

Surrealism at the Opera

Thomas Adès *The Exterminating Angel*

The Exterminating Angel by Thomas Adès had its world premiere in July, 2016 in Salzburg, Austria (the city where Mozart got his start). This production by the Met is its North American premiere, directed by Tom Cairns, who also wrote the libretto, with the orchestra conducted by Adès himself. (Imagine seeing the premiere of *La Traviata*, directed by Francesco Piave and conducted by Verdi!) The opera is based on the 1962 film of the same name by the Surrealist director, Luis Buñuel.

British-born Thomas Adès (pronounced “ahh-DAYSS”), born 1971, is a distinguished pianist and conductor, and is considered as one of the most influential composers of the 21st century. *Exterminating Angel* is his third opera, after *Powder Her Face* (1995) and *The Tempest* (2007). *The Tempest*, based on Shakespeare’s play, had its North American premiere at Santa Fe in 2006 and was produced at the Met in 2007 where it received both critical and popular acclaim.

Luis Buñuel (pronounced “boon-WELL”) was a Spanish-Mexican film maker who was one of the most eminent practitioners and developers of the mid-20th century Surrealist movement. He was born in 1900 in a small town in the Aragon region of northwest Spain. He eventually emigrated to Mexico and renounced his Spanish citizenship in protest against the Fascist regime of dictator Francisco Franco. When he died in Mexico City in 1983, his obituary in the New York Times characterized him as "an iconoclast, moralist, and revolutionary who was a leader of avant-garde surrealism in his youth and a dominant international movie director half a century later".

Briefly, the plot of the Buñuel movie is this: 12 guests arrive at a dinner party given by the aristocratic Señor Edmundo Nóbile and his wife, following a performance of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*. They gradually discover that some dark force is at work, as one by one, the servants abandon them. Then they realize that they are inexplicably unable to leave, and civility begins to decline, leading to tragic, often explosive results. The plot of the Adès opera closely follows that of the film.

Surrealism is an art form and cultural movement that began in the early 1920s, and is best known for its visual artworks and writings. In the graphic arts, artists painted disconcerting and

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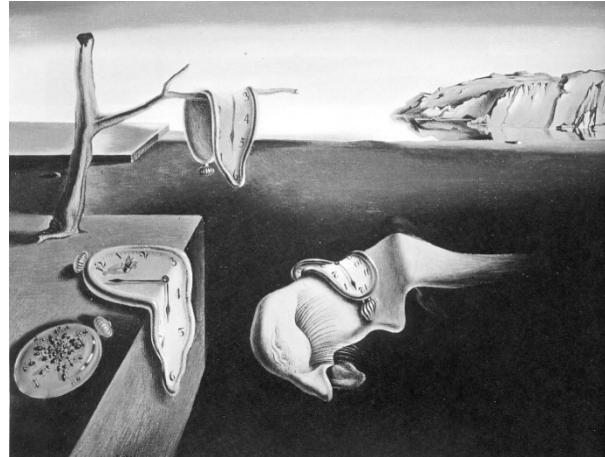
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seemingly illogical scenes with photographic precision. A familiar example might be Salvador Dalí's 1931 painting *Persistence of Memory*. (In fact, Buñuel and Dalí actually collaborated on several of Buñuel's earlier films.) In surrealist literature, events were portrayed that are full of supernatural situations and irrational non sequiturs. According to André Breton, one of its founders and a psychiatrist by training, the aim of Surrealism was to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality", and to express the subconscious in tangible artistic terms.



Buñuel never made any attempt to explain any of his work, and indeed discouraged anyone else from doing so. However, American film critic Roger Ebert, based on his study of both the film and of the life of Buñuel, wrote, "The dinner guests represent the ruling class in Franco's Spain. Having set a banquet table for themselves by defeating the workers in the Spanish Civil War, they sit down for a feast, only to find it never ends. They're trapped in their own bourgeois cul-de-sac. Increasingly resentful at being shut off from the world outside, they grow mean and restless; their worst tendencies are revealed." Today, those explicit references to Franco, Fascism and the Spanish Civil War may no longer seem relevant, but Ebert's analysis of the 1962 film gives us a clue as to how we might approach interpreting the seeming absurdity of the 2016 opera's surrealist plot.

Exterminating Angel, both film and opera, employ an established literary technique: the "locked room" drama. The author arranges a group of people in a closed and isolated environment and then explores human nature and the human condition by watching their interaction over time. For example, in *No Exit*, the 1944 play by the French Existentialist author and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, Hell is portrayed as a locked room holding three people who torture each other psychologically but are unable to leave. In another vein, Agatha Christie's murder mystery *And Then There Were None*, 1939, places ten people on an island isolated by a storm who die one by one; only at the end does the reader discover the perpetrator and motives. In the 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*, author William Golding has a group of English schoolboys stranded on a desert island, trying unsuccessfully to govern themselves until they are rescued. More recently, novelist Ann Patchett won several prizes for her novel *Bel Canto*, 2001, which explored the relationships among people being held hostage by insurgents in the Japanese Embassy in Lima, Peru.

Quite likely, we will find Adès's opera challenging, perhaps disturbing. But concerning one thing we may remain at ease: rest assured that after the performance, we will all be able to leave the theater and make our way home. So relax and enjoy!

