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As Plain as the Nose on His Stage

By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH
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MANAGING pandemonium is not easy, especially when you must create it first. The South African artist [William Kentridge](#) has set himself this task with the very young [Dmitri Shostakovich](#)'s first [opera](#), "The Nose." Based on the story by [Nikolai Gogol](#), the absurdist tour de force tells of Platon Kuzmich Kovalev, a civil official of the eighth rank who wakes up one morning in status-mad St. Petersburg short one nose. To his mounting dismay, the missing body part is eventually discovered gallivanting through the capital in the guise of a snooty official of the fifth rank.

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Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times
William Kentridge

One morning in February, in the bowels of the [Metropolitan Opera](#) House, Mr. Kentridge, 54, and a small army of artistic personnel were rehearsing a chase scene involving a dozen Russian answers to the Keystone Kops.

"Be like inflatable objects," Mr. Kentridge told his loose cluster of lawmen, expanding in three dimensions as his lungs filled with air, shrinking again as he let the air go. "Sing from the deflated position. And crush your bodies together. This is a contact sport." Things began to look more promising.

"It will be great if we can get everyone to do it," Mr. Kentridge said when the company was released for lunch. "It takes an hour to rehearse what? One minute?" Scheduled to run 1 hour 44 minutes, "The Nose" — Mr. Kentridge's first production for the Met, and the company premiere — opens on Friday. [Valery Gergiev](#) conducts. Paulo Szot, the suave Brazilian baritone who won a [Tony Award](#) as Emile de Becque in the current [Lincoln Center Theater](#) revival of "South Pacific," plays Kovalev, the lone human being in a carnival of caricatures and grotesques.

The Canadian tenor Gordon Gietz plays the title role. "You've seen those awful productions where people

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William Kentridge

A design for a major role in Shostakovich's opera "The Nose" by the South African artist William Kentridge.

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Metropolitan Opera Technical Department

The production's set, by Mr. Kentridge and Sabine Theunissen.

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Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times
The title character, in a rehearsal.

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'The Nose'

William Kentridge talks about his new production of Shostakovich's opera. (Video courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera)

meander?" he asked. "Here, there's no wandering around. We have a class every morning to develop a language of movement we all use as an ensemble. Kentridge's vision isn't naturalistic. A lot of the point is for the performers to create specific pictures. It's great to be asked to use your whole body to accentuate the words and music. It gives the show a great unity."

The live action is accompanied by Mr. Kentridge's continuous projections, which are sometimes still images and sometimes animated. Parts of the screen action run in reverse, which makes filming them tricky. "Suppose you have a real person walking backwards under a giant paper nose, so it will look like he's walking forward," Mr. Kentridge said. "You have to calculate the angle of the lean, or everything will look wrong. Or say that you throw down a pen, so that on screen it will seem to jump up to meet your hand. When do you move? When must you wait? A lot of this is very counterintuitive. First you improvise to discover what will be wonderful, then you work hard to find the grammar that will make it happen."

Mr. Kentridge's work bears the stamp of many interests. He holds degrees in politics and African studies as well as fine arts, and trained in Paris with the renowned mime Jacques Lecoq. His theatrical credits include two well-traveled opera productions: [Monteverdi's](#) "Ritorno di Ulisse in Patria" and [Mozart's](#) "Zauberflöte." Drawing, though, remains his most natural form of artistic expression. To watch him draw is to see him think, and his work in other mediums is an extension of drawing by other means.

The traveling retrospective "William Kentridge: Five Themes," which opened at the Museum of Modern Art on Wednesday, illustrates the process repeatedly, as well as Mr. Kentridge's abiding interest in acoustic impressions of all kinds. According to Klaus Biesenbach, [MoMA's](#) chief curator at large, the hardest thing to get right in installing the show was the marriage of imagery and sound.

"The first piece you see is a shadow procession," Mr. Biesenbach said. "The figures are often just cut or torn from paper. They're rough but also very precise, which gives them poetry and a kind of tenderness too. The sound that goes with the procession is really loud. I like loud sound. Life is loud, so why shouldn't art be loud? But William also insisted that all the sound cues be very precise."



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“The Nose”— which Shostakovich

started at 20 and finished within a year — is chock full of musical effects that are graphically precise yet often mysterious. The satirical intent is obvious when the singing is choppy and frenetic. But then ethereal or rhapsodic strains intervene. Are these passages satirical too? The virtuosic instrumental writing raises the same sort of question.

For the most part the orchestra is compact (no Wagnerian multiple winds and brass here). The only special features are balalaikas and such for local color and an extreme percussion section of nine players. During one percussion eruption audiences will see Shostakovich on screen hammering away at a piano. “It’s archival footage we’ve edited and adjusted for tempo,” Mr. Kentridge said. “And by the time we’re through, you believe it’s actually Shostakovich playing the music you’re hearing from the pit.”

The exceptional height of the Met stage has prompted Mr. Kentridge to think in terms of the screen of an old-time movie palace. “We’re constantly zooming in and out, which is kind of what Gogol does,” he said. “Zoom in on a woman you’ve never seen before. ‘I’m going to die,’ she says. ‘Bury me in my purple dress.’ And that’s the last you hear of her. You see very specific characters for a very short time and the giant social world teeming around them.”

A cast of 30 soloists, mostly Americans, plays some 80 roles. The tenor Andrei Popov, one of seven recruits from Russia, sings the District Constable, emitting high E flats like a factory whistle. (At least he does so on Mr. Gergiev’s recent recording on the house label of the Mariinsky Theater. In rehearsal, saving his voice, he sounded more like a distant cricket.) Another Russian tenor, Sergey Skorokhodov, has his best bit as Ivan, Kovalev’s valet, but also shows up in other roles requiring six or eight quick changes. “Really,” he said at a rehearsal break, “that’s too much!”

As for the two figures at the eye of the storm — the bereft Kovalev and the renegade Nose — Mr. Kentridge has no wish to force them onto the couch of Dr. Freud. “Equating the loss of the Nose with castration is too easy,” he said. “For me, the story is much more about a vision of the self. You can half-control yourself, and half you can’t.”

That conflict shows up frequently in Mr. Kentridge’s storytelling, personified by his twin alter egos, Soho Eckstine, a corporate tycoon who ravages the earth, and Felix Teitlebaum, a bohemian artist who lusts for Eckstine’s fleshly wife. (Both are the spitting image of Mr. Kentridge.) Their unending mutual vendetta is Mr. Kentridge’s allegory — both personal and political — of the history of South Africa rent by apartheid.

Though Eckstine and Teitlebaum have put in appearances in many of Mr. Kentridge’s other stage productions, they will not be seen this time.

“But the divided self is in the show,” Mr. Kentridge said. “The stage belongs to Kovalev, while the screen is the domain of the Nose. When Kovalev is onstage weeping at the loss of his nose, we see Anna Pavlova on screen, gently mocking him, dancing completely gorgeously. Let me see if I can find it.”

With that, he planted a pince-nez on the bridge of his nose and conjured up a historic film clip of the ballerina on his [iPhone](#), a mighty wedge of nose poised delicately on her swanlike neck.

As the Nose, Mr. Gietz, who is new to the Met, may well have the briefest title role ever written. “If I dawdle, it’s maybe three minutes end to end,” he said. “It’s a perfect role

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for a debut. No pressure. There's the wonderful confrontation with Kovalev, which is some of the most lyrical writing in the score. And then in my second scene I come in yelling: 'Stop! Stop!' on lots of high C's. Then the mob turns to catch Kovalev, and I yell a few more high C's, and I'm done."

Mr. Szot too is making his house debut, but a much more daunting one. "I'm onstage all the time, and I sing for an hour and 20 minutes," Mr. Szot said after a recent rehearsal. "What I have to express is the despair of a person who is totally naked. Yesterday Kovalev had a nice life, a good position, a good future. And now it's all gone. There's no place in his world for someone who is disfigured. It would be easy to play him just as a crazy man. Luckily William knows every word of the opera, every note. That's a great gift for a singing actor. We're trying to find all the colors and layers."

Mr. Kentridge is urging friends who are coming from South Africa to see the show twice. "Not just for support," he said. " 'The Nose' is a complicated opera. There's a lot going on."

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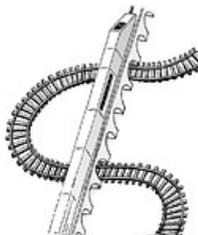
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