

Figaro: A Marriage made in heaven

Fiona Shaw is bringing her theatrical nous to Mozart's most famous opera. It could make for the most thrilling Figaro in years, says Jessica Duchén

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On song: Iain Patterson plays the lead role in 'The Marriage of Figaro'

It's a challenge any director would relish, but might fear: a Mozart opera so famous that it carries a weight of expectation second to none. This week English National Opera is unveiling its new staging of *The Marriage of Figaro* and in the director's chair is Fiona Shaw, the Irish actress and director extraordinaire.

Shaw, besides her ever-popular roles in *True Blood* and the *Harry Potter* films, is of course one of the towering figures in today's classical theatre. When she starred in Brecht's *Mother Courage* at the National Theatre in 2009 she drew plaudits for her "phenomenal performance" and "wonderful, aggressively disguised sensitivity". She is not a newcomer to opera direction, having already tackled two 20th-century works, Vaughan Williams's *Riders to the Sea* and Hans Werner Henze's *Elegy for Young Lovers* for ENO, the latter performed last year at the Young Vic. This, though, is her first venture into the heartland of Mozart and the 18th century.

A frequent collaborator with the director Deborah Warner, Shaw has sometimes starred in productions that involve issues of gender politics – but she has not tried to present a feminist Figaro, she insists. Instead, what we can expect is an account informed by exceptionally deep engagement with its characters' emotional truths.

It was this potential, she says, that drew her so strongly to the drama. "The rules of 18th-century opera are much stricter than those of the other operas I've directed," she comments, "and to my delight I began to think it's a bit like Shakespeare. These are big characters and they're interesting people. The music may be beautiful, but

that doesn't mean that its world is simple. And if I've learned anything, it is that everyone in this opera is equal: nobody really behaves better than anyone else."

The Marriage of Figaro, based on Pierre Beaumarchais's play of the same title, takes place across one "day of mirth and madness". Figaro, valet to the Count, is trying to marry Susanna, maid to the Countess. But the Count, having abolished the feudal droit du seigneur that entitled him to sleep with a servant girl on her wedding night, wishes to bring back that law in order to have his way with Susanna. The situation's complexity snowballs as the page boy Cherubino goes into hormonal meltdown over every woman he sees, while the housekeeper, Marcellina, has designs on Figaro for herself until she discovers that he is her long-lost son. Teetering between farce and disaster, the tale also hints at potential revolution as the balance between master and servant shifts in favour of Figaro. This made Beaumarchais's play, written in 1778, so subversive that Louis XVI banned it. With hindsight, both king and playwright proved prescient.

Shaw says that her Figaro is rooted in the 18th century since the droit du seigneur is central and cannot be evoked satisfactorily in a more recent era: "You have to believe that Susanna has no choice but to sleep with the Count." But gradually her characters begin to point forward towards a new, more equal world. "This opera does not hold the freedom to go much beyond its frame. If you did, you would murder it," she comments. "But I certainly don't want the production to hide behind the 18th century. You have to climb forward and deal with your own time – you mustn't look back at it, you must be attending it. Theatre must always make things present to the viewer, but at the same time it must acknowledge where it has come from."

Talking about Figaro, Shaw's responses are peppered with theatrical allusions – not only to Shakespeare, but also to Greek myth and tragedy, Pinter and Beckett. The set is a revolving maze that represents the house, she says; it allows the production to whirl from room to room. But a maze, or labyrinth, is also the mythological home of the Minotaur. "The Minotaur lived in the middle of a maze and ate women, and in a way that's what the Count does – while Figaro, like Theseus, has to go in and face him to get his girl back."

She also suggests a parallel between Figaro and the story of Oedipus, via Marcellina – and she has made this episode less farcical than it often appears. "She's attracted to him, she wants to be close to him – and she's not wrong. The scene in which they learn she's his mother is turned towards comedy by the music, but I find it moving, because I know people who have discovered their true parents. It transforms Figaro's sense of self."

The action comes to a head in the last act, a concatenation of disguises and mistaken identities before the Count is hoist by his own petard. Shaw has tightened up the action by running the wedding party scene straight into Act IV: "It's a maze in a darkened garden, a very abstract space; the people are in the middle of this, rather like characters in a Pinter or Beckett play," she says.

The performers, for their part, credit Shaw's attention to detail for taking them far into the opera's world. Iain Paterson, who sings Figaro, has performed the role several times elsewhere. "But in this production he's darker than I've ever played him – a far more complicated character," he says. "Fiona remarked that in the last act everyone else is in a farce and Figaro is in a tragedy; we go to some quite dark places. The Act IV aria is particularly bleak: angry, frustrated and tortured."

Susanna is the very young American soprano Devon Guthrie; still studying at the Juilliard School of Music in New York, she is making her European debut. Shaw describes her as "a huge talent", while Guthrie has been thrilled to work with the director. "She wants us all to find our own truth in every intention and thought," she comments. "She doesn't want to spoonfeed anything to us."

"This opera is packed tight with incident, plot, counterplot and emotional shadings – and it can turn on a sixpence," adds the conductor, Paul Daniel. "We've really investigated carefully who knows what, where and when. What Fiona does is to get right inside the text, right inside each moment. This is why you thank your lucky stars to have her around."

Together the team has raked over every inch of back-story and off-stage incident. Did Figaro meet Cherubino in the garden? If so, what was their conversation? How many people would have handled a letter being passed from Susanna to the Count?

Nothing should be imposed on the performers, says Shaw: "My challenge to myself was that I wanted the performers to inform the scene and to take responsibility for what they sing." Does this derive from her perspective as an actor? "No – it's about what I think the theatre needs now. It's got to be very exciting and it has to offer something that two-dimensional film does not. Film offers the capturing of moments enhanced by music and colour, but theatre offers the self of the performer. And in order for opera or theatre to be alive, the performer must come in with his or her true, total self. Iain's Figaro, for instance, will be different from anyone else's. That's what makes the theatre and opera a unique experience."

All will be revealed tonight. And now that she has been bitten by the opera bug, can we expect to see more productions from Shaw? "Not this week!" she jokes. "But it's an amazing form – it takes so many skills. I think opera has a great future."

'The Marriage of Figaro', London Coliseum, London WC2 (0871 911 0200) tonight to 10 November