

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Mortier Leaves Paris With an Ending That's a Beginning



Charles Duprat/Paris Opera

The set of “Am Anfang” (“In the Beginning”), a theatrical work by the German painter Anselm Kiefer, Gerard Mortier’s final commission at the Paris Opera.

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PARIS — Much of the world may have been watching the obsequies for Michael Jackson, which were also shown live on French television, but a different kind of artistic farewell also took place here on Tuesday night: the premiere of a theatrical work by the German painter Anselm Kiefer, the last commission of Gerard Mortier’s tenure as director of the Paris Opera.



Charles Duprat/Paris Opera

Geneviève Bovin, in the foreground, with the Rubble Women in “Am Anfang” (“In the Beginning”).

Mr. Mortier, whose appointment to run the New York City Opera blew apart in a crisis over financing, is going to Madrid instead, to the Teatro Real, like one of those amazing Brazilian soccer stars Real Madrid keeps buying.

But if there is any theme to be found in Mr. Kiefer's work, "Am Anfang" ("In the Beginning"), it is the circularity of destruction and rebirth: that in the end is the beginning, and in the beginning is also the end.

"Am Anfang," at the opera house, is a departure for Mr. Kiefer, 64, who has made his art out of the destruction he saw as a child in southern Germany, when he played happily in the wreckage of his family's bombed house. "I cannot find it ugly," he said in an interview here. "It was my material. It is my material."

Mr. Mortier told him two years ago he could do anything he liked. "That's a very difficult thing for an artist, to be without limits, so at first I was afraid and said no," Mr. Kiefer said. Then he met the clarinetist and composer Jörg Widmann, 36, "and I thought with him I could do something," Mr. Kiefer said. "It wouldn't be without limits but a collaboration."

The piece is breathtaking at the start. When the curtain goes up, the audience is confronted with an eerie landscape of 12 misshapen towers, made of broken concrete blocks, piled high like cells, that extend all the way to the back of the opera house's enormously deep stage.

This setting, we are told in a portentous voice-over introduction, complete with map, is the Fertile Crescent, where empires have risen and fallen and the three main Western religions were born. To chilling, dipping music composed and conducted by Mr. Widmann, robed figures move aimlessly through this broken landscape, covered in ash and dust (actually grated potato). These are the lost tribes of the Holy Land, engaged in the endless cycle of exile and return, destruction and rebuilding.

A woman named Shekhinah, a word that indicates both the presence and the feminine aspects of God, represents the voice of an abandoned, wandering Israel, waiting for the Messiah who does not arrive. She wanders herself among the concrete towers, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel, hurling biblical curses at God taken from the prophets, mostly Isaiah and Jeremiah (translated into French).

The curses, of course, are marvelous. And the setting would be perfect for "Waiting for Godot," with the addition of a single tree somewhere.

On both sides of the stage women in slightly more contemporary rags knock the mortar off broken bricks, then begin to place them in rows, a symbol of reconstruction. These are the famed Trümmerfrauen (Rubble Women), who salvaged bricks in bombed-out postwar Germany under orders from the victorious Allies. They were mythical heroes, especially in the former East Germany, and here they symbolize the human effort to rebuild and go on.

“It’s ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” Mr. Kiefer said. “Dust and ruins are greatly beautiful, and it creates the space for a beginning.”

The Trümmerfrauen, who bring Mr. Kiefer’s themes and obsessions into the modern world, are also part of the orchestra in a way. Mr. Widmann uses the sound of their picks on the bricks as another instrument, adding a sense of passion and movement to a stage that is all too often static.

And toward the end the malign Lilith appears, bearing clouds of devils and dust, as Shekhinah delivers the sere vision of Isaiah 21: “It cometh from the desert, from a terrible land. A grievous vision is declared unto me. ... My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me.”

In a swirling dance in the dust Lilith breaks down the rows of bricks painstakingly aligned by the Rubble Women.

Mr. Kiefer sees a vengeful God and “the world as completely wrongly constructed,” he said. But beauty can emerge: “If you try to do something you cannot do, it brings you farther, it brings you to something else, even if you fail.”

There are days when he paints and hates his work. “It’s horrible,” he said. “You’re desperate, but the next day it becomes, sometimes, beautiful. Because I didn’t see what was inside. Desperation is a material for artists.”

The Kiefer piece is also meant to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the opening of the opera house, which was opened by François Mitterrand on the 200th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille prison. The building, which has a huge stage and wonderful acoustics, is less successful on the outside. But it does share two other themes with Mr. Kiefer: lost tribes and crumbling masonry.

The building has often been adorned with nets to stop falling chunks of concrete from hitting pedestrians, and the area around the building has become home to Paris’s self-conscious alternative youth, with their gothic and techno clothes, who share the steps with drunks and beggars.

The applause on the first night of “Am Anfang” was polite. The seven-performance run concludes with a free matinee on Tuesday, Bastille Day.

Middle Eastern themes are everywhere this summer festival season. In Avignon the Israeli film director Amos Gitai has done a play drawn from “The Jewish War” of Flavius Josephus, here called “The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness.” The story of the Jewish rebellion against Rome, it is informed by the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stars Jeanne Moreau.

Also at Avignon a young Lebanese-born writer who lives in Quebec, Wajdi Mouawad, presents a set of plays about war, identity and memory.

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