

“The Tristan Project” by Bill Viola: diving into one of the most fabulous opera productions

Bill Viola. The Tristan Project is the most beautiful book ever devoted to an opera production. It tells how, at the request of the Belgian Gerard Mortier, then director of the Paris Opera, three creators based in California pushed the limits in order to imagine, for our time, a resolutely innovative “Tristan und Isolde”.



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The most beautiful for several reasons: the innovative nature of the project, its intrinsic beauty, the fair description of the work accomplished.

In 2004, Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* was presented in Los Angeles. Assembled at the instigation of Gerard Mortier by Esa-Pekka Salonen (conductor, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic), Peter Sellars (opera and theater director) and Bill Viola (multimedia artist), it remains undoubtedly one of the most fabulous opera productions of all time and certainly the benchmark for the beginning of the 21st century.

The adventure included three parts: a concert, staged and imaged at the Disney Hall in Los Angeles and created in this hall in December 2004, performances at the Opéra Bastille from February 2005 and occasional exhibitions of video extracts in various art galleries. *Bill Viola - The Tristan Project* - the book out today - offers coverage of each of these chapters. And not just any coverage since it is the fruit of the analytical work of Kira Perov, companion of the videographer and real coordinator of the video component of the show. The performances in Los Angeles and Paris are commented jointly in the first part of the book, while the division into several sequences intended for exhibitions is the subject of a systematic analysis in the second part of the book.

The radiant beauty of illustrations

We suspected it from the memories we kept of the performances, but we remain stunned by the incredible beauty of the images and photos of the show, taken from the archives of the organizers and, above all, the images by Viola themselves, of breathtaking splendor.

But this work is much more than a collection of beautiful images because each of the protagonists explains in depth the research work they carried out on the project. They build in parallel, each following their own path, with the centralization of ideas only occurring in the final edit. Of course, they discussed their proposals, their common references to Buddhism, their analysis of love and death, to the almost Plotinian desire for lovers to merge which serves as support for the musical drama, the role of the elements, and in particular water and fire.

A consensus quickly emerged between the participants, which convinced Viola to embark on this adventure: more than four hours of video, by far the most monumental work he had ever undertaken.

An educational journey behind the scenes

Each partner begins by describing in detail their research and preparation work. Perov then takes up her pen to explain the extent of the work accomplished. And, on the video level, it is mind-blowing both in the multiplicity of means used for capturing images, expertly described by Perov, as well as in the set-up, the diversity of the numerous collaborators coming from diverse and hyper-specialized backgrounds, the trics used, even the fireproof suit allowing the actor playing Tristan to walk through flames.

A final fascinating chapter explains the systems for controlling the speed at which images unfold, in order to take into account the fluctuations in tempi inherent to any live performance (which were particularly notorious when Valery Gergiev took on the first revival of the show).

An essential document

From start to finish, it is this goldsmiths' work at the heart of a puzzle of staggering complexity which is explained to us with a clarity worthy of the subject and far removed from the indigestible gibberish of the so-called aesthetes usually responsible for explaining productions of operas.

Everything in this book reflects the high level of vision of the subject and the work accomplished and we can be proud that this document with international scope is the product of a Belgian publisher, Mercatorfonds.

The Tristan Project, Bill Viola, edited by Kira Perov, published by Mercatorfonds, 128 pages, 120 illustrations, 35 euros.

