, most design was focused on rendering incredibly naturalistic stages employing *trompe l'oil*. These works, though

beautiful, served only to frame the actors while performing as a decorative background. At the turn of the twentieth century great designers such as Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia found through their practice "that this art [of scenic design] is not a peripheral theatrical activity (either physically or conceptually) but one that is essential to dramatic production" (Payne 5). They found that through a careful design process they could not only visually, but emotionally and mentally captivate the audience. Directors and designers came to understand that through engaging "the audience consciously in the act of looking," they could say more using less (Collins 215). Theatre artists began to understand that by locating the setting of a production ambiguously, the audience could make their own relationships to the material, engaging with the play text or opera in a more meaningful fashion. The famous Polish artist, director, and designer Tadeusz Kantor began to explore these ideas, writing in the 1940's on the functions of scenic design:

> The scenery does not have to, and even should not, function only as the location, regardless of whether the form is constructivist, surrealist, expressionist, symbolic, naturalistic or poetical. It has much more alluring function to perform, such as the function of locating emotions, conflicts and the dynamics of the action. (Collins 212)

Kantor's determination that scenography can play an allusive role, underlining the emotional and psychological aspects of a production, was

groundbreaking at the time. Levine's work demonstrates that he is one of the designers who have come to embrace this thinking in his personal design philosophy.

The effect of the creation of the allusive stage is to alter the theatre contract: whereas in the past stage design had worked towards Realism or spectacle, the audience was now being asked to actively decipher the design, and work to understand and attribute meaning to it. This shift happens at different times for dance, theatre, and opera, but the result is the same. The audience's role shifted from spectator, to co-creator. The sets became implicative and abstracted, and their meaning became increasingly reliant on the education, will, and observational powers of audiences and critics. Patrice Pavis summed up this scenographic revolution in his latest book, *Contemporary Mise En Scène, Staging Theatre Today:*

> They [designers] no longer attempt to blind the audience with science, with a shameless parade of chic equipment, a very high-tech or high class decorativism, technological monstrosities worthy of Broadway or Hollywood. They rely much more than previously upon the imagination of the spectator. (78)

This co-created theatrical experience is a subject current theorists such as Cormac Power, Caroline Heim, and Erika Fischer-Lichte are addressing in their scholarship[14]. Although not the focus of this thesis, it is pertinent to briefly examine *décalage* and reception theory in order to fully

[14] See works cited.

understand the scope of Levine's design work. As reviewer Peter Davis suggests, Levine's work is heavily reliant on the audience's willingness to, "surrender to the poetic concept[s] of the work." It is reasonable to suggest that where there is surrender, there is also resistance. Conventional design provides specific information regarding location or setting of the production's era, and oftentimes suggests a mood or tone through its use of realistic furniture, walls, and props. Levine instead focuses on creating an atmosphere where the core of the production, not its historical setting, is explored onstage. His design avoids the realistic, instead encouraging the audience to interpret the stage, placing the emphasis on the actors and their interactions on that stage. His work focuses on what the show is about, and what is happening rather than where the show is set and when it is happening. By not rigidly adhering to the conventional, and by inviting interpretation, he encourages the audience to seek deeper, contemporary connections with the narrative. However, without the willing participation of the audience, the setting and its meaning can become obscure. Levine's designs can sometimes traverse a perilous line between a perfectly balanced and economical set, and one that possibly fails to engage this vital two-way communication.

One might ask why it is important that the setting and scenic design attempts to engage in this communicative role. It is problematic, because as shown by the negative reactions on the opening night of *Eugene Onegin,* the designer will be held responsible if that communication is not

perceived as occurring. The goal of design is always to frame and support the production. That support, however, does not necessitate a simplification of information. It means framing the information in a way that contemporary audiences can engage with. In North America, many non-theatre professionals have expressed difficulty engaging with classic productions. In his book *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, Pavis explores this topic in a lengthy chapter entitled "The Misery of Interpreting the Classics" (204). Scenographic design attempts to solve the disconnect experienced by audiences, allowing them to freely engage with the work being presented. It accomplishes this when the stage is visually stimulating, but not distracting. Josef Svoboda, who is often referred to as the father of scenography, wrestled with this very issue. He explains:

> For a designer, opera provides great opportunities and severe challenges. The designer has to arouse the spectator's fantasy without ever coercing it. He mustn't compel him to a conclusion, but merely act as a catalyst to a gradual revelation by means of precise suggestions. (Collins 393)

Svoboda recognized and began to address the changing roles of the audience, and scenic design. He understood that engaging the interest and imagination of the spectator did not equal the creation and manipulation of stage spectacle. When he states that the designer "mustn't compel him [the spectator] to a conclusion" he is saying that good design does not present a finite answer to questions regarding a

production. He is suggesting that a successful design facilitates an individual interpretation, creating a stage space where it is the spectator - rather than the director, designer, composer, or writer - generating meaning.

Svoboda's theories provide a cornerstone for understanding Levine's stage design. There is a dichotomy between the visual elements a designer provides, and the perceptual elements he or she hopes to convey. There exists the actual stage consisting of flats, or as in *Eugene Onegin's* case leaves and furnishings; and the psychologically co-created stage, individually generated in the mind of each spectator. This co-created stage exists in the realm of the audience's imaginations. In discussing the role of the audience, Ubersfeld suggests that "the direct or indirect intervention of spectators" is required to complete the performance's construction (4). The spectators bring to the theatrical experience their own individual experiences: their previous exposure to theatre and drama, their likes and dislikes, their social, political, and artistic views, and finally their own psychological make-up. Personal and cultural backgrounds combine to provide the spectators with the tools necessary to interpret and articulate what they perceive on the stage, and to further probe its meaning. While scenic design "styles associate[d] with modern drama range[ ] from detailed realism to total abstraction," it is nonrepresentational settings which allow the audience the most freedom to project their own aesthetic and cultural values, and facilitate the

construction of a mentally co-created stage (Collins 147). This second stage operates liminally, supporting the narrative through evocative or suggestive means. Rather than reproducing a detailed period grand ballroom, in *Eugene Onegin* Levine chose to space evenly matching period chairs around the four sides of the stage. Placing the chairs at the outer edge of the stage serves to both outline and highlight the negative space. In art (and architecture) negative space is literally the shape of absences, formed by surrounding objects, lines, and structures. The negative space in this instance is the box created on the stage. Rather than articulating the walls with traditional flats, the space is delineated, or evoked, using the chairs. In this manner, the walls theoretically extend beyond a reasonable or realistic height. In turn, since it is not a realistic room it becomes a symbolic room with information to be decoded. This design choice draws attention to the vastness of the stage, and can be interpreted as a reflection on the emptiness of Onegin's life and the coldness of social gathering and interactions, or it could be indicative of the scope of the palaces the nobility parade in. The space asks the viewer what they think, and to apply their interpretation to the opera unfolding before them. Onegin's feelings of isolation in a cold and unfeeling world are visually manifested and magnified for the spectator. Designer and theoretician Liam Doona explains this phenomenon accurately when he says that scenography is an "expression of a psychological construct which, whilst ... [suggesting] extant architectural

forms, renders those forms mutable and ambiguous" (Collins 182). In defying the conventions of swinging chandeliers and naturalistically rendered scenery, Levine instead allows a stage atmosphere, riddled with subtext, to emerge. This has the dual effect of involving and focusing the spectator on the action. The audience is not allowed to be distracted by artifice, as "the focus [is] squarely - nay piercingly - on the characters and how the music illuminates them" (Davis).

'Innovative,' 'risky,' 'avant-garde,' are all terms used to both praise or decry a production's scenic choices. The oftentimes tacit push for opera to improvise and modernize its productions is often thwarted by the perception that opera is a traditional, and thus an unalterable art form. Maurice Tourigny, columnist for Montreal's *Le Devoir*[15]*,* sees the canonical consecration of opera as a historical genre as a limitation, and laments that "Here, tradition reigns supreme and woe to those who dare rejuvenate 19th century operatic cannons." The reception of *Eugene Onegin* has been deeply impacted by this bias, and its admittedly austere production stirred an animated dispute between supporters and detractors. Critic Peter Davis recounts overhearing heated arguments during the intermission of the premiere performance in 1997, describing them as possessing "an inevitable and refreshing flurry of controversy..." The word choice here is quite interesting because it describes the controversy as inevitable due to the fact that in the operatic world bold choices that deconstruct or innovate the genre are often met with negative reactions.

---

[15] Leading French language newspaper in Quebec.

By 1997, opera and theatre goers alike had been exposed to degrees of Modernism ranging from moderate to extreme abstraction on the stage. This production, though admittedly minimal, contained period furnishings and costumes. It strives to eliminate the extraneous and the redundant, while maintaining the sense of viewing something from the past. Levine's design is in fact a careful balance between period representation and abstraction.

Directors, designers, and critics have increasingly demanded less decoration and more substance from the stage setting, however some spectators have come to resent these spaces as boring, devoid of interest, and meaning.[16] This prejudice against both essentialized and abstracted stages is not a new phenomenon. Kantor wrote a paper defending scenography in 1961 discussing "the [already] old and overused accusation[s] concerning its [abstracted scenic design's] incomprehensibility, exclusiveness and indifference..." (Collins 211). Perhaps the reason for Davis' use of the word 'inevitable' is noteworthy because these changes, prevalent in theatre design since the 1960's, have only recently become visible in opera. For the operagoer, there is a horizon of expectation, a presumption that the opera's setting will be lavishly executed.

Herein lays the key to that second of Davis' catchwords, 'controversy'. When Carsen and Levine took their bows at the premiere of

[16] One reviewer commenting on the audiences negative reaction suggests that "they likely resented that Mr. Levine neglected to design a set at all." Mark Adamo, *The Star-Ledger,* March 17, 1997

Eugene Onegin, "A salvo of bravos and boos confronted [them]" (Tourigny). The audience's reaction to this production seemed evenly divided between those who approved, and those who loathed the design. Many critics, including Anne Midgette (*New York Times*), Martin Bernheimer (Pulitzer Prize for Criticism), and Katherine Ashenburg *(The New York Times,* and *Toronto Life*), applaud the change in design, and in particular Levine's role in it. Levine has been called "one of the foremost international movers in a drive to modernize opera" (Ashenburg). Others like Justin Davidson (*Newsday*) or Bernard Holland (*The New York Times*) lambaste these attempts, attributing them to laziness and possibly budgetary limitations. The element most of these criticisms fail to comprehend is that Levine is not modernizing or updating opera. He is revealing opera.

The sign system Levine creates atmospherically and literally on his stage demands and receives an intense response from the spectators. Presence and absence become equally tangible and equally significant aspects of the stage. It is very easy to dismiss the minimalist stage as simply being empty, and thus devoid of meaning. Justin Davidson claimed in his *Newsday* review that "it's hard to know what Michael Levine's credit as set designer means, since there isn't a set in sight." The counterargument, is that not only is the stage not bare, but that its streamlined choices create an evocative space ripe with meaning, adding to the intertextual commentary created through the spectator-stage

experience. The ‘absence’ is not a ‘lack’. It is a conscious choice, with deliberate emotional results. One glance at the vitriol in the negative reviews should speak to the intense emotional response ‘absence’ can evince. There is a “strategy of absence, of evasion, of metamorphosis” that Levine’s scenic design for *Eugene Onegin* consciously engages with (Baudrillard 58).

Chapter 3.2 Scenographic Analysis

The relationship between the visuals and the musical score of opera are at once obvious and opaque. It is readily acknowledged that the set plays a vital role in communicating the story, and yet the depth of that communication often remains unplumbed. Although a casual glance at the set of *Eugene Onegin* seems spare, its elements offer themselves to multiple complex interpretations.

Perhaps the key to understanding the theory behind the Carsen/Levine staging lies in the difference between representation and re-presentation. When a ‘thing’ (a prop, a room, or setting) is copied, and rendered realistically or even naturalistically onstage, that ‘thing’ is being ‘re-presented’. That is to say the item stands only for itself, or to employ Sigmund Freud’s famous aphorism in this discussion, a cigar is sometimes just a cigar. Its iconic identity is finite, and no further critical thinking is required to disclose its meaning. Whereas when a thing is

'represented' on stage, it is being framed metaphorically, metonymically, non-realistically, or even symbolically. 'Representation' occurs iconically, and indexically. A production can create the opportunity for the interpretation of the 'things' appearing on the stage when it is freed from period re-production or re-presentation.

What then does it mean to produce a set in a representational, versus a re-presentational manner? Re-presentation in *Eugene Onegin* would include a naturalistic treatment of its required scenic elements. Since the production is set in the 1830's, the chairs, the chandeliers, the art on recreated walls, and costumes will all be theatre quality simulacra of rooms and gardens found in Russia of the 1830's. In this manner of production, era is firmly established, but interpretation of the setting is reducible to its iconic identity. If at its core, *Eugene Onegin* was an opera about the 1830's, this would be acceptable. However, it is an opera about pride, loss, love, and the consequences for behaviours exacted by societal standards. It is difficult to reconcile the ability to evoke these intangible, subtle aspects of the show while confined to an inflexible, realist stage environment. Daniel Jeanneteau, a contemporary scenographer, has very strong feelings regarding how much material information a set should provide. In this interview with Pavis, Jeanneteau seems to reiterate Svoboda's thoughts on scenography:

> In order to welcome in the word, space should avoid meaning; it should introduce a certain confirmation of the meaning but not the

> meaning itself. It is only afterwards, under the influence of the meaning given by the word, that space can offer to transform itself and to absorb meanings (qtd. in *Contemporary* Pavis 74-5)

Like Svoboda, he is suggesting that in providing a too-defined stage picture, one hinders the revelation of meaning. Levine's design for *Eugene Onegin,* but especially Tatyana's bedroom scene[17], presents an opportunity to concretize these ideas.

The bedroom scene in Act I Scene ii, during which Tatyana writes her ill-fated letter to Onegin, is often considered to be the highlight of the opera. The scene opens with Tatyana being readied for bed by her nurse. However, Tatyana is far too excited to sleep, because she has come to realize that she has fallen in love with Onegin. She sings "Life's sweetness is known to me! / I drink the magic potion of desire" (Tchaikovsky). When the set change from scene one to two is revealed, the leaves previously covering the entire stage have been partially cleared away. Forming a tight center stage square, the small area is further defined with the placement of a few period bedroom furnishings. The upstage cyclorama is lit in a deep blue, crowned with a projected crescent moon. The juxtaposition of the abstracted setting created by the leaves and the realistic decor seems to be problematic at first glance. The bed, desk, rug and nightstand are placed in the middle of the stage with no walls or windows to delineate or establish the space. If one were to examine a production photo with no supporting information, it might look

[17] Act I, Scene ii

as though Tatyana lived in the middle of a forest clearing. However, as Jeanneteau advises in the quote above, "in order to welcome in the word, space should avoid meaning." The point of this scene is not that it is the moment where Tatyana writes a letter. It is the moment were her emotions run high, where she ". . . summon[s], in dazzling hope / bliss as yet unknown" (Tchaikovsky). To "welcome in the word" is to allow the essence of the scene to unfold, and not to overwhelm it with an ornate scenic presence. Levine describes the intent behind the design of this sequence:

> One of the things we wanted to achieve was making Tatyana's room very small onstage, so that she is confined by the small space which is her room. And then when she's sort of overwhelmed by the emotion of the scene, she can escape from her room. (Cuerrier/Levine)

Although there is not a physical scene change, none of the set elements move, a metamorphosis is nevertheless present. When Tatyana breaches the confines of the delineated bedroom space, into the surrounding leaves, it is as though she has raced into a different world. Playing with the leaves, and joyfully running under the enormous cyclorama sky, Tatyana herself effects a scene change. The incongruity of the bedroom and forest merge to form a visually and emotionally striking moment. Through her aria, or as Jeanneteau suggests "under the influence of the meaning given by the word," the setting is able to evolve, its meaning

transformed. It is able to provide the bedroom required by the libretto, but also an evocative ambiguous space where the emotion of the piece is allowed to manifest.

Like modern, abstract, or expressionist art, the abstracted or minimalist stage makes demands of the audience. The spectators are asked to evaluate, analyze, and deeply consider what they are seeing. Opera typically eases the audience into the experience playing an overture, with the main drapes remaining closed, encouraging a period of reflection on the music and its moods. Carsen and Levine changed this, entreating the audience to the task of decryption with the first stirrings of the music.

This new introductory scene, performed while the overture plays, shows Onegin alone sitting on a chair, (re)opening a letter. The addition of this scene brings attention to one of the most important features of this production, its refocus on the character of Onegin, and his journey. *Eugene Onegin* has two main characters, it "has been called the "story of a twice-rejected love" - [that of] Tatyana's love of Onegin, and Onegin's love for Tatyana" (Vickery 100). Despite the importance of the two-fold nature in the opera, most often the emphasis is placed on Tatyana. Onegin acts in a consistently unscrupulous manner, and although young, he has already become a "cold dandy...[and] bored society lion;" he is as despicable as Tatyana is pitiable (Gasparov 69). However, in providing this change of focus, the audience is invited to reflect upon the story from

Onegin's point of view, and even to perhaps experience sympathy for his failings. The novelty of adding an additional opening was so striking that it has since become a staple of many productions in opera houses around the world. The recent production from the Edmonton Opera (2013) added filmed scenes, alluding to Onegin's inner turmoil. The 2012 De Nederlandse Opera choreographed a scene where the entire cast and chorus entered as if it is the second ball in Act III. When the overture begins to play Tatyana's motif, everyone freezes, Onegin is isolated in a blue spotlight, and the audience bears witness to his mental collapse and emotional breakdown.

In addition to the refocus on Onegin, the Carsen/Levine staging indicates a shift to the narrative structure of this production. According to Levine, they felt that the entire opera was a "recounting of memory" (Cuerrier/Levine). Carsen and Levine felt this is Onegin's story, and that everything seen on the stage is being shown to the audience through the lens of Onegin's remembering. It achieves an ambition for theatre identified by Patrice Pavis in 1991:

> If the *mise en scène* can, in a new concretization of the text, suggest new zones of indeterminacy, organize possible trajectories of meaning between them, the classical dramatic text [or opera] may recapture the glow tarnished by the passage of time and by banal interpretations. (*Crossroads* 55)

In taking the opera and refocusing it through the sometimes hazy memories of Onegin, Carsen and Levine are able to reveal new aspects of Onegin's character to the audience. When Pavis writes of 'banal interpretations' one could assert that he is alluding to boring interpretations, where an audience feels disengaged from the material. Presenting *Eugene Onegin* in "a kind of light box that could change the mood and have a different feeling for every scene . . . [reveals] the most essential aspect[s] of the story" (Cuerrier/Levine). Those fundamental facets of Onegin's tale, his feelings and regrets, are universal, and as such revitalize the connection to the audience.

The introductory scene begins simply with the lights illuminating Onegin as a lone figure who is sitting pensively on a chair. After a few bars, the gentleman looks up, and removes a letter from his jacket pocket. Withdrawing the letter from its envelope he reveals that this letter is well worn, and must have been read and reread over time. A few leaves fall from the sheets, and as the woodwind solos begin to sound, he rises and the lights surge revealing the most visually striking moment of the production: the entire vast Metropolitan stage is covered in leaves with more raining down from the grid. They fill the expanse, suffusing floor and vertical space with movement and colour. The wintry spotlight quickly morphs, and the stage is illuminated with an autumnal glow. The seasons literally go in reverse, whisking Onegin and the spectator back through time and memory.

These leaves compose the primary set element for the entire first act, but their role evolves throughout that period. Their first purpose is to simply represent actual fall leaves. They act as a set or prop as needed throughout Act I. However, they also act symbolically, setting the mood while acting as a foreshadowing device. Marvin Carlson states in *Theories of the Theatre* that "Symbols are "free figures" operating on several levels, as icon and index, as message and code" (497). Autumn is a time of harvesting and reflection, providing an elegant dichotomy because although the season is beautiful, it is a time of endings and withering. Fall is a time of cooling, nature is beginning to die or slumber in anticipation of winter. If the spectator is unaware of the plot of the opera they are attending, this device denotes endings rather than beginnings, and signals fragility rather than strength.

The iconic use of the leaves continues through scene one. Peasants dance through them, and the two pairs of lovers romantically walk through them. Occasionally, the leaves misbehave. Ramón Vargas, performing the role of Lensky, sings with one of them trapped in his hair for most of the scene. Yet, the function of the leaves extends beyond their ludic and iconic qualities. Pavis argues that "the theatrical space ought to be an emanation from the mind and body of the actor . . . [the] setting will therefore have no meaning except in relationship to the actor" (*Contemporary* 65). While there is a practical purpose to the omnipresence of the leaves, their meaning changes and evolves within

the performance to serve the demands of the actors and action. When they frame Tatyana's bedroom, they become a metaphysical barrier which she breaches through the power of her emotions. Following this, the leaves assume their former role, once again becoming prop-leaves. The peasant girls return to the stage singing an interlude, while sweeping the leaves away to clear a large central circle, establishing the playing area for the next scene. The main plot points of scene three are primarily Onegin's reaction to the letter, and his rejection of Tatyana. Tatyana enters first in a frenzied state. Writing and sending the letter was an impulsive and incautious act. She is desperately worried, singing

> . . . Oh why
> Did I obey my aching heart alone,
> And, lacking all self-control,
> Write him that letter!
> . . . .
> Oh my God! How miserable I am,
> How contemptible! (Tchaikovsky)

While singing this part, she does not enter the cleared center stage area. Her panic and hysteria are a continuation of the inappropriate and emotional behaviour exhibited in the bedroom scene, and as such she remains in the wild and leafy zone. It is only when Onegin arrives, chastising and ultimately rebuking her, that she returns to the civilized leafless area of the stage. Through scenes two and three the leaves take

on this symbolic role. They represent a place of freedom, high emotions, and possibility. The spaces cleared of them are meant for polite society, rules, and etiquette. Scene three witnesses the end of Tatyana's hopes, and the naiveté of youth, and so it should come as no surprise that the leaves are never seen again.

While Pavis asserts that there is a subordination of the stage design's meaning in the presence of live performers, he also binds the two together as inseparable. Without the singing, the stage has no purpose. However, the stage serves to explicate psychological aspects of the characters; although the leaves are more or less inert, they act to reflect the emotional timber of the singers taking primary focus onstage.

Madame Larina and Filippyevna sing the first duet of the opera. The leaves are utterly still as they sing reminiscing about Madame Larina's more impetuous youth, but now she has become "resigned and settled down / And God be thanked!" (Tchaikovsky). They are two small figures in a downstage right location, but the entire stage is well lit. The space radiates stillness, it holds a tangible, and serene presence generated through the near absence of set pieces or other actors. The leaves embody and reflect the calm and resignation of Madame Larina and Filipyevna. This all changes the moment the daughters and peasants enter the stage. As the chorus, Olga, and Tatyana sing and dance in celebration, they play with and scatter the leaves. They become ludic, unpredictable, capricious elements. Whereas the atmosphere of the duet

is quiet, the leaves respond to the jubilation expressed by the performers. The leaves anthropomorphize into a joyful character, again reflecting the jubilant emotional states of the characters.

The leaves are the most important, but not the sole scenic element of the first act. After the preliminary sequence with Onegin, the stage is set for Madame Larina and Filipyevna's opening duet. The lights come up to reveal the stylized silhouettes of three tall tree boles stage left, with a rattan chair; while a rustic table with chairs, and a single tree trunk are revealed on stage right. The trees and leaves operate almost metonymically, they are not only representative of a much bigger forest, they also stand in for a larger, denser world. The stage is an abstracted space where the furniture and leaves are realistically represented, while tree trunks are rendered with a whimsical minimalism. This dichotomy of design style could be seen to present a problem until one considers the most important thrust of this production's direction. The stage is a manifestation of Onegin's memories. The audience is not being given a re-presentation of nineteenth century Russia; they are being shown what is important to Onegin. Memory is faulty, and highly selective. A study on memory done in 1992 found that, especially when dealing with emotional memories, "the "center" of the event might be well remembered, but little else will be. If, therefore, many details are subsequently recalled, these are like to be after-the-fact reconstructions, and thus, open to error" (Burke 277). Echoing the format of actual memory, the set is realized as a

fragmentary and amorphous plain. Onegin might remember for example that there were trees on the Larin estate, but not what variety. For scenographic design purposes, it only becomes important for trees to be represented, not that they be realistically articulated.

The idea that the stage is operating as a portal detailing Onegin's memories is especially developed in a prelude to Act II, Scene i: Tatyana's name day ball, hosted in the Larin's home. As with Act I, the audience is shown an ancillary scene revealing Onegin's emotional and mental states. The curtain rises on the second act, revealing a stage now cleared of leaves. A large rectangular area is delineated using mismatched chairs and small tables center-stage. The tables are littered with the evidence of a party: glassware, decanters, and gas lamps. There is a light haze covering the stage, which is dimly and coolly lit, as a tight blue spotlight reveals the solitary figure of Onegin. He wanders through the area, dazedly at times, seizing upon a glove or a fan at others, until he finally stands, utterly alone through a slow blackout. The dreamy atmosphere of the sequence makes clear that the stage is a manifestation of Onegin's memory of the space. He seizes upon items he remembers, the items that had some significance to him. As with the trees, it is not necessary to accurately or exactly render walls, or doorways, they are not important to Onegin in this scene.

As scene two progresses, the design proves to be exceedingly clever. Although providing a wealth of semiotic information, it is visually

uncomplicated. The simplicity of the set allows for easy transitions when the actors require them, and presents an unimpeded view for the audience throughout the scene. When the lights are restored after the blackout, a bustling party is revealed. The chorus and supernumeraries are all dancing, frolicking within the boundary formed by the chairs. It quickly establishes the convention that the boundary implied by the chairs is in fact the interior of the Larin's house. Therefore, any activity occurring outside of the perimeter is occurring in the exterior or the periphery of the home. Walls and doors are typically required for the action of this scene, often creating complications for actor's movement and audience's sight lines. In implying walls, rather than rendering them, both of these issues are solved. To offer a brief comparison, the Edmonton Opera's 2013 production had large, lavish, French doors, clearly delineating the outdoors (upstage) and the indoors (center and downstage). However, spectators could not clearly see the action, including that of primary characters, going on in those upstage areas, which was frustrating. The scene change into the ball was clunky, time consuming, and evinced poor sight lines. The chorus and principles were forced to take turns navigating the stage. Levine's solution instead provided elegant and effective opportunities for the *mise en scène*, especially for the members of the chorus who can move swiftly and efficiently. As a mass they are able to surrender the center stage to the private and crucial moments between the principals, and reappear almost instantly. Unlike the Edmonton Opera

version, the flow of the piece is never stalled to allow for these movements. An additional bonus to the open stage is that the audience is granted an almost cinematic clarity in that they are able to see multiple scenes at once without a set change. Private moments are visible, there is nowhere on the stage for Tatyana hide her reactions, or Onegin to disappear behind. The audience can witness this while simultaneously enjoying the chorus' dancing and later reactions to the happenings onstage.

The effectiveness of using a configuration of chairs to imply an entire house provides an elegant solution to the scene's technical requirements, but the design invites further interpretation. I have suggested that the stage is like a realization of Onegin's memories, rather like a dreamscape of Onegin's regrets. As within dreams, the props and sets on a stage can have, or represent differing meanings. In *Theories of the Theatre,* Marvin Carlson explores the idea of the real and the abstract changing places:

> One aspect of theatrical transformation is the shifting of signs from one style to another. The real and the abstract may also change place: a real object, such as a ring, may stand for an abstraction, like love or wealth; an abstract object, such as a pile of cubic forms, may stand for a real object, such as a mountain, or for another abstraction, such as the ladder to success. Each new performance explores these transformational possibilities anew. . . (408)

In applying this theory to this production of *Eugene Onegin,* a 'real object' like the naturalistic chairs can also be read in a metonymic way, representing society, or even acting as silent witnesses in Onegin's memory. As they are all pairs of different types of chairs, they might even be representative of the diversity found in the country gentry who will be in attendance at the ball.

The ball of Act II Scene i, leads to one of the most famous moments in the opera: the climactic duel of scene two in which Onegin kills Lensky. It has been the inspiration for many paintings[18] and works of art[19]. In paintings, and most traditional productions of the opera, the forest is rendered realistically in some manner. In the Edmonton Opera production (2013) they used a multilayer projection, filling the stage with ghostly trees. The Australian Opera (1997) used rows of actual birch trees creating a very literal interpretation of the scene. Levine chose to have no trees. This is the only scene truly devoid of any prop or scenic element; however, to say that the stage is empty would be inaccurate.

Lensky and Onegin fully occupy the stage. The bareness of the stage serves to focus the attention entirely, unflinchingly, on their moment. The stage is bleak, but this reflects perfectly the futile nature of this duel. Neither man wishes to follow through, and yet, neither man is willing forgo their pride in order to back down. The audience is granted no visual

---

[18] *The Duel Between Onegin and Lenksy.* Ilya Repin, 1901. and *Eugene Onegin and Vladamir Lensky's Duel.* Ilya Repin, 1899

[19] See Appendix II

reprieve from the tragedy; there is nothing to distract or detract from the men and the music.

The talents of Jean Kalman, the lighting designer, are particularly showcased in this moment. After Lensky and Onegin finish their duet, the front lights slowly go down, while the cyclorama lights dramatically increase their intensity. The backlighting creates a powerful effect; the stage itself seems to flatten, almost like a movie screen. But most importantly, with no front, side, or top lighting, the body and costume details are not visible, and the singers' facial features are obliterated. As Onegin and Lensky walk to their dueling positions, they become solely well-defined silhouettes. Their bodies now appear as living shadows, they duel, and of course it is Lensky's form which crumbles upstage after the shots are fired. His corpse is outlined by the rising of the sun which takes up the entire upstage cycloramic wall. The emptiness of the stage instantly becomes a metaphor for the emptiness of Onegin's existence: he has killed his only friend, and irrevocably damaged all of his other relationships. Locating Lensky's death in such an isolated space neither civilizes nor romanticizes death, rather it 'others' it. In his book, *Sacred Theatre,* Franc Chamberlain discusses representing death on the stage and argues that ". . . the sacred has nothing to do with redemption and understanding; it is a space where the subject is altered and 'othered'. In the presence of the sacred [death onstage], the subject leaves behind his profane different identity. . ." (38). There is no blood, there is no clutching

of the chest, there are no operatic or over-the-top reactions at all. The scene eliminates all of the theatrical props of death, allowing no other focus besides Lensky's corpse. As Chamberlain suggests, Lensky transforms from a living, breathing character to an upstage carcass (38). What can be quite a sensational moment in the opera is instead subdued and somber.

In a typical production of *Eugene Onegin,* there is a blackout following Onegin's final lines after the duel. It is the end of Act II, and there is a musical interlude to cover the transition into Act III. Levine and Carsen, however, took this moment as an opportunity to add their third, and final, auxiliary scene. As the entr'acte music begins, the lights illuminate the entire stage, revealing only Onegin and Lensky's body onstage. Onegin walks to a position just beyond center stage and waits. Uniformed valets appear, and begin to undress him, changing Onegin in full sight of the audience from his dueling costume to formal evening dress attire. Additional servants eventually arrive to lift Lensky's mortal remains and bear him off, while still more valets bring on extremely elegant matching chairs, placing them at even intervals around the stage perimeter. This supplementary scene contributes three components adding to the overall narrative, which are unique to this production: Lensky's corpse, Onegin's costume change, and the set change.

Having Lensky die up stage center presents certain challenges. The effect of keeping Lensky's body in view of the audience for most of

this change is that his corpse becomes part of the scenography. Once the character is dead, the body onstage becomes an inert prop. In a typical production, after the duel there is a blackout, the curtains go down, and the audience waits while the singer gets up and walks offstage. With none of these conventions, the body remains supine, until two of the valets lift him, carrying the remains off like a rug. The reverence with which the death moment was treated is then juxtaposed with the irreverence of the body's disposal. This further exposes the audience to the abjectified spectacle of death. In a psychoanalytic interpretation of the stage, ". . . the corpse, [becomes] a material entity inhabiting the symbolic order yet unamenable to categorization, that effectively *collapses* the border between the symbolic and the organic" (Zimmerman 104). Lensky's death may be part of the script, but this production's handling of it elucidates the contrast between the "organic" and "symbolic." The spectator is at once presented with the very alive singer Ramón Vargas, who is simultaneously the carcass of Lensky. Although the audience is not concerned for the singer's well-being, they are confronted with both the symbolic death, and literal remains of the character. The atmosphere of the shooting is strikingly bleak, but instead of releasing the anxiety of the audience with a tidy black out, the spectator is forced to watch, and wait, until the corpse is ultimately hauled away. The profanity of death is not dismissed with a black-out. Carsen and Levine's decision to stage this

interlude, and have the audience witness the disposal of the body, adds a layer of verisimilitude to the death scene of *Eugene Onegin*.

While waiting for the issue of the body to be dealt with, Onegin undergoes a costume change, in full view of the audience. The choice to engage the costume and set change into Act III in full view of the audience elevates it from a technical to a ritualistic act. If one is familiar with the story of *Eugene Onegin,* one is aware that several years are supposed to have passed between the duel and the Muscovite ball. However, the assumption must naturally be that the audience will be unfamiliar with the source text. This transition creates the impression that more time is passing for the characters onstage than the spectators witnessing the scenic and costume changes. The pace of the valets is unhurried, their movements are stately professional, they evince no emotional responses at all as they are entirely dedicated to their tasks. Although the end results of these actions are the required scenic and apparel changes from Act II into Act III, the meaning behind them is more calculated. Jan Mukarovsky suggests that what the audience is shown is not necessarily a literal interpretation for the audience to accept absolutely. He writes, "A reality perceivable by sense perception . . . has a relationship with another reality which the first reality is meant to evoke" (84). The audience is shown this change, but it is hoped that they perceive and engender additional connotations. It is a lengthy change, indicating a larger passage of time. However, it is the relationship of the clothing to the

character that should resonate most clearly. The dueling attire looks comfortable, unbinding, and casual. The evening wear is not only a formal and starched outfit, it becomes representative of society. Within this garb Onegin is restricted, not by silk, but by convention and the unbending etiquette of the upper classes. He is not simply being clothed, he is being confined. The final result, as is revealed when the chorus enters, is that Onegin is wearing the 'costume' of the elite.

The repetitious black regalia composing the attire of the wealthy ball attendees is echoed by the uniform chairs employed by the stage decor. Identical chairs, evenly spaced, outline all four sides of the stage. The austerity of this particular ball room paired with the solemn black gowns and attire does not lend itself to a festive 'party' atmosphere. The formation of the chairs echoes that of the earlier ball, but the configuration is larger, encompassing the entirety of the stage. Placing the chairs at the outermost edges of the stage heightens the awareness of the expansiveness of the stage. They act to draw the eye up, accentuating the vertical space, and highlighting the otherwise emptiness present. It is not, however, a light or unsubstantial 'emptiness'. The absence onstage becomes palpable, and disquieting. The weight of this 'absence', felt by the audience, intensifies while watching the scene unfold. Arnold Aronson wrote a book, *Looking Into the Abyss* (2005), expressly investigating the meaning, the creation, and audience's responses to emptiness on the stage. In the first chapter he writes that "… for most spectators, it is the

apprehension of space that may be the most profound and powerful experience of live theatre although, admittedly, it is one that is most often felt subconsciously" (1). Levine, ever aware of how the perception of space affects the spectator, uses the vastness of the Metropolitan Opera house to his fullest advantage. Levine wanted to impart the emotions Onegin experiences: the crushing yet cold nature of society, feeling lost amid the sweeping ballrooms of Moscow, and his anxiety. Restricting his colour palette, and especially eliminating nearly every scenic element allowed Levine to realize this goal. Levine's other means for expressing the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of *Eugene Onegin* are found through the medium of costume.

Chapter 3.3 Costume Analysis of Levine's *Eugene Onegin*

Costume design is perhaps one of the more accessible facets for the critical thinker and layman alike to draw upon in the discussion of performance analysis. Costuming is an aesthetic medium, its polysemous nature appealing to many interpretations. The spectators' attention in any production is primarily centered on the performer, so ensuring that their costumes are effective is part of any successful *mise en scène*. Costumes are instruments for expressing ideas, history, conflict, and character development. In *Adorned in Dreams*, costume historian Elizabeth Wilson explores the importance of fashion and describes

couture as “an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas circulating in society” (Collins 252). Levine’s designs exceed the base functions of costume - delineating rank, family associations, era, and the age of the character - using them instead to add to the narrative, and to form a commentary on the social, cultural, and historical world of *Eugene Onegin.*

The original set and costume designs presented to the Metropolitan Opera were realistic and traditional, and very evocative of a sense of ‘Russianness’. Levine describes them as being “an extravagant Russian affair with ballrooms and the prerequisite chandeliers” (qtd. in Rewa *Scenography* 195). The set endured dramatic revisions, but the costumes remained historically authentic. Corsets and hoop skirts will fill the stage, firmly establishing a mid-eighteenth century atmosphere. The most prevalent visual juxtaposition exhibited by the costumes in *Eugene Onegin* is that between the quotidian and the cosmopolitan. This exploration of Levine’s design will examine the use of stereotype, silhouette, and costume detail, through which costume designs communicate.

The opening scenes of *Eugene Onegin* are set in the Larin’s gardens, towards the end the harvest season. Madame Larina and her servant Filippyevna (who is also Tatyana’s nanny) open the opera with a bittersweet duet. Madame Larina is of the upper class, not overly wealthy but certainly part of the gentry. Filippyevna is a serf, but as her character enjoys an important role within the opera, she is afforded some adornment

in her costume in order to differentiate her from the chorus. The contrast in wealth and position is better shown when the two daughters, Olga and Tatyana, and the rest of the peasants enter for the *Chorus and Dance of the Peasants*. The delineation of class exhibited through the contrasting silhouettes creates a visually striking entrance. The peasant's profile by contrast is stocky, baggy, and soft. Long tunics and smocks are donned by the collective. There is no structure evident in the women's garments, and no foundational garments to force any shape. These are the people of the earth, of Russia's fields. If the period setting for *Eugene Onegin* had been not the nineteenth century, but a fable, or alternately a vaguely mediaeval period, one can imagine the chorus donning precisely the same attire. They wear the costume of the past, providing the spectator with a view of a Russian countryside mired in obsolescence.

Whether the spectator is keenly aware of Russian history or not, the radical contrast evidenced by the simple shapes or silhouettes of the costume instantly alerts the viewer to the great disparity in the education, wealth, and freedoms of the peasants as compared to the gentry.[20]

The argument could be made that this production's design is simply adhering to historical authenticity, but one must consider that identifying this anachronism was an intentional choice made by both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky. This is an intentional display visually demarcating how the peasant classes were othered by a privileged elite.

[20] "The late abolition of serfdom and the rural economy left Russia appearing backward throughout the nineteenth century, and the urban-rural divide created a large mysterious territory and a silent, illiterate population." (Henderson 130).

The peasants are being iconically represented, visually rendering information regarding the lives and struggles of Russian serfdom. Regarding historical, as opposed to theatrical costume, Michael Quinn succinctly states, “Costumes are conventional cultural objects with coded significance” (109). This statement is especially applicable when applied to the interpretation of folk costume, the attire Levine employs throughout Act I. The peasant’s costume proclaims their lack of sophistication and education. They are relegated to the habiliment of previous eras. Quinn further suggests that, “Clothing is always both a practical body covering and an aesthetic artifact, with the two functions existing in a dialectical antinomy ...” (108). Applying this concept to theatrical costume suggests that there is a functional aspect of the costumes, in that they simply identify the supernumeraries as peasants. However, those same costumes are rife with historical and social implications, and there is nothing simple about this signification. This visual containment and separation of the classes employs stereotyping, revealing a Russian peasant existing as both a romantic creation of the Muscovite and St. Petersburg elites, and also alluding to the life of an actual serf, who historically endured great hardships.

The silhouette of the costume of the Larin’s invites a similar evaluation. Madame Larina and Olga move around the Metropolitan stage in corsets and crinolines. Unlike the shapeless garb of the labourers, their shape is bell-like, solid and hinging on well defined tiny waists. As this

was the preferred style of France and of continental Europe, one can argue that Russia, as described by Levine, is presented as submissive and mimicking the appearance and language of the dominant culture. In the case of Russia the "elite viewed its colonial peripheries through the lens of orientalism but was in turn viewed by the West through a similar lens as the "easternmost" of Europeans" (Fournier 523). The upper classes of Imperialist Russia adopted French mannerisms, speech, and dress. Filippyevna sings "you stopped calling the maids by French names," indicating Madame Larina had participated in this idolizing of the Eurocentric, specifically French, ideals. In this Russian opera, that which is Slavic is uncouth, that which is sophisticated is either French or English. Adopting continental attire and speech demonstrates that the Russian elite is attempting to prove that they are a part of the European community. Their attempt to act, dress, and speak in a more continentally acceptable manner, only serves to highlight Russia's non-European status.

The other notable contrast evidenced in the costume of the opening numbers can be found in the patterning of cloth and costume details. The serfs are clad almost entirely in patternless variations of grey, grey-beige (or greige), and beige. If, as semiotician Sonja Andrew suggests, textile communication occurs through the "colors, textures or patterns which evoke a mood of feeling in the viewer," this bland choice homogenizes the chorus into a singular, nonthreatening, entity (34). As such a mass, they lack any individual identity.

The entrance of Lensky, and in particular Onegin, highlights the Eurocentrism present in both novel and opera. They enter in costumes which are diametrically opposed in every way to those already on the stage. They are fitted, square, and blunt edged. Whereas the male peasants wear loose shirts or smocks, with soft or folded edges, these gentlemen wear fitted shirts, vests with straight-edged, well defined waists, and tailored jackets. Lensky and Onegin wear similar styles of costume, but whereas Lensky appears chromatically aligned with the rural Russians, Onegin is wearing iconically British hunting attire. This may have been a nod to Pushkin's description of Onegin in the first canto of the novel:

> Dressed like a London *dandy*, he
> At last saw high society.
> In French, which he'd by now perfected,
> He could express himself and write. . .
> (Translator's Italicization, Pushkin 8)

Visually aligning the character as an Anglo-dandy is a bold decision. It signifies Onegin's desire to appear European. This costume choice corroborates Onegin's expressed disapproval of the bucolic setting he finds himself in; the narrator describes "The country [as being a] place where Eugene suffered. . ." because it is a "desert." (Pushkin 34 & 39). Onegin does not 'suffer' because he is far from Moscow, but because, he feels as if he is exiled from cosmopolitan Europe.

Of semiotic importance is the fact that Onegin's red jacket is the first burst of prismatic colour on the stage. In a sea of muted and neutral tones Onegin is isolated, elevated above all the other players. This will be the only use of prismatic colour for the duration of the opera. Through this choice he is at once identified as the protagonist. His companion, the poet Lensky, joins Onegin in this entrance. Although, not a study in opposites, their costumes clearly indicate these gentlemen are not very much alike. Wilson suggests in her introduction to *Adorned in Dreams* that, ". . . dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, links that body to the social world" (Collins 252). Cut and colour of garments offer readily deducible information in the theatre. Onegin's red coat and white pants offer a startling contrast to the peasants or the Larin's colour palettes. Lensky's jacket and trousers are tan, with a chestnut vest; he tonally matches the scene, and easily merges into the familial unit of the Larins. Lensky belongs to this world, Onegin is other.

This opera contains not one, but two distinct ballroom scenes. As a mirror of each other, they impart information through the contrasts they exhibit. The first ball occurs on January 25, Tatyana's name day. Until witnessing the second ball scene, these costumes appear delightfully frivolous and luxurious. The silhouette of this first ball is hard, crinolines are worn by every woman onstage, and they literally fill the stage space, while comically bouncing with every dance step. Due to the structure of the hoop skirts, they respond almost unpredictably. Like the leaves filling

the stage of the first act, the movement caused by the hoops radiates a certain playfulness. The silhouette of the second ball is softer, the lines of the gowns are heavier and more sumptuous. This scene parallels the first, but in so doing reveals the true archetype the first ball was attempting to replicate. Although both scenes are meant to be festive events, and the fashionable ideals are the same, the differences in their execution serve to accentuate the gulf between the city and country realities. The frocks of the Larins' ball are all slightly too short, suggesting a relaxation of rules of acceptable decorum. Their dresses are beribboned and over-embellished, lacking the dignity of the Moscow fete. The gowns of the second ball trail behind their wearers indicating their station and nobleness, by contrast the shortness of the skirts in the first ball are indicative of their bourgeois standing. The unsophisticated palette of the rural incorporates a riot of pastel hues which seem immature or childlike when compared to the somber grays, blacks, and whites of the second dance. This evaluation of the costumes may seem arbitrary or far-fetched, however the audience is invited to view the costumes as signs due to the theatrical frame in which they are located: ". . . [and as they are] understood to be signs; these signs, in turn, evoke in our mind various specific referents that we locate in an imagined space offstage" (Alter 242). There is intention even behind seemingly period design, and as such the spectator is meant to draw connections between that which has been seen onstage, and what it might mean outside the theatre.

Conclusion

Theatre and opera houses around the world charm audiences every year into attending their productions, many of which are not new works, but re-imaginings of classics. The question producers ask themselves is how to entice spectatorship, despite audiences' familiarity, or lack of familiarity, with the production. However, instead of asking "How are we going to do this production?" directors and designers have begun asking themselves "Why are we doing this production?" Many theatre artists have come to understand that a regurgitation of classic works, with traditional presentational staging, will not effectively answer these questions. Increasingly theatres and operas are, as with *Eugene Onegin*, focusing on the psychological aspects of production, and representing them in abstracted or evocative ways. This process of refocusing and revealing hitherto unexplored aspects of a work is an example of the process of adaptation. It is through this practice that productions attempt to challenge, while still suiting the needs and desires of contemporary audiences. It is the role of composers and playwrights to interpret and adapt existing texts for the stage, moving them from paper onto the three-dimensional medium of theatre. This undertaking is challenging, and is often met with hostility and negative criticisms. After the premiere of *Eugene Onegin* in 1879, Tchaikovsky received harsh criticisms, even from close friends. Boris Gasparov reported that "complaints about "sacrilege"

could be heard almost from the beginning . . . [and] a sense of the "violation" of Pushkin's poetry" (60). "Sacrilege" and "violation" are incredibly strong words, but Levine received similar criticisms for his *Eugene Onegin* in 1997. The set designs were so unexpected, and the staging so shocking, audiences were enraged, booing the third act as well as the bows at the curtain call. David Lasker reported after its premiere that most of this "anger seemed directed primarily at Levine." However, just as *Eugene Onegin* has become Tchaikovsky's most famous opera, so too has criticism turned to praise for Levine's designs. Scenographic design must not only create a plausible stage environment for a production, but "express the activity of the subconscious mind, to express thought before it becomes articulate" (Collins 183). Perhaps the reason why Levine's designs were met with derision in 1997, and praised in 2007 is simply due to the amount of time elapsed between productions. These years encouraged debate, wherein theorists and critics alike had the opportunity to reflect, instead of react, to the poetic narration the scenography provided.

The importance of the visual onstage cannot be understated. Although the nature of theatre work is collaborative, it is the designer who is vested with the responsibility of graphically communicating the narrative, and who is empowered to disclose the emotional and psychological subtext of the production visually. There is a pervasive idea in theatre that ". . . a stage setting should be invisible, meaning it should

call no attention to itself" (Larson 161). This is somewhat misguided; whereas the set should not distract from or overwhelm a production, its nature is to call attention to itself. The very function of a stage is to be a locus for visual selection and attention, even the word theatre is derived from the ancient Greek *theatron,* which translates to viewing space. The architecture of the stage acts to create a point of convergence, and the designs set in those spaces have a presence that cannot be denied or disregarded. They have an authoritative voice in the performance, and communicate to the audience through the most direct means available, sight. Many studies exist proving the dominance of the visual in the way humans interpret and learn, ". . . the sophisticated visual capacity of our brain system is beyond the conscious processing of our mind: research approximates that between 70 and 90% of the information received by the brain is through visual channels" (Hyerle 28). On the stage, one may not be aware of the amount of information that is being communicated, as David Hyerle states that process wherein we interpret what we perceive may exist "beyond the conscious" ability to discern (28). This suggests that visually gathered information may well rest in the subconscious, to be disseminated over time or upon reflection.

Although scientific studies declare the dominance of the eye as the primary filter for most of the information processed by the brain (Hyerle 29), this research fails to answer the question of what might encourage spectatorship, or entice the eye to linger at all. Levine excels at seducing

the gaze of an audience. His designs incorporate the void of theatre spaces, embracing the concept of absence, which in turn produces an atmosphere rife with potential. The paradox of Levine's design for *Eugene Onegin* is that although it is at times devoid of any traditional set elements, it remains ever resonant and allusive. To see his set is to witness an act of visual poetry, and like its literary counterpart, it is full of intentional pauses and voids which serve to seduce the audience's awareness. Jean Baudrillard suggests that "Just as absence is not that which is opposed to presence, but that which seduces presence" (51-52). Levine chooses not to confront the audience with all the answers, but instead allows the setting to lure the audience into the world of the stage.

Appendix I - Interview Transcription

This interview occurred on June 20, 2013 via Skype. Michael Levine was in London at the time, while I was in Edmonton. This is a faithful transcript, and I have neither altered nor cleaned-up the language used in this section. I wanted to preserve the candid nature of the conversation, so there is an element of repetition, and the occasional fragmentary sentence. I have included a number of ellipses representing pauses within the conversation; these pauses often lead to a change of direction of the thoughts being spoken. The interview took approximately forty-five minutes, for which I would once again like to extend my thanks to Mr. Levine.

MC - Melissa Cuerrier (Interviewer)

ML - Michael Levine (Interviewee)

MC: Can you tell me about your education and how you started out?

ML: Sure. I started, I studied... I went to a small art school in Toronto, for high school, by the name of Thornton Hall, T-H-O-R-N-T-O-N, Thornton, Thornton Hall. And, it gave me a kind of an unusual high school… in that it gave a classical education. When I say classical education I had a very intensive study of art history, and also we learned how to draw the skeleton, and bones, and muscles, all of those things,

and then we studied classical paintings. So that was a very good grounding for me. And then I went to Ontario College of Art, and studied my general foundation studies there. And then I came over to the UK and studied set design at the Central School of Art and Design. And when I graduated from there I went to a theatre in Glasgow, by the name of the Citizen's Theatre, a very good school, a very good, very interesting theatre. And I apprenticed under two designers there, and also designed three productions of my own. And so, that's how I started, and then I started to sort of freelance. I was working both in the UK and in Toronto, and I started going back and forth. And then I started working the Shaw Festival, and doing things here in London, so you know, I kinda started that way.

MC: It seems that you were able to launch into larger theaters quite rapidly in your career, is that accurate?

ML: Yeah. So I started working at the Citizen's Theatre in Glasgow, and I also started doing work in Toronto, sort of working back and forth between the two, and yeah, I got the very lucky opportunity… one of the directors, the artistic directors of the Citizen's Theatre in Glasgow, was teaching at our college and so he saw my work and invited me up to their theatre.

They were doing a very interesting season, where they were putting on a new production every two weeks. So he could have, he sort of really took a chance, and hired me to design three productions, and in a way that was a very lucky break for me. Because I immediately had three productions in my portfolio, and then I came back to Canada and...So yes, then I got the job at the Shaw Festival designing *Skin of Our Teeth* for the main stage, so it was sort of a very good break to get. I was, at the time 1983, and I was... 23. So it was very nice to do that, and it was also quite a successful production, and highly designed so that was very good for me. So yes, I managed to make that jump quite quickly.

MC: That's really quite amazing.

ML: Yeah, yeah. Thank you.

MC: So, my Thesis is specifically on *Eugene Onegin,* at the Met. Could you talk to me a bit more about the design process? Natalie Rewa's book mentioned that you had initially designed something quite elaborate, and then those designs had to change?

ML: Robert [Carsen] and I had worked on the design, and I had come up with a, in fact, a sort of complicated much more complicated ornate set. Which was a series of rooms stretching back from the proscenium to the

far back stage at the Met, the far upstage. Based on the grand ballrooms of Saint Petersburg, quite ornate in the downstage room becoming less and less ornate as you moved upstage, becoming much more simple. And there were rooms that moved within other rooms, and gauzes and all sorts of different things. And I handed in a preliminary design to the Met, and they accepted that for the new design. But then when I handed in the final design at the Met they wanted to make further cuts, and to reduce the size and take things away. And I had worked very carefully on the proportion of the design, based on the preliminary design that was accepted by the Met. And when they wanted to sort of randomly take a room away upstage, all of the sculpted details they wanted to, they wanted to make, they wanted to paint rather than sculpt and, I felt like the edges of my design were being worn away. So, Robert and I walked away from the design. And decided to do something else, so we, the evening after we after our final presentation of the final model, we went to a bar and sat down at a bar and tried to figure out another way to do it. And we'd recently, Robert and I, had done a production of *La Bohème,* which we worked on together in Antwerp, and in fact my design for that sort of departed from the sort of direction of design I had been working in. Much more of a sort of abstract design. More based on the emotion of the characters than on any sort of notion of naturalism. So I, so we threw it all out and decided to go for something much simpler. Much more about the psychology of the piece, the feeling of Tatyana and what it was like to be

Eugene Onegin, and the fact that it was all really a recounting of memory. And the fact that it was all really a recounting of memory… so that's when we came up with this idea of a kind of light-box, if you will, that could kind of change mood and have a different feeling for every scene ... and that we would then just fill with leaves and then we made spaces within the leaves.

We really sort of just pared it down we tried to find out what was the most essential aspect about the story and in that sense, I think it worked really well. Because one of the things we wanted to achieve was making Tatyana's room very small onstage, and then in the letter writing scene, so that she is kind of confined by the small space which is her room. And then when she's sort of overwhelmed by emotion of the scene she can escape from her room. Which I thought was a very successful scene because it allowed for the room to grow really.

So that's how the process evolved. We designed this thing. I designed basically on the back of a napkin, a sort of new design. I don't really like to design things on the back of a napkin. But we had been through such a long process on this that we knew what we wanted out of the opera. And so it wasn't too complicated to come at it again. And sometimes I don't think it was perfectly designed. I think it was a little hastily designed. I would, if I were to come at this again, go back and invest a little more time in the redesign. I mean, I was proud of what we did, but there were certain aspects which I thought could've gone further.

But my problem at the time was that I had handed in this preliminary design which was accepted, and I had worked for about three months on the final design, which I handed in, and then I used up my design time. I mean, I spent a lot of time. It was my first production that I'd ever worked on at the Met, I was anxious to get it right. But then I was up against my next deadline, which I was designing something for the Paris Opera. So I couldn't, you know, I didn't have any wiggle room for the design. I had to start on the next one. So in a way when we changed directions, I had to move quite quickly. I mean, I was pleased with the outcome, it could've been, I mean, I guess we just could have pushed it a little bit further.

MC: I've been studying it for the past year and a half now! But if that wasn't your favorite production could you tell me what is your favorite production that you have designed? That you are most proud of?

ML: That's interesting you know. Each production I do sort of has its own special thing to it. I just finished a production of *A Dog's Heart*, which is a new opera based on a story by Bulgakov, about a dog that's found in the street, and turned into a man. Set in Soviet Russia in the 1920's. It's a new opera and I was very proud of the design. It was quite hard-won, the design, it went through a lot of permutations. And when we finally found the design, it worked beautifully for the opera and had a lot of life to

it. It was a very long process that I think was very satisfying, and very - quite full of conflict. I'm very proud of that, *A Dog's Heart*.

My design for *Madame Butterfly*, which is also at the Met, I'm also quite proud of. And that came from a direct, very close collaboration with Anthony Minghella, when he was alive. It was a sort of rather, I would say a beautiful collaboration because he was trying to do something slightly unusual with *Madame Butterfly,* which he was referring to Japanese theater practice, and he wanted to bring that into the telling of. He wanted to inform the telling of *Madame Butterfly* with the use of *bunraku* and *kabuki*. And so he was sort of very interested in viewing the piece with Japanese culture and Japanese references, specifically storytelling in Japan. So I was quite proud of the design because there was a sort of simplicity to it. It could be a room it could be a house, it could be a big space, it could be outside, inside, without being any of those. So you could conjure a room on the stage and then it could disappear. I was very pleased with the fluidity of that and, because nothing was set prior to the rehearsal period. In that we hadn't figured out how we were going to approach any of the scenes. I provided a set where you could have *shoji* screens that could move anywhere and different entrances and exits. But Anthony hadn't really had the time to work on the production prior to the rehearsal period, so It was in a way, a kind of magic box, in which he could create the production inside. It was something when I first met him, I realized that he wasn't going to be… he wasn't going to have the time to

work out the production scene by scene by scene. So I'm also proud of that.

There’s a production of mine *La Bohème* which I really liked, I referred to it before that Robert [Carsen] and I worked on in Antwerp. And that has toured a lot, it's been quite successful. And that was kind of turning point for me in my approach to design because I decided to, I think, both Robert and I decided to focus on the emotional center of the production rather than the natural ... the naturalistic center of production. Rather than <u>where</u> the production takes place it was more <u>why</u> the production takes place. So, when I say that I mean I was exploring the emotional heart of the production. Rather than saying is the production about Paris in the 19, no 1890s, no not particularly! The production is about a group of friends, who love each other who then lose each other. And about mortality and about love and friendship. And I think by exploring those ... the emotion of the production I was able to breakthrough, to a different level of design. You know rather than worrying about putting Rudolfo's studio on stage, we wanted - we decided at the beginning to show what does it feel like, what does it feel like to be in a tiny studio. That you're sharing with your best friends, you know insane, funny, awkward; do you know, it's all those things... When you have a student residence and you're on top of each other and it's messy and it's horrible but you love each other so you have a lot of fun. You don't care. And, and it was really to reflect that; to try to figure out a way

to… how do you put that on stage? Because for example, in *La Bohème*, one of the problems with it is that you have to put a studio on stage, it's the size of an opera house and you know these studios are huge! And, so right away you start to make a false space, something that doesn't actually ring true to an audience. Because they're in this huge studio, and you think they're poor (!) well why do they have such a big space?! I think what we tried to do, what we did, is we confined the studio to a very small space onstage which was an imposed space ... it wasn't defined by walls ... it was an imposed space. It was surrounded in fact by paper, so it was surrounded by their work. The drawings and the writing of Rudolfo, I can't remember the character who is the painter. And it was like they were in a sea of their own work. Their own drawing and writing, but it also felt like winter, because it was white paper. So it sort of worked on two levels and in the middle of it was this tiny little space. So every time somebody had to move something, or they had to sit down, they had to move the bed or put the table, and then the chairs had to be moved, and everybody had this kind of crazy lovely choreography that took place, so everybody had to switch places to make things work. And there was a great sense of joy that came out of that, and a lot of laughing, a lot of hilarity that came out of people being confined to a small space. And then you know when we went to the streets of Paris we weren't particularly interested in you know, making the Paris of 1890. It was more just a sense of what it's like to be an artist, and an artist in Paris in 1890, in the center of the universe and to

be part of a group of fantastic people. So that's what we explored and it was for me quite a turning point. I think I began to just to kind of free up a little bit, I realized you could approach design in a different way.

I guess another production that I'm fond of, is a production of the *Flying Dutchman* with Tim Albery. And again it was the kind of production that is groundbreaking for me because Tim is quite difficult to work with, in that ... not difficult to work with, Tim is quite particular, and he likes to push to find things. And sometimes as a designer you're quite lazy and you feel happy about what you got, and you're sort of satisfied, and you don't quite understand why directors are not interested… and Tim would push through it, and ask lots of questions, like: 'why are you doing this and what is it for?' We were working on the *Flying Dutchman* and trying to explore it in different ways, find our way into it. We had worked on another production together so we were, we had a shared language already, and I was working but I couldn't find the design. We were working through many different things and, and there was one night I worked very late in the studio and I was trying to put what was like… I had made a floor that looked like metal, like sheets of steel. I was trying to put it onto the floor of the theatre, but it was 11 o'clock at night and I was pushing it into the model box, and it got stuck on the side walls. And it made this beautiful shape, a curved shape like in a way the opposite direction of the side of the ship, and so I put it in and I thought oh that looks so ... that looks very good... That's a very good shape. And for some reason it resonated for

the production. But I put it away and carried on doing things and then the next day very early in the morning Tim came in, and I showed him all of the things I had done, and then I said you know, by mistake last night I put the sheets of steel in, and it got stuck on the sides of the theater and it made this beautiful sort of warped shape. And Tim looked at it and said “that's fantastic, I think that's great let's try to make it work, lets see if we can make it work, with that shape, it's such a beautiful shape” ... and we did! And I was really pleased with it and again, it's again, one of those surprise productions that come at you from behind.

For me the most important part of what I do is the collaborative aspect. And it's important to listen, not only to the piece and to the words and the music (or if it’s just words) but to understand what the words mean… but also to listen to the feeling of what they, what the director is trying to ... what aspect of the production they are trying to get towards... and to try to understand that. I think listening is probably the most valuable aspect of… my most valuable tool. It’s to try to really understand what people are trying to do, and then really to try to explore it. I mean, recently I’ve been working on a production of the *Rape of Lucretia* with the director here by the name of Fiona Shaw, who’s a very big, well known actress in the UK. We sort of starting working on this design, and at some point I decided to make the design an archeological dig. And so I made this archeological dig, and we were sort of meeting about it, and I showed her the design, and we were both not happy with it. And I said, well let’s

forget that, let's just try to tell the story, let's go back to telling the story. And let's just do it with a piece of white paper. We started to explore ... it kind of completely freed up the atmosphere in the room because I just gave up on my design. And we moved on to the pieces of white paper. And we started to tell the story with these pieces of white paper. And then we sort of became dissatisfied with that after awhile ... and we went back to the design, and I said, "Let's just pour black sand over the whole thing!" We poured black sand over the whole thing and then through that we found something we did like. That there was this idea that the archeology dig was more a kind of subconscious that we were looking for, a subconscious space. Because it's not, it wasn't based in reality. It didn't feel like an archeological dig anymore, it felt more like something that existed more in the mind. And so it was beginning to go away from the design, and throw it away, and come back to it, and find it through coming back to it, with fresh eyes, that we were able to find that place. So it's important to play those games. And for me, to kind of listen to the mood. Because sometimes I find myself, where I frustrate the process, is where I insist upon something that I think is right in the design. And it kind of frees up the atmosphere. Because I'll be wanting something that I think is right in the design, and the director will be opposed to it, and then it makes for an atmosphere which doesn't allow for the creative process to blossom. On the other hand, sometimes conflict is something where you find the design through the conflict. And you do have to push it. My main way of

finding my way into a design is understanding what I'm doing, and understanding what the story is, and what it's about.

I was recently working on *Parsifal*, which again I did at the Met, with Francois Gerard. We were looking and looking and trying to find the design, and Francois wouldn't engage with one of the scenes that I felt was the centre of the opera. Which is the point where Kundry kisses *Parsifal*. And Francois would not engage with it. He wouldn't engage with it on an intellectual level and I needed him to tell me what the scene was about, because it was the center of the piece. And he wasn't able to do that and it was through constant pushing on my part that we did come to an understanding of the scene. And through this conflict, where he was not ready to commit to the scene and was asking him to commit to the scene, that in fact we found something. So sometimes through direct conflict as well, you can find your way into something. Does that help?

MC: It does! … More specifically about some of your, I guess you could say, iconic design, oftentimes you seem to use materials that are quite ludic, they have a mind of their own. Are you continuing to do that? Is that something that is still present in your design work?

ML: Sometimes it's really nice to use materials that you don't have control over, because you don't know what's going to happen to them. So if you use mud and water and fire, and it's quite nice sometimes… you

know in *Parsifal* we used blood. Sometimes there's something about something that feels very alive. The blood did beautiful things: first of all it got on to everything, it had, in effect, a sort of visceral quality to it that I think touched people emotionally. You couldn't help but feel the blood. And that worked very well for the scene. Because when somebody falls in the blood, you feel… you felt for the people. You felt for their humiliation. It has a sort of slightly evil quality to it; it was very helpful because we were in the mysterious, slightly suspect world. So, and again you don't know how it's going to react. Like, to how people move in it and the sounds. In fact it was really sort of strangely sort of sexual and luxurious, which is exactly what we were looking for. And so that was nice actually.

And in fact I really like to explore materials that you don't know quite what they're going to do. I did a production called *Mnemonic*, which I did with Complicite Theatre here, in London, and we used the very thin plastic that you put on the floor when you're painting your walls. And so it was super cheap. *Mnemonic* was a story about memory and told through the telling of the tale of the iceman. Who was this man who was found in the ice who was 4000 years old. So there were certain scenes that we played behind it, this plastic. The plastic had this very sort of very ... ooooh... it's like when you saw things behind it you couldn't quite see them, they were in shadow, but they were blurry, and you could light the scene blue and it felt like people were inside ice, it was rather beautiful. And then and when you double layered it, it became even more blurry. So

it was very exciting to sort of discover that about that material. Something that you can buy in the streets. And it had this sort of strange, cold quality to it that worked really well for the piece.

So I do, yeah. I like to explore things that I don't really know really well. See what happens. And sometimes it causes a lot of problems. Putting blood onto the stage is not the easiest thing in the world to do, especially at the Met where they have such a complicated change over: from, you know they have to be, their afternoon shows have to be down and changed over in two hours, no matter what size your production is. So we in fact, what we were doing at the Met is something they never do, which is we were allowed to have two pallets, two side stages, so on one of them sat the blood so they could get rid of the blood, they could take it all out of the theatre. They would sort of suck it all up, take it all out, they had to then take it out of New York, and then they had it cleaned and brought back in. So it was very complicated just on a logistical level, blood. There was an enormous amount of negotiation about it. How they were going to do it, the size of it, and I had to keep an alternate design in order to accommodate ... the size of the blood they could accommodate and la la la... it's very very complicated.

But I also like to do that. I like that, I like negotiating with all of the various technicians in the theatre, because I feel a good design comes from, comes out of that negotiation. There are some designers who don't enjoy that aspect of the job, but I do. I like it to inform the design.

Because I feel like the design becomes lighter if it's imbued with the information of the technician. It works better. When a technician says to me that "this is impossible," then it's important to listen to them, but also then to come back and say "why is it impossible? Tell me exactly why it's impossible." And then too if you listen carefully, you can sometimes find a way to make it possible by slightly altering your design, and accommodating what they want. So, you know, if you design a table with three legs, you try to make it work, and you try to make it work within a piece, and you need a technicians help. So it is a collaboration. I like all that discussion. I like all that work. And sometimes people say "well you can make this work, but you have to make you members thicker" in order to you know, make walls fly or do whatever. So it's nice to then go back to the drawing board, and to take that information, rather than compromise the design, make it part of the design, and then work from there. So yes, no... I do like to use more elements that I can't quite control. Yeah.

MC: This is sort of an odd question... When I'm reading about your work, it's often described as "boldly stark" someone once said you were "clearing the cobwebs off of opera design..." and they talk about the reinvention of opera. But, especially when listening to you, I don't feel you are "reinventing" I feel like you're finding, as you said earlier, the emotional moment of a piece. How do you feel about these statements, or when

people say your designs are “minimal” because I don’t know that they are... I don’t think they are.

ML: Well, you know in fact, I think that most of those things really are North American comments. Mainly, probably... And a lot of them haven’t seen the work I’ve done in Europe, in European houses, which is much more... or can be much more ornate. I don’t feel my... main you know, it doesn’t matter whether it’s theatre or opera, I think my main approach is not to... I don’t want to shock the audience. I’m not particularly interested in it. Shocking the audience. I don’t think that the audience gets shocked very easily these days. You know we’ve all seen a lot of stuff. What I like to do is to tell the story, to tell it in the most interesting way possible. To try to find a way, a way into the opera or the story... I think it’s more to try to find the intention. Why did Mozart, with Schikaneder write the *Magic Flute*? Why did they write this ridiculous piece? Because *The Magic Flute*… *The Magic Flute* is a good example I think, because it’s impossible. It’s impossible. People have this sort of idea that it’s all about the magic, and that it’s charming and sweet, the music is charming and sweet but the story is really complicated, difficult, and doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. So, you can either approach it as a fantasy that means nothing... and I’m close with *Magic Flute* because I’ve just designed three productions in a row of *Magic Flute* with different directors, so I really know what it’s about now. And, I’ve approached it in three

different ways. It's a very interesting, sort of a really good case to talk about. To try... I don't know if I've been successful, but think what I've tried to do all three times is: I've tried to understand why this piece of theatre is put on, and why it's so popular. What made it such a popular piece of theatre? Because in fact, it's really not easy. One of the interesting things to find about it, is you know it's very strange. One was, the production I was doing in Amsterdam, which is now coming here [London], you know when we pushed the pieces, we were talking about it and reading about, and reading all this history about it, and all sorts of things ... and we still had not idea what it was all about. And then one day, so strangely it sounds stupid, but it's called *The Magic Flute*. And so, it's about the magic of music. And so, we didn't even think about it, but it in fact opened the door to the piece: That the piece is about the magic of music. Any time it plays something in the piece, the flute, the glockenspiel, it changes the course of events in the opera. And it sort of hadn't even dawned on us. We were involved with masonry, and other aspects of the production which are on the surface, but in fact it is sort of about the nature of music. And so, for me it's sort of finding those, those keys, and then once you find those you can sort of then add other.... those keys unlock doors to other parts of the production.

And, I would say that some productions that I've designed... you come to a certain aspect... I want to underline a very specific aspect of the production. I want to clear away everything else. And highlight that

aspect of the production. I don't know if that makes for a minimal approach. I think, sometimes... I do have a preference for less on stage. I don't love stages with a ton of stuff on them. I find it really difficult to look at. And, Especially... but there are pieces that are done are really, really, full of stuff on stage. I did a production of *Tales of Hoffmann*, that had tons of things on stage. Prosceniums, orchestra pits, you know, seats, huge things. I just did a production of *Don Giovanni* at La Scala last year that had tons of scenery, we used up every fly bar. You know, a version of an eighteenth century set but with photographic prints. So no. On some level I don't like a lot of extraneous design. Because I think if it doesn't mean anything, just get it off the stage. If it doesn't help tell the story of the production, then it's not worth having. You know, if the production needs to be in a room, a sort of dining room in the 1950's... you know find out what you need in that room. There's no need to fill it with lots of junk. You need to fill it with what the play needs. And I think sometimes as a designer you should feel nervous about things like that. You want to kind of, decorate around things. But it's not... sometimes it's just not necessary. So I always come from that approach. What's essential. And work out from there.

MC: One more question that is kind of on a different vein. The other big topic in my thesis is honestly, talking about 'what is scenography'. And I was just wondering what you opinion, even on the word is, because it sure

causes a lot of division even in the designer community. Do you consider yourself to be a scenographer? What do you think?

ML: Yeah. I guess that's… I mean, scenography. I mean, that's kind of designing sets. I call myself a production designer, because I do sets and costumes sometimes. So, scenography sounds more like stage design. So I think, I guess scenographer would be someone who designs scenes. So it's appropriate. But, I call myself a production designer just because that's what I write when I come into the country on my, you know when I have to enter, because people don't understand scenographer or set designer, and they don't get it. So I just do 'production designer,' and they understand, because that's a film thing, they can understand. And it feels like that. Yeah, I rarely call myself 'a something' actually; a set designer is more what I say. Because that's sort of, to people that ask me, I say set designer because that is clearest.

Appendix II – Watercolour Renderings of *Eugene Onegin*

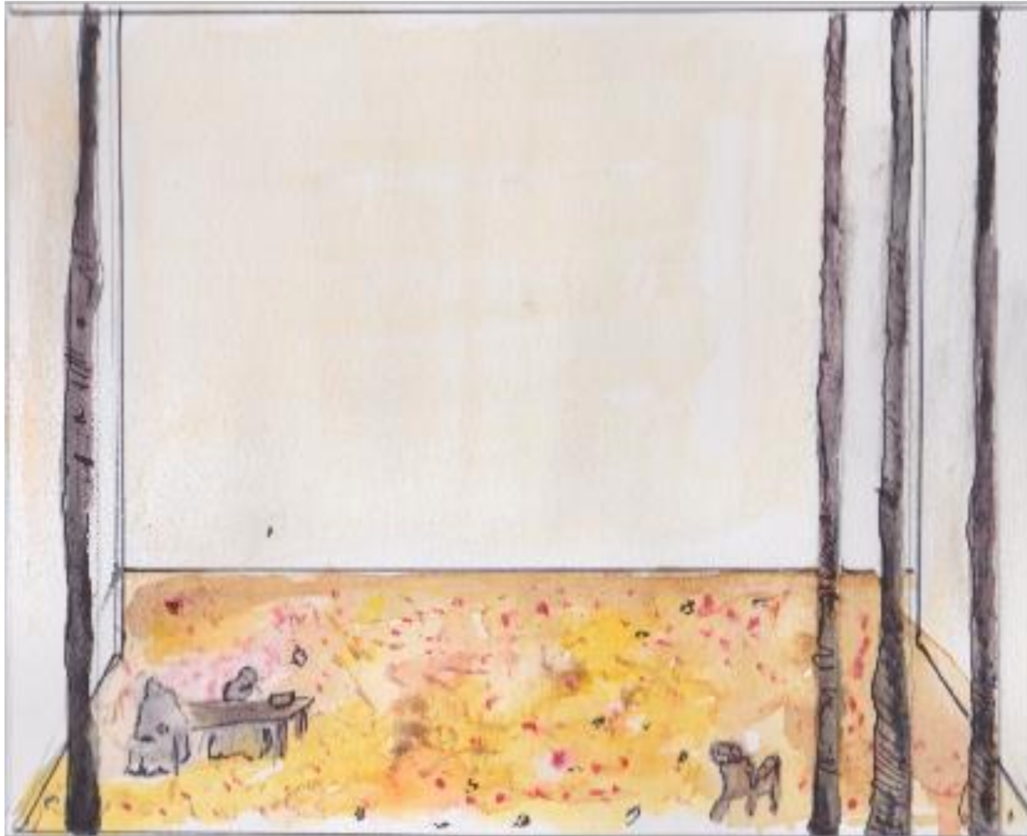
These are watercolour interpretations I painted of the sets in *Eugene Onegin.* In order to critically assess the design, I needed to see the stage in its entirety, but found no suitable photos available to accomplish this. Part of the reason I flew to New York was to visit the archives at The Met, hoping to find appropriate pictures there. Although I found many excellent articles, and spoke with knowledgeable people, there were no images of the set in its entirety. During my time there, I examined over two hundred slides, but opera production and publicity photographers tend to focus on the singers; as a result, the photographs produced are typically close-ups of those singers, revealing only tantalizing glimpses of the stage. However, I found the process of critically assessing the opera to be far more effective in challenging myself to render each scene. By creating these images, I feel I observed more carefully, and considered elements that might have been missed in a more casual viewing. I have selected nine of them in order to support or clarify the scenic analysis in chapter three of this thesis.

Eugene Onegin, Prelude to Act I scene i

Onegin sits alone upon the stage.
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

Eugene Onegin, Prelude to Act I scene i

The lights surge, and suddenly the entirety of the stage is awash in movement and colour.
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

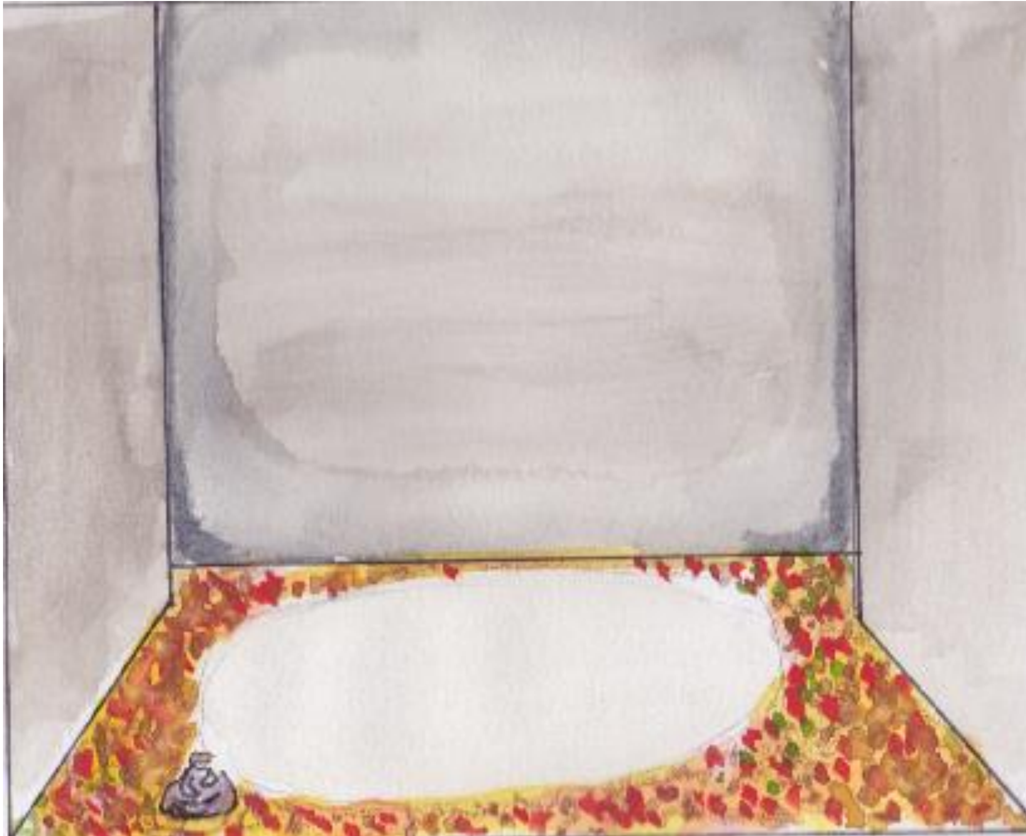


Eugene Onegin, Act I scene i

Madame Larina and Filippyevna sing their opening duet, after which Olga, Tatyana, and the serfs enter. (Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

Eugene Onegin, Act I scene ii

Tatyana's Bedroom
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

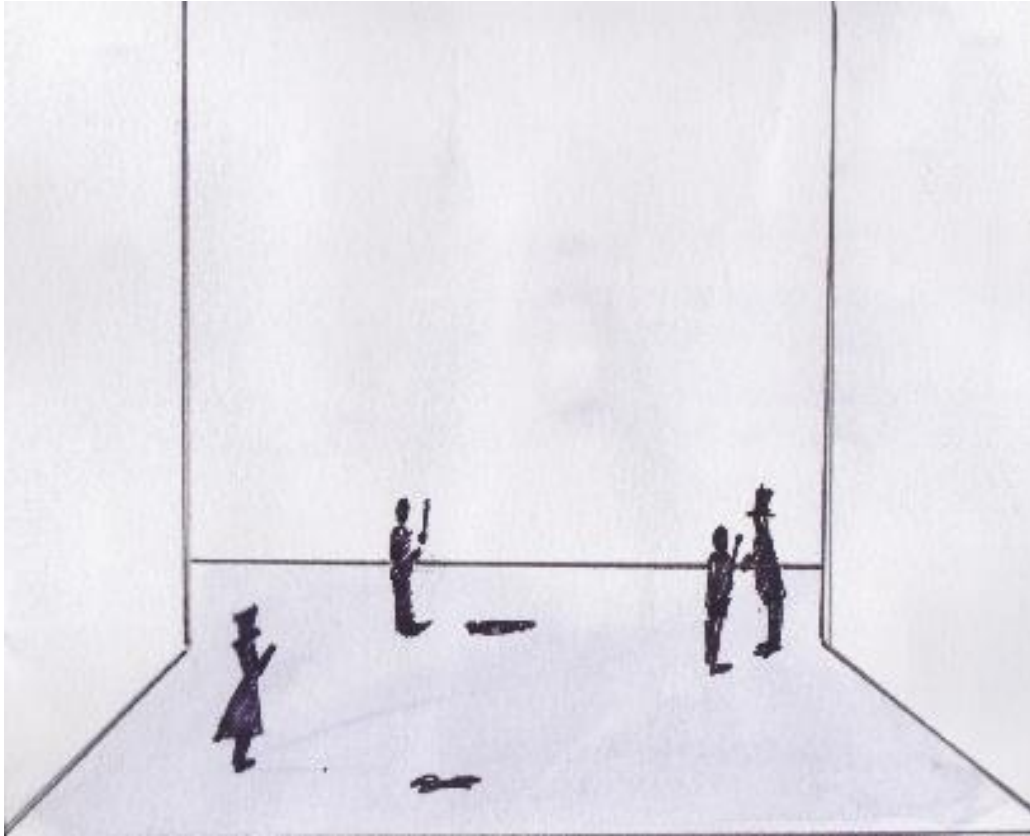


Eugene Onegin, Act I scene iii

Tatyana waits for Onegin's response
to her letter.
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

Eugene Onegin, Prelude to Act II scene i

Onegin wanders through a hazy stage alone.
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)



Eugene Onegin, Act II scene ii

The duel, in silhouette.
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

Eugene Onegin, Act II scene ii

Lensky is dead,
Prelude to Act III
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

Eugene Onegin, Act III scene i

The second, and more formal ball.
(Cuerrier, Dec 2012)

Works Cited

Alter, Jean. *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. Print.

Andrew, Sonja. "Textile Semantics: Considering a Communication-Based Reading of Textiles." *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 6.1 (2008): 35-65. *World Textiles*. Web. 12 Aug. 2013.

Aronson, Arnold. *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. Print.

Ashenburg, Katherine. "Ring bearer: known for his visionary sets, Michael Levine gave the four-part *Ring Cycle* its distinctive look. Now he's directing the first installment. Nervous? A little." *Toronto Life* 1 Sept 2006: n. page. *High Beam Business.* Web. 3 Aug. 2013.

Aston, Elaine and George Savona. *Theatre as Sign-System. A Semiotics of Text and Performance.* London: Routledge, 1991. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstasy of Communication.* Trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012. Print.

Bergfelder, Tim, and Sue Harris, Sarah Street. *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007. Print.

Burian, Jarka. "Josef Svoboda: Theatre Artist in an Age of Science". *Educational Theatre Journal* 22.2 (1970): 123-145. *Education Index Retrospective.* Web. 15 Feb. 2012.

Burke, Alafair, and Friderike Heuer, Daniel Reisberg. "Remembering Emotional Events." *Memory and Cognition* 20.3 (1992): 227 - 290. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File.* Web. 11 July. 2013.

Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre, A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present.* Expanded Ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. Print.

Chamberlain, Franc. *Sacred Theatre.* Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2007. *University of Alberta Access*. Web. 13 July. 2013.

Collins, Jane, and Andrew Nesbit, eds. *Theatre and Performance Design, A Reader in Scenography.* New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Davis, Peter G. "Lights! Camera! Opera!" *New York* 40.7 (2007): 130. *Omnifile Full Text Select (H.W.Wilson).* Web. 3 Aug. 2013.

Donington, Robert. *Opera and its symbols: the Unity of Words, Music, and Staging.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Print.

Eugene Onegin. Dir. Stefan Herheim. 2012. De Nederlandse Opera: Opus Arte, 2012. Blu-Ray.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Discovery of the Spectator: Paradigm Shift in the Theatre of the 20th Century.* Francke: Tubingen, 1997. Print.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics.* New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Fisher, Burton D. *Eugene Onegin [Electronic Resource] / Adapted From The Opera Journey Lecture Series By Burton D. Fisher.* Coral Gables: Opera Journeys, 2000. *NEOS's Catalog*. Web. 3 Aug. 2013.

Fournier, Anna. "Reflective Colonization: Domination, Consent, and the Self in Imperial Russia." *Russian History* 39 (2012): 519 - 537. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text.* Web. 29 November. 2012.

Gasparov, Boris. *Five Operas and a Symphony: Word and Music in Russian Culture.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. Print.

Gooding, Wayne. "Meet the Honorees of the 2009 Opera Canada Awards." *Opera Canada* 50:3 (2009): p. 28 - 30. *International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance with Full Text.* Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Hamann, Stephan. "Cognitive and Neural Mechanisms of Emotional Memory." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 5.9 (2001): 394 - 400. *CRKN Elsevier Science Direct 2013.* Web. 11 July. 2013.

Heim, Caroline. "'Argue with Us!': Audience Co-Creation through Post - Performance Discussions." *New Theatre Quarterly* 28. 2 (2012): 189 - 197. *Arts & Humanities Citation Index.* Web. 8 July. 2013.

Henderson, Sally. "The Elephant in the Room: Orientalism And Russian Studies." *Slovo (Maney Publishing)* 19.2 (2007): 125-135. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 12 Aug. 2013.

Hoile, Christopher. "Oedipus Rex with Symphony of Psalms." *Stage Door*. 13 Oct 2002. n. page. *Stage Door.* Web. 11 July. 2013.

Howard, Pamela. *What is Scenography?* New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation.* New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Hyerle, David. *Visual Tools for Transforming Information into Knowledge.* Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2009. Print.

Knowles, Richard. *Reading the Material Theatre.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

Larson, Orville Kurth. *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915 to 1960.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989. Print.

Lasker, David. "Reality by Design: David Lasker asks whether less is really more (or even anything at all) in minimalist opera staging." *Opera Canada* 38.2 (1997): 10-13. *Music Index.* Web. 4 Aug. 2013.

Levine, Michael design and Robert Carsen dir. *Eugene Onegin*. New York Metropolitan Opera: Decca, 2007. Blu-Ray.

McNally, Terrence. "MUSIC; An Operatic Mission: Freshen the Familiar." *New York Times, The (NY)* 1 Sept. 2002: 19. *Newsbank Archives.* Web. 3 Aug. 2013.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.* Trans. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge Classics, 2002. Print.

Mukarovsky, Jan. *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays.* Trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. Print.

Pavis, Patrice. *Contemporary Mise En Scène: Staging Theatre Today.* Trans. Joel Anderson. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

---. *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture.* Trans. Loren Kruger. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Payne, Darwin Reid. *Scenographic Imagination, 3rd Edition.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1993. Print.

Power, Cormac. *Presence in Play, A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre.* New York: Rodopi, 2008. Print.

Pushkin, Alexander. *Eugene Onegin.* Trans. Stanley Mitchell. London: Penguin Classics, 2008. Print.

Quinn, Michael. *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theatre Theory.* New York: P. Lang, 1995. Print.

Rewa, Natalie. "Michael Levine: Tracing the Moments of Scenographic Dramaturgy." *Design and Scenography.* Ed. Natalie Rewa. Toronto: Canadian Playwrights Press, 2009. 143-149. Print.

--- . "Michael Levine." *The Canadian Encyclopedia (including the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada).* 2012. *Historica Foundation*. Web. 3 Aug. 2013.

--- . *Scenography in Canada. Selected Designers.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Print.

Sanders, Julia. *Adaptation and Appropriation.* New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Silverman, Mike. "Met Premieres New Production of Tchaikovsky Opera." *Associated Press.*16 Mar. 1997. No page. Print.

Tchaikovsky, Piotr Illyich, and Konstantin Stepanovich Shilovsky. *Eugene Onegin.* Trans. Sonya Friedman. New York Metropolitan Opera: Decca, 2007. Blu-Ray.

Terras, Victor. *Handbook of Russian Literature.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985. Print.

Torgovitskaya, Julia. "Eugene Onegin's Journey Through Time: An Analysis of the Meaning and Effect of Major Themes in Pushkin's Novel in Verse, Tchaikovsky's Opera, and Other Adaptations of the Work and Their Relevance to Today's World." Honors Thesis. Tufts University, 2009. *Tufts Digital Library.* Web. 4 Aug. 2013.

Tourigny, Maurice. "Cheers and Boos: Scandal over a Canadian Team's "*Onegin"* at the Met." *Le Devoir* [Montreal] 26 Mar 1997: n. page. Print.

Ubersfeld, Anne. *Reading Theatre.* Trans. Frank Collins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Print.

Vickery, Walter N. *Alexander Pushkin.* Revised Ed. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. Print.

Weisstein, Ulrich. "The Libretto as Literature." *Books Abroad.* 35:1 (1961): 16 - 22. Print.

Werndorff, Oscar. *World Film Encyclopedia.* Ed. Clarence Winchester. London: Amalgamated Press, 1933. 445-446. Print.

Wynne, Peter. "A Spare but Sparkling '*Onegin'."* *The Sunday Record* [New Jersey] 16 Mar 1997: n.page. Print.

Zekulin, Nicholas. "The Art of Adaptation, Novel to Opera." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 29.2/3 (1987): 279 - 291. *JSTOR.* Web. 17 Mar. 2012.

Zimmerman, Susan. "Psychoanalysis and the Corpse." *Shakespeare Studies* 33. (2005): 101 - 108. *Omnifile Full Text Select (H.W. Wilson).* Web. 13 July. 2013.