



The Perfect American: The dark side of Walt Disney's world

He gave the world Mickey Mouse, but Walt Disney was a racist megalomaniac who couldn't draw – according to Philip Glass's explosive new opera

Jessica Duchon May 30th 2013

Donald Duck comes to the London Coliseum? Not quite. Philip Glass's *The Perfect American*, about the life and death of Walt Disney, does not show images from the great man's empire, such is the lockdown on copyright. Never mind – we know what they look like – that's the power of his legacy. It is, instead, the limit of his personal power that forms the new opera's heart: his mortality.

A co-commission between English National Opera and the Teatro Real Madrid, *The Perfect American*, which receives its UK premiere tonight, is based on a fictionalised biography of Disney by Peter Stephan Jungk. At first glance it seems to have something in common with films such as *Citizen Kane* that debunk the inner lives of the rich and powerful. Headlines around the opera's world premiere in Spain earlier this year zoomed in on the apparent portrayal of Walt as a racist, anti-union megalomaniac who even considered freezing his own body for future resuscitation.

Nevertheless, in an interview for the BBC World Service's *The Strand*, Philip Glass pointed out that Walt Disney grew up in a time and place in which the attitudes he displayed towards race and politics were all too usual; that was never the opera's point.

Born in 1901 and raised in the small town of Marceline, Missouri, Walt had, according to Glass, “all the baggage that anyone from that part of the country would have had... He does appear warts and all. But what was interesting to me was how he thought about his legacy and about himself.” His creation depicts Walt facing his final illness and experiencing flashbacks to episodes of his life. It is, Glass said, fundamentally about “mortality and eternity – just those two things. It's enough.”

Besides, the essence of a good operatic character is that he or she should be a rounded human being. The charismatic British baritone Christopher Purves sings the role of Walt Disney: “I love it when you can find some unpleasantness in a character,” he says. “We all know people who are terribly nice, yet you think they're probably axe murderers underneath. There's a sentimental side to some people that I think can show that deep down in their psyche there's something rather disturbed.”

“I don't think Walt Disney was a horrible man, but there were many sides to him, including the ruthless businessman with an empire to protect – and we arrive at the opera with that paranoia fully intact. People who create these monoliths often have a problem with relinquishing power and life: what's happening to them, what's their legacy, what's it all been for?”

The staging is directed Phelim McDermott of Improbable Theatre Company, whose production of Glass's earlier opera about Mahatma Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, is a favourite at both ENO and the Met in New York. He suggests that Walt Disney in some ways is the perfect example of the American dream: “He's a small-town guy who started from nothing and created these characters that today are unavoidable all over the world,” he says.

“Behind the perfection of the animation and the vision there's the fact that he was a human being with ambition and had maybe some not so nice aspects to his character. People who worked with him said that they loved him because he was a great visionary, but he was scary because of his perfectionism. That's one of the themes of the opera: if you create something that's perfect, you simultaneously create its own shadow in the background.”

And shadows there are plenty as Walt, on his deathbed, is haunted by images from his childhood and his earlier life. An owl that he killed as a small boy returns as a symbol of death; his own animatronic figure of Abraham Lincoln malfunctions and attacks him; and there is a strange but pertinent encounter with Andy Warhol, who, perhaps like Disney himself, mingled high art, commercial art and terrific recognisability in his work.

With some irony, perhaps, that's true of Glass as well. Now 75, he has reached a sizeable audience with a breadth of which more esoteric composers can only dream. He is a highly practical artist and has devoted much of his career to opera, dance and music for film. *The Perfect American* is his 24th opera; he has since written his 25th. He has one of the most instantly recognisable musical voices of any living composer: those purling patterns that shift at a hypnotic, dreamlike pace, bending time in strange directions, could belong as convincingly to few others. Love it or loathe it – and it does polarise people – there's no mistaking it.

Decades ago, his music epitomised the style of what was termed “Minimalism”. Speaking recently at Bristol's Watershed, though, Glass remarked that in his view, the label ceased to be relevant to his work after just 10 years. The danger of applying it now, he suggested, is that people might go to *The Perfect American* expecting to hear music that fits the description – and they might wonder where it is.

Perhaps that is more evident to him than to his listeners, but according to McDermott, “It's unusually romantic for Glass. There's some extremely beautiful music in the opera but there are also some surprises and some humour. And it's got Hollywood in it, I'd say – you can hear the influence of movie scores from the 1940s and 1950s.”

For Purves, who as Walt is on stage for 11 out of the work's 12 scenes, the work is “a big sing” – but as challenging as the music is the system of movement that McDermott has devised to match it. “It's not exactly slow motion, but it involves realising that every movement has a start and a finish,” says Purves. “Generally it is played at a slower tempo physically than is normal. The resulting effect is that you're not conscious of time moving

and you're drawn into a world that is just slower – a bit like a slower animation. That, I think, is the key. It's as if we're animating as we go along, frame by frame.”

Even if Walt Disney is no Mahatma Gandhi, the message remains universal. Do we all seek immortality? Perhaps drawing a clothed mouse with round ears is the strangest way anyone has yet devised to achieve it.

'The Perfect American', London Coliseum, WC2 (0871 911 0200; eno.org) in rep to 28 June