

THE ADAPTATION

The book of *Don John of Austria*

When *Don John of Austria* was submitted to the Colonial Secretary for approval for performance in 1847, it was described as ‘an opera by Jacob Levi Montefiore...with music by Isaac Nathan’. Principal credit to Montefiore may seem odd, but tonight’s work is actually a ballad opera, containing a great deal of spoken dialogue. When we say ‘libretto’ in this instance we envisage not just the lyrics but what, in the musical theatre, would be called ‘the book’.

Montefiore’s libretto was based on an 1835 French play by Casimir Delavigne (whose *Sicilian Vespers* was the basis for Verdi’s later opera). Some scenes are literal translations from Delavigne; others are Montefiore’s tracing with fresh segues. Montefiore’s and Nathan’s purpose would have been to reduce Delavigne’s very long play to operatic length and situation.

There have been a number of stages in developing tonight’s text. On a first reading I felt that Montefiore had successfully gone through Delavigne’s text in order to select musical numbers for Nathan to set. But I had certain questions.

Would an audience in 2007 cope with historical background which may have been second-knowledge to an audience in 1847? How would a modern audience cope with involved literary sentences that seem to hover



The interior of the Royal Victoria Theatre, where *Don John* was premiered

around meanings rather than zero in on them? Could the audience find consistency in the characters' motivations, once the play had been chopped for operatic purposes? What was the draft stage of this libretto and might it have been sharpened up with subsequent rewriting?

It was not such a difficult matter to reduce and re-focus some of Montefiore's sentences. But I wondered if Delavigne's play would provide more clues to a consistent portrayal of certain themes. We found a rare copy of *Don Juan d'Autriche* in the National Library in Canberra and Natalie Shea translated it.

I then drafted a composite of Delavigne's play and Montefiore's libretto, adding and reinforcing the sorts of signposts that I thought a modern audience might expect, eg. establishing early on and subtly keeping up the fact that Don John has military ambitions; also using structure to highlight. Notably, interval in this version occurs just before the change of scene to Charles V's monastery at Yuste.

In one very important respect however, Montefiore and Nathan's *Don John* differs from Delavigne's. Agnes' scene by herself near the end, containing the song: 'They tell us that a home of light there is, where praying seraphs glow...' is unique to Montefiore and Nathan's version. It must have been the heart of the show for these two early members of Sydney's Jewish community. Catering for a modern audience who I thought would expect more of a point to an opera (for both the play and the libretto end with a strange sort of stasis; majesty restored; brothers reunited; duty reaffirmed; Agnes saved, but certainly no lovers living 'happily ever after') prompted Agnes' short philosophy of resignation at the end.

I approached the reworking of the libretto from what I imagined was the point of view of a modern audience member. Rodney Fisher's direction of the work represents another stage in the development of this text. He is steeped in the style of typical early 19th-century romantic drama, and brings this knowledge to bear on his theatrical presentation.

It should be stressed that much of the language of this *Don John* is still closely related to, and often is, Montefiore's or Delavigne's. Importantly, the lyrics of the various musical numbers have not been altered.

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