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PARSIFAL, OR, THE SPACE BETWEEN

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom
—T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men” (1925)

THESE CELEBRATED LINES seem at first glance as far removed as possible from the titanic certainties that pour forth from Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882). Wagner’s final opera begins with the mystical call of the Holy Grail and ends with the absolving chords of the “Dresden Amen” composed by Johann Gottlieb Naumann: “*Höchsten Heiles Wunder! Erlösung dem Erlöser!*” (Highest holy wonder! The redeemer is redeemed!). Eliot’s threnody for alienated humankind falls away from such dreams of transcendence into an exhausted admission of failure: “*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*” There can be little shared ground, surely, between one of the nineteenth century’s most sublime statements of hope and one of the twentieth century’s most searing expressions of despair. Still, it is on that shared ground that Québécois director François Girard’s production of *Parsifal* is set: in the shadowy space between idea and reality, desire and disillusionment, beauty and pain.

When I booked a flight to New York City in February to see Girard’s *Parsifal* live at the Metropolitan Opera, I was walking into that space with my eyes open. While I had spent many years preaching Wagner’s importance in classes on modern performance history, I had always secretly been a skeptic. The grandiosity and egomania of the great composer’s vision (at least, as I perceived them) simply didn’t appeal to me. In 2013, however, I encountered Girard’s production in a Halifax movie theatre via one of the

Met's "Live in HD" broadcasts and immediately fell in love with Wagner's music and poetry, with Girard's simple yet wrenching theatrical vision, and with the performances of the superb cast. So I waited eagerly for the privilege of seeing that opera, in that staging, with those singers, *live*—of sharing a room with that much beauty.

As a student (and sometime maker) of live theatrical performance, I knew there was a good chance that this dream would prove disappointing. Things look and sound different in the house than they do on the screen. Sightlines and acoustics fail us; props and costumes age; singers get sick or tired; audiences cough, fidget, feel hungry, and simply stop paying attention. As Eliot writes,

Between the conception
 And the creation
 Between the emotion
 And the response
 Falls the Shadow
Life is very long

So, too, is *Parsifal*.

Wagner's opera—or, as he called it, his "*Bühnenweihfestspiel*" (Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage)—tells the story of the eponymous "pure fool," who saves the Knights of the Holy Grail from the disaster precipitated by their king, Amfortas, who succumbs to sexual temptation in the arms of Kundry, an ageless woman cursed to endless cycles of suffering after laughing at Jesus Christ on the cross. Attacked by the sorcerer Klingsor with his own sacred spear, Amfortas sustains an incurable and supremely painful wound whose effects blight his life, the community of knights, and the health of their holy wood. The first act stages their agony; the second explores the epiphany of the youthful Parsifal, whose compassion for Amfortas enables him to resist the temptations of Klingsor and Kundry; and the third shows Parsifal's apotheosis, as he not only heals Amfortas' wound but also baptizes Kundry, thereby releasing her into a peaceful death. Compassion, forgiveness, and faith triumph over pain, wrath, and sin. It is a work of great beauty—and at five hours of ritual music-drama it is also a trial of endurance for its characters, performers, and audiences.

When Wagner first staged *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, those five hours were

adorned with such lavish spectacle that the scenic transformation from the holy wood to the knights' temple in the first act outlasted the music Wagner had written to accompany it and nearly brought the whole performance to a halt. Those who grew weary of the master's score could turn their eyes upon one beautiful stage vista after another. Girard offers no such concessions. His *Parsifal* is set in the desiccated world of Eliot's "Hollow Men":

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star

As the production begins to the overwhelming strains of Wagner's prelude, the audience is faced with a reflection of themselves onstage: rows of men and women dressed in formal, contemporary black-and-white clothing. As if hailed by some divine voice, they rise, divest themselves of their finery, and separate into two groups: the men, now barefoot and garbed only in the plainest shirts and trousers, retreat to a triple circle of chairs on one side of the stage, while the women, covering their heads in black veils, are banished to the other. As the lights rise, we see that the ground upon which they stand is barren and cracked, moistened only by a thin stream whose line divides the two groups. When Amfortas bathes in it, the stream turns into a rivulet of blood. At the back of the stage, dark clouds rush across a projected sky, relieved at intervals by images of planets passing by. The Holy Grail, when we finally glimpse it, is a rather tawdry gold-plated chalice—a prop from a middle-school play. For the whole 110 minutes of the first act, this is almost all the spectacle Girard grants us.

At the act's end, the true nature of that spectacle becomes clear. When Parsifal, fascinated and appalled by the rituals of the knights and the suffering of their king, peers down into the thin stream that divides the stage, the crack begins to glow red and then widens and splits open as if to welcome him. Girard stages the second act, which Wagner set in the wondrous gardens of Klingsor's magic castle, at the bottom of this terrifying crevice. The Flower Maidens sent by the sorcerer to tempt Parsifal dance ankle-deep in blood, which covers the whole stage. As Kundry strives to seduce the young

man, they both become soaked in it. Some have interpreted this image as a misogynistic representation of the female body, riven and leaking, which must be rejected. To me, however, the meaning seems the opposite. Girard's imagery equates the female body both with the parched and abused earth and with the agonized Amfortas. All are suffering, all are simultaneously exploited and anathematized by the knights, and all are in desperate need of dignity and reconciliation. This *Parsifal* takes place at the site of the wound—a site of pain, horror, and abjection that is also a site of transcendence, longing, and hope. It takes place in the space of Eliot's "between."

The full realization of this vision in live performance depends not only on sets, costumes, and staging choices, but also far more crucially on the singers, whose voices and bodies must give flesh to Girard's vision of the human suspension between beauty and agony, desire and despair. In the 2013 Met production, German tenor Jonas Kaufmann fit the bill perfectly as Parsifal. His famous matinee-idol looks combined with his intense, effortful stage presence and his dark, covered sound to embody a beauty born from suffering and self-denial. In this revival, German tenor Klaus Florian Vogt—blond, boyish, and slightly blank, with acting as straightforward as the silvery sound of his singing—cuts an altogether simpler figure that is more appropriate to Wagner's "pure fool" but ill-matched with Girard's ambiguous staging. As Kundry, on the other hand, German soprano Evelyn Herlitzius surpasses Swedish soprano Katarina Dalayman as Girard's collaborator. Her sometimes audible struggles with the role's demands—her raw-edged sound, occasional wobbles, and uncertain high notes—fuse with her no-holds-barred, fervent acting to tell the story of a woman whose existence is both a self-loathing slog through eternal punishment and an endlessly hopeful fight for redemption. As for German bass René Pape as the noble knight Gurnemanz, in both outings his task has been to embody compassionate understanding of such struggles through his restrained acting and rich, burnished singing. In the revival, his beautiful voice shows occasional signs of strain and is at times overwhelmed by the vastness of Wagner's orchestration. A delightful New York operagoer sitting next to me, who saw the production live in 2013, bemoaned the fact that "Pape is getting old." For me, however, time's inroads on his portrayal bring it that much closer to Girard's vision, in which all greatness—even the wisest and best—coexists with pain and failure.

No singer could embody this conception of *Parsifal* more perfectly than

the incomparable Swedish baritone Peter Mattei as Amfortas, and it was his performance above all that converted me to Wagner in 2013. Mattei is widely celebrated for his beautiful, velvet-grained voice, which seems to flow out of him so effortlessly that one can easily underestimate the scrupulous artistry of his work in operas like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Don Giovanni* (1787) or Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (1878). In *Parsifal*, such misjudgments are rendered impossible by the intense relationship—half continuity, half contradiction—between his singing and his physicality. Mattei's Amfortas is unable to stand upright, leaning constantly upon two long-suffering knights for support. As his wound gushes blood down his white shirt, he seems to clench every muscle in constant spasms of physical and emotional agony. Even so, throughout his two great arias of unremitting suffering Mattei's voice pours out of his tortured body with a sound so even and plangent that it can almost pass for that of a stringed instrument. That sound envelops the whole cavernous space of the theatre at the peak of his monologue in the first act, and the effect is reminiscent of another great passage from Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922): "Yet there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice." At this climactic moment he cries, "*Erbarmen! Erbarmen! Du Allerbarmer!*" (Have mercy! Have mercy! You all-merciful one!). Mattei's voice speaks first torment, then rage, and then a kind of despairing reverence in the face of a divine compassion that lies just beyond reach. Expressing the depth of human abjection and the height of human desire for transcendence, this is the sound of Girard's *Parsifal*.

At the end of the production, Mattei's Amfortas, finally healed, seems so full of awe that he hardly knows where to look or what to do. As the stream begins to run freely again, Parsifal not only baptizes Kundry in its waters but also invites the women of the community—heretofore segregated and disdained—to cross over its dividing line into fellowship with the knights. Defying Wagner's instructions, Girard gives Kundry—rather than any of the men—the task of raising the Holy Grail in a final, renewed ritual. Parsifal then plunges the holy spear into it, uniting male and female principles in a somewhat heavy-handed image of reconciliation. But the final moment renews Girard's sense of the simultaneous wonder and precariousness of human existence. Amfortas rises unsteadily to his feet on one side of Parsifal, while a young woman rises to hers on the other. In the live performance, a spectator can just barely glimpse Parsifal's head turning toward the woman

before the curtain falls. Will he go to her, accepting relationship and unity, or will he tell her to get back down? Will the restored Amfortas join the knights, or will he walk out of the holy wood into an altogether different existence? Will everyone live happily ever after, or will the cycle of agony begin again? In the end, as he has done throughout the production, Girard both pays homage to Wagner and subtly contests the master's vision. The last chords of the opera suggest resolution, but Girard's final image remains shadowed by hope and fear. It leaves us in the same realm into which it ushered us at the beginning: the space between possibility and anxiety, where beauty and pain are one.