

**The Exploration of Political References in Costume within
Glyndebourne's Production of "Les Mamelles de Tirésias"**

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BA (Hons) Costume for Performance and Film

Unit 14

2023

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Glyndebourne, specifically Lucy Harris, for hiring me on as a dresser during Glyndebourne's 2022 Season. This dissertation would not have existed without you. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to work with you!

Thank you to my tutor, Andrew Nisbet, who helped keep me on track and whose suggestions helped me to dive deeper into my chosen subject. I appreciate all your words of encouragement throughout this process.

Thank you to my mother, Heidi Jardin, for helping to proofread my work- pointing out all my silly mistakes. I really appreciate your inclusion of me in the process of proofreading, going through my paper with me while reading it outloud.

Thank you to my college library, for withdrawing so many useful books- giving me the opportunity to own, highlight and annotate these books. It has greatly helped me in the research process of this dissertation.

Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate how the production of “Les Mamelles de Tirésias” (Pelly, 2022) utilises the characters' costumes to depict the politics that took place during the opera's origins and within the current production. I utilised a variety of sources, from theatre productions to films, books to websites. Primarily, I investigated this topic through Glyndebourne’s 2022 program and reviews of the opera. The program had a lot of information regarding the history of the opera such as information regarding its playwright and composer. It also gave me a firmer understanding of the director’s intentions throughout the opera. The reviews helped me understand the interpretation of the opera from other viewpoints, which was very helpful when discussing my own opinions versus the opinions of other viewers. In conclusion, I discovered that the director did not intend to explore politics within the production, however; that did not mean he could not have been influenced by current politics or the events which influenced the playwright and composer during the opera's conception. In the end, my observations are all subjective. Nonetheless, these observations give new insight into how the opera could be interpreted through the costuming. This includes how characters' relationships with one another can be explored through political references within the costuming or how modern interpretations of historical garments can influence an audience's understanding of a character.

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Introduction

Within this essay, I will be analysing and evaluating the costuming in Glyndebourne's production of "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Pelly, 2022) and how it is utilised through different characters to depict the politics that took place during the opera's origins and within the current production. As a practitioner currently studying and training for a Bachelors in Costume for Performance and Film, I am intrigued by how politics can affect how a character is costumed, especially considering the turbulent nature of politics today. I have chosen to explore Glyndebourne's production of "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Pelly, 2022), specifically, as I had the opportunity to watch the Poulenc Double Bill of "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Pelly, 2022) and "La Voix Humaine" (Pelly, 2022) during Glyndebourne's 2022 Season, while I was working as a dresser for two other operas. "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Pelly, 2022) intrigued me by its seemingly simplistic abstract costuming as well as its comedic approach to gender politics.

Do the costumes possess meaning?

At first glance, Pelly's costumes do not seem to carry much meaning other than being a colourful spectacle for the audience's enjoyment. There is not really any in-depth explanation as to why the costumes are the way they are in any interview or review. The only clarification given is that Pelly wanted to make the production seem like 'be[ing] in a dream[-like] space' (Valencia interviewing Pelly, 2022), following the aim of most surrealist productions. However, I believe that even if done subconsciously, the costumes have been used to depict current events as well as allude to the occurrences that took place during the making of the opera's origins. Guillaume Apollinaire, a French playwright, invented the term 'surrealist'- to describe his play "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Apollinaire, 1917). The play was later developed into the first surrealist opera by the same name in 1947 by the French composer Francis Poulenc. Both plays were written during different wars, taking influence from the political occurrences at the time- such as the number of deaths, declining birthrate, and the first and second waves of feminism.

Though costumes can hold strong links to specific events and occurrences, they are used first and foremost to help the artists in channelling the character they are portraying, subliminally expressing a character's personality, feelings and foreshadowing the character's development. By subliminal, I do not mean the costume hides anything physically underneath it, but small nuances can often be overlooked by the untrained eye, blending into the garment. These can present themselves in small things, such as specific colours, a pattern or even an intricately placed brooch or handkerchief. They could also be presented through larger things, such as a piece of clothing that holds significance to a specific time period or event. The artist may have originally meant to convey something different, but audiences are free to interpret these details however they like, theorising what might happen to the character based on their own knowledge and experiences.

References to the opera's origins

In Pelly's production, it is suggested that Tirésias is the protagonist, being the titular character of the opera. Initially, you may interpret this as a comedic tribute to feminism from a modern perspective, reflecting upon the period in which the opera was initially written. Even the objectifying title, which translates to "The Breasts of Tirésias", can be overlooked as a comical visual interpretation of women relinquishing their feminine features in order to take on the roles previously held by men. However, the truth of the matter is that Tirésias is a foil for her husband, objectified, only utilised to emphasise the journey of the male counterpart- her husband. 'Spectators are encouraged to identify with [...] the male hero and make the heroine a passive object of erotic spectacle' (Chaudhuri, p.31). This statement is amplified as Tirésias is given no clearly grounded personality, the morals and ideals that make up their character are revealed to contradict one another as the plot progresses. This is presented through the way their character dresses throughout the opera.



Figure 1: (Pelly, 2022)

Tirésias is first introduced wearing a white corset, as shown in Figure 1. Due to the media, modern audiences have been instilled with the belief that corsets were restrictive- impeding breathing and movement. However, in reality, corsets ultimately acted as modern bras and shapewear, giving support to the wearer. Badly fitted corsets or corsets that have not been broken in properly for actors in theatre and film have perpetuated this misconception. It is rumoured that this has become such an issue, that period dramas from Netflix, BBC and ITV are planning to forgo the restrictive garment noting health and safety concerns voiced by young actresses, 'report[ing] bruising and even breathing problems.' (Willix quoting a source, 2023). Pelly plays into this modern belief- utilising the corset as a symbol of restriction from which Tirésias breaks free from, ripping open the top of the undergarment and tearing off her breasts. In the following scene, Tirésias' husband is shown wearing the corset previously worn by his wife. The symbolic transfer of clothing from wife to husband could represent the feeling of inferiority men felt as women took their jobs during the second world war, referencing the opera's initial conceptualisation.

They are made anxious by their apparent 'redundancy' finding their traditional functions taken over by other men or, more disturbingly, by women, whose mobilisation on the home front during the war showed to returning soldiers that society could manage quite well without them. (Chaudhuri quoting Silverman, p.111)



Figure 2: (Pelly, 2022)

This statement is further visually supported by the tightly bound rope held by the policeman, as seen in Figure 2, further constricting the husband's movement. Making reference to how society at the time felt that the government had played a part in this situation- sending men off to war to die, only for those who returned to feel they lacked purpose. By showing Tirésias' husband adorned in the same clothing she would wear while he is getting harassed by male authority, Pelly alludes to the hardships Tirésias might have had to go through and possible reasons as to why she decided to make the extreme decision to become a man. Not only does this show the domestic restrictions women had to face but also the political restrictions, such as the ability for women to vote or the wage gap between men and women doing the same jobs in the same positions.



Figure 3: (Pelly, 2022)



Figure 4: (Hawks, 1953)

However, this narrative quickly diverges as Tirésias, disguised as a fortune teller as shown in Figure 3, reveals themselves- dressed in a garment that closely resembles the “New Look” silhouette of the late 1940s. A look that encapsulated the ‘glamourised, old-fashioned, feminine ideal’ (Kindersley, p.325) which was highly critiqued by the emerging movement for women’s liberation, who felt that ‘the tight waists and emphasised busts [...] were a [deplorable] demonstration of the objectification of women’ (Moses, 2019). In doing this, Pelly presents an opposing view of women from the opera’s initial conception. This disputes the feminist ideals preached by the female lead in the beginning, gauging more so towards appealing to the male gaze. This interpretation is further supported by the pink dress worn by Tiresais. The dress is provocative, made up of pink gloves positioned to suggest multiple hands grasping at Tiresais’ chest, legs and head. This makes sense, as it has a striking resemblance to Marilyn Monroe’s pink dress in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” (Hawks, 1953). Marilyn Monroe was a fashion and sex symbol prevalent during the 50s and 60s, feeding into the concept of the male gaze.

There were quite a few women who longed for a change in fashion, tired of the minimalistic, masculine cut uniforms which dominated the industry during the war- wanting to return to a more feminine look. Supporting this theory further, this desire for fashion is represented through the chorus, shown in Figure 4, whose silhouettes mirror modern haute couture fashion. It is intriguing that the costumes hold a uniform-like look - following a black-and-white colour scheme. Pelly might have done this in order to differentiate the chorus from the principal characters, making the leads more easily distinguishable- causing their colours to pop. However, due to the unique shapes of hair and clothing, it is suggested that the chorus represents a modern haute couture look, alluding to a more androgynous style. This works well in context with the message the opera is trying to convey, balancing and putting focus on the struggle of gender role stereotypes addressed by the principal characters.



Figure 5: (Pelly 2022)

Does this production have political intent?

Glyndebourne’s production of “Les Mamelles de Tirésias” (Pelly, 2022) is self-proclaimed as ‘a giddy romp of an opera that throws questions of politics, gender and society up into the air’ (Glyndebourne, 2022), suggesting Pelly approached the opera from an unpolitical standpoint. Drag Queen, Le Gâteau Chocolat, supports this claim, expressing that the opera ‘does not transgress the boundaries of current political correctness’ (Malone quoting Le Gâteau, 2022). The opera is not meant to make a political statement, covering accepted modern gender norms of transition and gender identity, however; that does not mean that there are no outliers who do not accept this perceived norm. The audience is key in this situation- if this production was presented in the Middle East or other conservative communities, the scantily clad actors would be seen as challenging gender norms, going against traditional gender roles. Though the United Kingdom is a progressive country, it does not mean there are those who would see this production as a commentary on gender politics. Pelly may have intended for the opera to be an amusing production with no real strong message behind it, but due to its status as a surrealist opera, it takes influence from the unconscious - drawing upon inspiration from everyday life.

In addition to this, the direction of the opera cannot escape the author or composer's unconscious choices completely either. In his lifetime, Poulenc only wrote three operas. 'Poulenc rarely embarked on any project lightly, so [...] Glyndebourne's double bill may be comedic, anarchic and surreal, but [it has] a serious purpose.' (Malone, 2022). Outside of both the original play and opera being praised as symbols of patriotism for the French after their respective wars, Poulenc's intentions have been questioned in regards to his sexuality as 'anything that got in the way of procreation [was considered] degenerate[, ...] includ[ing] homosexuality.' (Malone, 2022). This idea draws upon Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality regarding the unconscious mind, suggesting Poulenc's sexuality and views regarding sexuality were transposed, whether consciously or unconsciously.

An opera mocking gender norms written by a gay (or bisexual) composer under a regime that celebrated traditional values, and the return of women to the household, must have had a subversive intent. (Jackson, p.127)

However, this is opposed by letters between Poulenc and baritone Bernac, who claimed that Poulenc's 'music that is so french [would ...] give back a little importance to [their] unhappy country [after the war].' (Jackson, p.128) Poulenc wanted to reconnect with France's airy spirit, which he felt was best represented through Appolinaire's work. If we were to argue that Poulenc had 'subversive intent', it can be dismissed due to the fact he saw himself as these characters, having been quoted as saying, 'Blanche [the main character in Dialogues des Carmelites] was me,[...] and Elle [the woman] is me once again' (Mellor quoting Poulenc, p.119). He had gone through similar trials and tribulations as these characters, which I believe he must have wanted to represent through his work. In addition to this, having explored the costuming of Glyndebourne's production in relation to the narrative- I believe that Poulenc wanted to represent the trials and tribulations the French had to face. How they triumphed over the societal and political barriers placed before them.

Overall, Pelly may not have intended to make a political comment through his work, but due to the extensive history behind this production- political commentary is made whether intentional or not. The same goes for Poulenc; he may not have intended to make a commentary mocking gender norms but the events that affected him in his lifetime and made him who he is affected the perceived intent. With this in mind, Appolinaire, Poulenc and Pelly all approach these complex topics in an easily digestible format, akin to modern comedians making political commentary. Using their medium to make a comment on the society they live in, ultimately giving us a snapshot into what their lives are/were like.

The effect of presentation

Intent can also be presented through presentation. Glyndebourne paired two of Poulenc's productions, "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Pelly, 2022) and "La Voix Humaine" (Pelly, 2022), as a double bill. Pairing these two productions by the same composer was not only meant to show off Poulenc's work but also complement one another with their female leads and contrasting genres. This is presented through the staging and costuming as the productions' switch[...] from [a] monologue to [an] ensemble piece, from monochrome into technicolour, the mood flips 180° into joyous, nose-thumbing, slapstick irreverence.' (Karlin, 2022) "La Voix Humaine" (Pelly, 2022) presents itself as a tragedy; the neutral tones and monochrome colouring of the set and costuming relay the desperation and depression Elle, the female lead, feels. In comparison, "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" (Pelly, 2022) represents a bold and confident female lead, Tirésias, whose various contradictory opinions and big ideas are all reflected through the bright, bold costuming and set. This shows how these differing productions use these opposing female leads to amplify their differences.

Elle is initially covered in a trench coat as shown in Figure 6, concealing her body- representing how she is trying to hide her emotional state. However, as the production goes on, she sheds her trench coat, revealing the nightdress underneath as well as the emotional state she has been trying to hide. One review states that 'Elle wants nothing more than sexual subservience, and it doesn't turn out well for her' (Karlin, 2022), which I would have to disagree with. Elle cannot accept the reality of her recent breakup and is desperate to return to the relationship she had previously, only to realise it is too late. Elle is presented as a dependent person, unable to cope without her partner. Her mental health is reflected through her costume, as mentioned before. The way she adjusts the trenchcoat and her body language relay a lot of what she is thinking and feeling.



Figure 6: (Glyndebourne, 2022)

In comparison, Tirésias presents themselves as a strong female lead who will not put up with the societal restrictions placed upon them. They start off in a revealing corset, which, as mentioned previously, is a symbol of restriction. In the next scene, they are seen in a men's suit, fulfilling their self-proclaimed new role as a man. The next and final time we see Tirésias is when they are disguised as a fortune teller, returning back to their role as a woman. One review reflected this by pointing out that, 'Thérèse [, referred to as Tirésias after the first scene,] isn't going to put up with it, and we get a glorious romp as a result. I'm slightly disappointed that she relents in the end' (Karlin, 2022), which is true; it is disappointing. However, as explored through references to the opera's origins, this change in character could be a reference to the differing opinions of women during the late 1920s and 1940s. This is also reflected through modern perspectives, where various individuals have different outlooks and opinions regarding gender politics. In a sense, it shows how dimensional Tirésias is, however; it can also be interpreted as them being used as a blank slate- not bound by one view or opinion. It makes their character seem impulsive and contradictory- unable to strongly feel one way or another.

By combining these two productions together, Pelly reinforces the differences between the female leads. Elle is an emotional character, dependent on her previous partner and unwilling to let go of the past. Whereas Tirésias is a strong, independent and bold lead- following her own path- whether that is objecting to traditional values or accepting her gender role as appointed by society.

References to modern politics

Having looked at whether the opera has political intent and the effect of its presentation, I would like to return our focus back to “Les Mamelles de Tirésias” (Pelly, 2022). How the production makes reference to current, modern politics and events through its costuming- whether intended or not. I will be referring back to visual sources present in ‘References to the opera’s origin’.

Tirésias’ transformation from a woman to a man, as shown in Figure 1, alludes to the surgery undertaken by those who identify as transgender. The corset symbolises the skin, with the flaps representing the skin pulled back while removing breast tissue. The cut of the corset also looks similar to the surgical marks left by top surgery. The issue with this is that Tirésias does this in order to avoid the societal barriers faced by women, not because they feel like they were born in the wrong body. This is supported by their reversion back into a woman while disguised as a fortune teller near the end of the production. While this is a comedic opera written by a ‘gay (or bisexual) composer’ (Jackson, p.127) back during the late 1940s, it still remarks on a harmful mindset held today. There is a lot of backlash towards transgender people today, with those who believe ‘allowing transgender people to choose their toilet could lead to [cases of sexual assault]’ (Thorn, 2016), using identifying as a woman as an excuse to enter women’s toilets, for example. Though many may have seen this opera as a positive promotion towards trans rights, the performance could be taken by others as affirming their preconceived notions- that transgender individuals are women parading as men and vice versa for their own self-gain.

While the opera has some negative connotations relating to current politics, it also has some positive messages bringing awareness to ongoing issues. Pelly uses the corset to amplify Tiresais’ husband’s chest, as seen in figure 5. However, he still retains his moustache, a decidedly masculine feature. This could be interpreted as a representation of someone in mid-transition. While wearing his wife’s clothing, Tirésias husband is harassed by a policeman- as shown in Figure 2. Outside of typically affecting women and girls, ‘policing clothing has also impacted people in the LGBTQIA+ community [regarding] what is appropriate for different genders to wear’ (Pecoraro, ‘no date’) with what someone wears being associated with the cause for sexual assault and harassment. This is not always the case, but this harmful association has been reinforced by society to the younger generation through the use of some extremely unreasonable dress codes. An example being that spaghetti straps in some middle schools and high schools in today’s society are considered inappropriate as female shoulders are too distracting for male students and faculty. This sexualisation of typically non-sexually associated body parts ‘submits to societal pressures of modesty that create a culture based on shunning and blaming women for men’s behaviours and actions’ (Baumgarten, 2021). Though a statement on this issue may not have been made intentionally, it still makes an impact due to this problem being ever-present and ongoing for women and the LGBTQIA+ community.

Overall, though Pelly may not have intended this interpretation, the opera can be interpreted in many different ways by an audience- both positive and negative. This is what makes it important to be aware of current political events. However, ultimately, I do not believe Pelly’s production is harmful to any community- instead, opening up communication about these topics. Comedy treads a fine line between what is offensive and what is inoffensive- not everyone will be happy with every joke made. When working with older works, it is important to understand the context and history behind possible influences as well as the initial intent of the author.

Conclusion

In conclusion, politics within the production of “Les Mamelles de Tirésias” (Pelly, 2022) are explored through audience interpretation. Due to this production being so new, there is not much information regarding the reasons behind the costuming and other aspects of the opera. The most I can conjecture is Pelly’s intent regarding the presentation of the double bill in order to amplify the differences between the two female leads. Pelly never intended for the opera to be analysed in such depth, aiming to create an abstract, dream-like world for the audience to get lost in. All my analysis is speculation, using the research done regarding the occurrences that took place during the opera’s history as well as current political events taking place today that might have influenced the director.

My interpretation of the opera is that it utilises costume to depict the relationship and feelings between characters, utilising the political events that took place throughout its history. This includes how the corset symbolises oppression felt by feminists during the late 1940s. However, it can also refer to feelings of inferiority felt by men on their return home after the war. The modern interpretation of the corset is used to evoke an understanding of its symbolism within the audience. Costumes are also used to refer to current political events, such as trans rights regarding references to top surgery based on how the corset is constructed. Overall, so much can be derived from the costuming of this opera that may not be obvious at first glance. Though it may not have been intended, I had a lot of fun deriving meaning from this opera.

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- Glyndebourne. (2022) *Figure 6: Elle (Stéphanie d'Oustrac), on a phone to her ex in Glyndebourne's production of La Voix Humaine.* [image]. Available at: https://glyndebourne-prod-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/08112515/Copy-of-%C2%A9BC20220802_VOIX_0076-1920x1300.jpg (Accessed: March 6, 2023).
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Hawks, H. (1953) *Figure 4: Marilyn Monroe in her iconic pink gown by William Travilla, performing "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" in 1953's "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," directed by Howard Hawks. [image]*. Available at: https://static.wixstatic.com/media/b987c0_602df2ecf4644596b22b40af844060de~mv2.jpg/v1/fill/w_1024,h_768,al_c,q_85,enc_auto/b987c0_602df2ecf4644596b22b40af844060de~mv2.jpg (Accessed: March 6, 2023).

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