

# Migration and Opera Old and New Repertoire Revivals and Eva Noer Kondrup's *Den Rejsende*

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses Eva Noer Kondrup's chamber opera *Den Rejsende* (Copenhagen 2018) to examine the challenges and opportunities provoked by the operatic form when attempting to create socially responsible theatre. Focusing on how opera reflects and contributes to contemporary discourse on migration, it examines how opera's unusual performance and reception demands differentiate it from, for example, spoken verbatim theatre. The article first considers the most common way opera companies today engage with migration – through productions of existing operas – in which socially responsible decisions are primarily in the hands of directors and designers and relate mostly to interpretation, and it explores some of the risks and opportunities of engaging with migration in recent revivals of repertoire works. It then analyses how questions of social responsibility in new operas extend to structural issues that are the field of the composer and librettist. The article examines Kondrup's decisions as librettist-composer of *Den Rejsende*, demonstrating the potential for opera to use non-realist operatic techniques to engage with some of the issues with which spoken verbatim theatre has wrestled, including questions of authority, authenticity and authorship, and of empathy, engagement, and identification. The production, performed by two Swedish singers from non-refugee backgrounds in multiple roles, favoured distancing techniques over "authenticity effects" and avoided tensions between giving voice to and speaking for contemporary refugees that can arise in spoken verbatim theatre. While the libretto contained found text, this was from historical refugee situations, and from the words of Inger Støjberg in her role as Danish Minister for Immigration, Integration and Housing. By throwing a spotlight on the words of an elected representative, *Den Rejsende* indicated an area in which audience members of what is often thought of as an affective theatrical form might have some influence in effecting practical change.

## KEYWORDS

opera and migration, Danish opera, *Den Rejsende*, Eva Noer Kondrup, opera and social responsibility, contemporary opera

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# Migration and Opera Old and New

## Repertoire Revivals and Eva Noer Kondrup's *Den Rejsende*

Opera is an expensive art form that rarely covers its costs of production through ticket sales. For opera companies reliant on state funding, initiatives designed to engage with the societies that fund them may be a condition of that funding; opera companies may have similar requirements placed on them by sponsors.<sup>1</sup> Since the middle of the last century, social responsibility initiatives by opera companies have largely fallen into two categories: measures to increase accessibility to opera in the opera house by demographic groups that are currently underrepresented in a company's audiences, and education-as-outreach programmes that sometimes also include the introduction of non-opera professionals to elements of opera performance.<sup>2</sup> Social responsibility in these initiatives is frequently one-sided, with discrete outreach departments of opera companies aiming to improve the lives of those who are not currently operagoers through interactions with a complex and often emotionally compelling art form, without a corresponding aim of the central functions of the opera company opening themselves up to change as a result of encounters beyond existing audiences. These initiatives often do not have a strong link to what is staged in the opera house or how it is performed.

Recently, however, some opera companies have broadened their conception of social responsibility to include more active participation by companies as a whole in the creation of social cohesion, with the intention of transforming attitudes of the company and of existing operagoers as much as of bringing opera to non-operagoers. In this article, I explore examples of one aspect of this: the use of opera to transform how existing operagoers understand migration and migrants, and to invite them to reflect on their own responsibilities and ethical standpoints.<sup>3</sup> I first explore a range of examples that show how opera companies have engaged with migration in more or less socially responsible ways through the medium of existing works of the operatic repertoire. I then analyse *Den Rejsende* [The Traveller], a chamber opera by Danish composer and librettist Eva Noer Kondrup from 2018, as a case study of the complexities of working through the medium of new opera with themes of migration and images of migrants and non-migrants without seeming to speak for migrants, and of how to create empathy without simplifying complex situations.

Opera companies, composers, librettists and others who wish to use opera as a medium

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1 On the various funding models for opera and their influence on contemporary practice, see Agid and Tarandeau 2010, 256-78.

2 On accessibility initiatives by opera companies, see, for example, Agid and Tarandeau 2010, 177-207 and Zalfen 2015; for education-as-outreach programmes by opera companies, see, for example, Dullea 2017, Soliveres et al. 2021.

3 Although not the focus of this article, valuable and innovative accessibility and inreach-outreach work relating to migrant communities often happens alongside this. See for example Komische Oper Berlin 2014 and the opera-focused case studies provided by the European Network for Opera, Music and Dance Education at [reseo.org](http://reseo.org).

through which to engage with issues of social responsibility face different challenges to those posed by spoken theatre, and practical differences in the art forms of spoken and sung theatre mean that critical approaches developed to engage with theatre and migration cannot straightforwardly be appropriated to study opera and migration.<sup>4</sup> For example, the demands of opera singing in terms of training and physical stamina mean that it is difficult for opera to replicate the participatory nature of some forms of spoken theatre involving migrants and migration if it is to remain within the boundaries of what is understood to be opera rather than some other form of music theatre. Pieter Verstraete's scare quotes around "opera" in the title of his chapter on "Turkish Post-Migrant 'Opera' in Europe" flag the difficulties of placing participatory music theatre firmly in the genre of opera.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, opera is itself a highly internationalized art form. As discussed below, one way that opera productions can intervene in the discourse around migration is to draw attention to opera's own migrant workforce.

Perhaps the most significant way in which opera and spoken theatre differ in their engagement with migration is that the latter does so predominantly through new works, often using verbatim text and non-professional participation, that can deal with matters of local and current importance, while the former is very likely to do so in more general terms, through directorial interventions in restagings of existing repertoire works with relatively fixed libretti and scores. Nonetheless, new operas are produced, if usually on a small scale, and, as this article's case study of *Den Rejsende* aims to demonstrate, these can engage as flexibly and locally with contemporary migration as spoken theatre. *Den Rejsende* shows the potential for opera to use non-realist operatic techniques to deal with some of the issues with which spoken verbatim theatre has wrestled, including questions of authority and authorship, and empathy, engagement and identification, but in ways that do not straightforwardly replicate the practices of most spoken verbatim theatre.

#### **Repertoire opera and migration: empathy and understanding, risks and opportunities**

Opera has a history of staging forced migration in emotionally compelling (and arguably manipulative) ways. This is especially so in large-scale nineteenth-century works. Amongst others, the massed choruses of Hebrews exiled in slavery in Egypt in Gioachino Rossini's 1818 *Mosè in Egitto* and Giuseppe Verdi's 1841 *Nabucco*, of Scottish exiles in England in Verdi's 1847 *Macbeth*, and of Trojans seeking asylum in Carthage in Hector Berlioz's 1858 *Les Troyens* all invite a vivid aural experience that evokes empathy with those forcibly displaced groups, who are clearly characterized by the score and libretto as groups of migrants. While the music of these choruses is stirring, the people to whom this empathy is directed are either historical or mythical: nineteenth-century operas do not generally relate to migrants contemporary with the time of the operas' first production, nor did they straightforwardly invite their original audiences to draw parallels between historical and then-contemporary migration.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one might argue that the trend for narratives featuring forced mass migration that began in the nineteenth century was primarily for operatic ends, a pretext for the then newly fashionable incorporation of large choruses, rather than primarily in order to invite audiences to consider migration as a contextualized and currently pressing phenomenon.

Opera, with its sung text, orchestral interventions, and suspensions of time, is not an ideal vehicle for stage realism, and the *Regieoper* techniques that dominate the staging and directing of much European opera usually have little concern with minimizing a lack of stage realism. Further, stagings of these operas are generally constrained by the existing librettos, which tend to focus on the emotionally fraught interpersonal relationships of principal characters: the storylines of these characters are rarely easily mappable onto the experiences of individual migrants today, and the recognition of migrants in contemporary stagings tends to be at the

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4 For writing on spoken theatre and migration see, for example, Sharifi 2011, Cox 2013, Cox 2014, Garde & Mumford 2016, Meerzon and Perry 2020, Stone 2021.

5 Verstraete 2013.

6 See Parker 2012 for a (not impartial) account of the long-running debate over whether the original audiences for Verdi's pre-1848 operas received the choruses as presenting a parallel between the displaced onstage characters and the people of the then-fragmented Italian peninsula, most of whom were subject to foreign domination.

level of the massed group. In contrast with much spoken theatre on migration which tends to invite its audiences to empathize with migrants as individuals or small groups and to understand their life histories, the strengths of the practice of staging existing nineteenth-century operas in ways that provoke a recognition of parallels between onstage narratives and current issues relating to migration perhaps lie in these operas' vastness of scale. The sound of massed choruses, often singing in unison (or more accurately, in parallel octaves), can be a thrilling experience that provides both bodily and aural pleasure. Productions that combine the pleasures of encountering choruses of migrant characters – whether historical or mythological – with a flagging of parallels between these onstage groups and groups of migrants today have the potential to grant non-migrant audiences affective access to ways of conceptualizing migration, and to create empathy towards contemporary migrants at the group level. As such, one might argue that this form of empathy works as what Jill Dolan calls an “affective vision of how the world might be better”, rather than providing a nuanced understanding of the causes of migration, or a plan for political action.<sup>7</sup> This in itself need not be accounted as of lesser political “value” than spoken theatre that depicts or engages with contemporary migrants' lived experience: if empathy with migrants at the group level does not necessarily entail an accurate understanding of their lives as individuals, the understanding of and empathy with the plight of individual migrants that spoken theatre often aspires to produce in its audiences does not preclude objections to “mass” immigration, however that is defined.

Nonetheless, in an art form currently heavily reliant on an existing repertoire, these historical works provide opportunities for modern-day revivals to comment on contemporary migration, or at least invite audiences to draw parallels between the onstage narrative and contemporary events. For example, the resonances with contemporary migration of Berlioz' *Les Troyens* – a work of such vast scale and difficulty that stagings were a rarity until very recently – may account for the recent increase in productions, especially in German-speaking countries. Indeed, the libretto lends itself to a reception in terms of modern asylum-seeking: on arriving at Carthage, a representative of the Trojans approaches Didon with the lines:

*Auguste reine, un peuple errant et malheureux  
Pour quelques jours vous demande un asile.*

*[August queen, a wandering and unhappy people  
Ask you for sanctuary for a few days].<sup>8</sup>*

Hedy Weiss, reviewing the Lyric Theatre Chicago's 2016 production of *Les Troyens* writes: “An ancient walled city reduced to rubble by a long and devastating war. An enemy bearing the gift of a fake peace. A prophecy of doom no one is willing to accept. A mass suicide by women who would rather take their own lives than be raped and enslaved by their conquerors. A refugee population battered in a perilous journey at sea, but welcomed by a foreign state where it helps fend off an enemy. A great but guilt-ridden love that ultimately cannot withstand the call of a homeland. All this might sound like a story grabbed straight from contemporary headlines.<sup>9</sup>”

Here, Weiss draws generalized parallels between the opera and contemporary events read about in the press rather than experienced in most audience members' lived reality. Such parallels may remind audiences that we live in a time of large migrations, forced and otherwise, but do not usually invite audience members without a recent migrant background themselves to consider their relationship to migration: although choruses of migrants in nineteenth-century opera might well elicit empathy from such audience members, it remains relatively easy for a binary division between groups of forced migrants and individual operagoers to be maintained.

Problems can arise when a director attempts to move from the general to the specific, using operatic sign systems such as costume, props or gesture to signal closer parallels with contemporary, local events in ways that clash with an opera's words and music. For example,

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<sup>7</sup> Dolan 2005, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Berlioz 1969, 595. All translations my own.

<sup>9</sup> Weiss 2016.

Eva-Maria Höckmayr's 2017 production of *Les Troyens* for Frankfurt Oper appeared to be sympathetic to the plight of the Trojans (or at least did not undermine Berlioz' sympathy for them). For the scenes surrounding the Trojans' arrival in Carthage and Didon's granting them asylum, the production used costuming, wig, make-up and stance to make Didon, played by soprano Claudia Mahnke, look strikingly like then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose 2015 so-called open-door policy on asylum seekers in Germany was politically polarizing.

This likeness was temporary, and in later scenes Didon lost her resemblance to Merkel. Nonetheless, productions cannot guarantee that audiences, having been given almost unmistakable signs that a particular aspect of the narrative is to be read in parallel with contemporary local events, will not continue to read the narrative in that way if these signs are subsequently removed. This was especially so here, as the resemblance between Mahnke and Merkel had been so skilfully created as to create a *coup de théâtre*. The production as a whole did not appear to be critical of Merkel or her policies – indeed, the score and libretto during the Merkel scenes portray Didon and her actions sympathetically, and the staging did not contradict this. However, Berlioz' opera ends as the Carthaginians pronounce a curse on the departed Trojans, after Didon has committed suicide when her Trojan lover Énée leaves Carthage with his people. A continuing parallel between the onstage events and contemporary politics was all too easy to construct: the political system of a country led by a woman collapses after she welcomes asylum seekers who disrupt a previously peaceful and prosperous society. Or to put it more briefly: accepting refugees spells disaster. A production that on the face of it appeared to draw attention in positive and empathetic ways to the role of Merkel's policies in facilitating the entry into Germany of large numbers of refugees also became readable as an indictment of these policies.

Likewise, a production that does not take care with sightlines and how audiences throughout the opera house might be able to receive it runs the risk of undermining its apparent attempts to create a critical stance towards anti-migrant sentiment. Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims* is another opera that has recently seen an increase in production despite the expense of its unusually large cast of principals, due to its promotion of both European unity and national difference within Europe, pertinent to the EU in the age of Brexit. The Deutsche Oper Berlin's 2018 production appeared to wish to engage audiences with issues of exclusion and inclusion within Europe, drawing attention to the use of media spectacle and stereotype in influencing our views of others. Instead of the original's setting in an inn, this production was set in what appeared to be a psychiatric sanatorium. A challenge for contemporary productions is that the 1825 libretto contains lines, sung by a principal soprano and repeated by the chorus, wishing for the fall of the Ottoman Empire and giving a vision of a re-Christianized Europe that would resonate with anti-Muslim rhetoric and right-wing tropes of the re-Christianization of Europe today: "Contra i fedeli ancora/ lotta falcata luna/...simbol di pace e di gloria/ la croce splenderà" [the crescent moon still does battle with the faithful... the symbol of peace and glory, the cross will shine in splendour]. This production seemed to wish to draw attention to the ways in which people are manipulated into exclusionary positions: the soloist was portrayed as a manipulator of the emotional effects of spectacle. While the soloist and other principals passed out what appeared to be pills to the chorus before they repeated her words, the blocking was so complex, the prop pills so small, and the gestures used to distribute them so indistinct that for large parts of the opera house they were either barely or not at all visible. Even when they were visible, their meaning was not immediately obvious. In contrast, the Italian and German supertitles made the words entirely clear. As a result, depending on one's position in the auditorium, the chorus's repetition of the soloist's words appeared to be an unproblematic endorsement of them that the production as a whole could be understood as sharing, rather than as a demonstration of manipulation and control. At one production I attended, the chorus's repetition was greeted by whoops and cheers of approval from large numbers of audience members seated at a distance from the stage. What apparently was intended to draw attention to media manipulation of the masses against non-Christian migrants appeared to be received by some as straightforwardly anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Nonetheless, repertoire opera can intervene in discourse around migration in less risky, more socially responsible ways, sometimes by using "familiarization" techniques that we might think of as the reverse of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*. One way in which these

familiarization techniques work is to obstruct a binary division of society into migrants/non-migrants, instead creating a sense of a continuum of migrant identities. This might take the form of framing in terms of migration a well-known narrative that is not usually thought of in that way. It might also take the form of drawing attention to the reliance of many opera companies on migrant labour. For example, in the Komische Oper Berlin's 2018 production of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* otherwise performed in German, Nicole Chevalier as Cunegonde and Maria Fiselier as Paquette spoke lines in their native English and Dutch. Act One ended with the main characters fleeing Europe for the New World on inflatable dinghies similar to those seen on news reports of migrants crossing the Mediterranean. The implications here are more complex than the paralleling of Didon and Merkel in *Les Troyens*, in which a high-profile person closely associated with policies around migration to Europe is referenced in ways that do not fundamentally challenge mainstream depictions of migration. Instead, well-known European literary characters are framed as refugees in ways that lead one to question why they are not usually so framed, given the narrative within which they find themselves. At the same time, Europe is framed as at least a historical producer of refugees, rather than solely as a recipient of them. That this visual framing occurs just before the interval provides audiences with time to process it, rather than being swept along in the ongoing narrative.

Finally, in this section on techniques in the staging of existing repertoire, familiarization techniques can also be introduced in peritheatrical material such as programme books. For example, the 2018 production of Paul Lincke's 1899 comic operetta *Frau Luna* in Berlin's Tipi am Kanzleramt had a culturally and ethnically diverse cast. Instead of the usual biographies listing singers' training and previous roles, the programme book had a short essay by each cast member that presented them in terms of migration, whether from the other side of the world, from one European country to another, from former East Berlin to former West Berlin, or simply between adjacent suburbs. Peritheatrical material here clearly presented migration as a continuum on which all cast members could place themselves, and on which the audience were also invited to place themselves. As this production showed, for a company to engage with migration in socially responsible ways it is not necessary to choose an opera with a migration-related storyline. That the site of thinking about migration might shift from the opera-as-artwork to the opera-as-event potentially opens up a company's entire season to socially responsible work.

### **New opera and migration: *Den Rejsende***

While the staging of existing works is by far the most common way opera has engaged with contemporary migration, new small-scale operas with small casts and limited orchestral accompaniments can effectively reflect local, contemporary concerns, and can invite audiences to relate to migration and migrants at the individual rather than group level, although this is still highly unusual. In this section, I discuss *Den Rejsende*, a chamber opera that, on the surface, deals with contemporary migration issues in Denmark, but also takes a wider view of migration in Europe. By 2018, migration had become a particularly fraught area of Danish politics, with the government's obsession with hardline approaches to migration reflected in a barrage of oppressive legislation introduced by Inger Støjberg, Minister for Immigration, Integration and Housing since 2015 that made conditions for migrants more difficult. (As an indication of the extent of Støjberg's activity, in March 2017, she notoriously published a photograph of herself on Facebook, holding a cake marked with a 50 and a Danish flag, to celebrate her fiftieth legislative intervention in less than two years aimed at tightening immigration law).

*Den Rejsende* premiered in February 2018 in Copenhagen Opera House's Takkeloft black-box stage, and then played at the Brecht festival, "Dage med Brecht" [Days with Brecht] in Svendborg on Funen later that month. The cast consisted of two Swedish singers, Cecilia Lindwall (soprano) and Anna Einarsson (mezzo-soprano), and three Danish instrumentalists, none of whom had obvious signs of a migrant background, and who were placed slightly to the side of the main playing area, visible to the audience. Thus the cast was not entirely Danish, reflecting opera's status as a migrant industry, but also did not appear to contain refugees. That the singers were not Danish usefully obstructed a naturalization of the singers with Danish characters. As far as the opera can be reduced to a clear storyline, it tells of a Syrian refugee and her daughter as they make their way to seek asylum in Denmark. At the Danish border

they are met with abuse from a border guard. In a final scene, they appear to have reached a peaceful village: whether this is in Denmark or not is unclear.

While the libretto included verbatim text, in the sense that it used the words of real people, its sourcing of such text differed significantly from the ways that spoken verbatim theatre usually sources its verbatim text: *Den Rejsende's* verbatim text was not sourced from interviews with migrants, but was drawn from *Jeg drømmer om fred [I Dream of Peace]*, a book of images, poems and letters by children of the former Yugoslavia detailing their experience of war, published by UNICEF twenty-four years before the opera was produced, and also from the words of Inger Støjberg, in her role as Minister for Immigration, Integration and Housing. One might rather say that the libretto included found text, rather than verbatim text. The opera, with its non-refugee cast, thus avoided the issue of non-refugees appearing to speak for the refugees they represent on stage. As Caroline Wake argues of spoken verbatim theatre, "our accounts of visibility stress, rightly, the ethical and political effects that visibility might have on refugees. In doing so, however, we ignore what visibility might do to more powerful entities such as prime ministers or governments."<sup>10</sup> As I discuss below, by throwing a spotlight on the words of an elected representative, *Den Rejsende* also indicates an area in which audience members might have some influence for change.

While Wake notes that "casting practices for [spoken] verbatim theatre are increasingly realist rather than epic", *Den Rejsende* directly engaged with epic casting in the Brechtian sense.<sup>11</sup> Einarsson played multiple roles, male and female, adult and child, Dane and migrant, her shifts between characters signalled among other ways by her adoption of representative items of costume. Lindwall, in a long black dress and headscarf, represented Anne Nihal, a Syrian migrant journeying to seek asylum in Denmark. In a form of role "shadowing", this character, who describes herself as "lærerinde og handlerske" [a teacher and a trader], dragged a cart behind her over a floor-covering representing a map of Europe and the Middle East, thick lines emphasizing seventeenth-century borders between states. As such she was simultaneously readable as another cart-dragging itinerant trader displaced by war – this time the Thirty Years' War: Anna Fierling or Mother Courage from Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*. For me, while Einarsson's rapid changes of characters functioned diachronically, with clear distinctions among them, my relationship with Lindwall was characterized at times by an uncanny oscillation between Anne Nihal and Mother Courage, and at others by a sense of double vision as Lindwall was readable simultaneously as Nihal and Courage. For example, for those familiar with *Mother Courage*, the opera's final scene was readable as both a coherent scene within the operatic narrative and as a reworking of *Mother Courage's* scene eleven; here Anne and her young daughter Zeinab (Einarsson) are welcomed by a peasant woman (also Einarsson) in an apparently idyllic scene. However, in a re-enactment of the drumming scene for *Mother Courage's* daughter Kattrin, Zeinab climbs to the roof of the peasant's cottage and insistently beats on a drum, attempting to warn her mother (rather than *Mother Courage's* town of Halle) of the approach of a threatening but unspecified "them", before being shot by the three musician accompanists.

As a result, audience identification, or over-identification, with any of the characters was obstructed. In contrast to verbatim or testimonial spoken theatre that places high value on the authenticity of the stories told on stage, especially through the use of refugee actors, *Den Rejsende* did not set itself out as telling a factual story.<sup>12</sup> By flagging its constructed nature (among other ways through the use of found text, epic casting, and visible and interactive musicians), the production did not attempt to downplay its fictional basis or its non-refugee creative team through the deployment of what Garde and Mumford refer to as "authenticity effects".<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is questionable how effective these might be in a resolutely non-realist performance genre such as opera.

Instead, this complex use of role-doubling, role-shadowing, and cross-casting in gender,

10 Wake 2013, 105-6.

11 Wake 2013, 107.

12 For discussions of authenticity in verbatim and testimonial spoken theatre, see for example Martin 2010, Long 2015, Stegemann 2015, Garde and Mumford 2016, Gröndahl 2017.

13 Garde and Mumford 2016, 5-12.

cultural and age terms effectively destabilized issues of authority and authorship and encouraged both cross-cultural recognition and an acknowledgment of cultural difference. Alongside inviting a recognition of *Mother Courage* as a play about forced migration with similarities and differences to the experience of contemporary Syrian refugees, the incorporation of lines from Yugoslavian children displaced as a result of the Yugoslavian war provided an additional timeframe to that of contemporary Syrian refugees and *Mother Courage's* Thirty Years' War and added a further layer of authorship. It also worked to destabilize assumptions that frame refugees as a peculiarly contemporary phenomenon or as one with origins outside Europe, instead presenting Europe as a continent with a long history of displacement, migration and asylum seeking. The multiple levels of characterization also created multiple points of entry for empathy towards migrants. At the same time, the uncanny oscillations among these layers obstructed a sense that the production claimed to speak on behalf of particular refugees or groups of refugees: while *Den Rejsende* featured characters readable as contemporary Syrian refugees, the opera was not "about" current refugees, so much as "about" Denmark's relationship to migration and Europe's history as a continent of refugees, providing one recognized the production's layered structure.

While the programme identified these found texts, music incorporated them into the wider fabric of the opera, "naturalizing" them, so to speak, by using the same musical textures as those used to set newly composed text. Music also effectively created empathy without encouraging audience identification with the characters. Joy Calico discusses the potential for musical aspects to dominate all other aspects of opera performance, thus neutralizing theatrical dialectics, and the risk that this poses for productions that wish to provoke a Brechtian analytical rather than emotional or imaginative approach in their audiences.<sup>14</sup> Kondrup's score avoided this risk through a range of techniques. The dry tones of the instrumental accompaniment – accordion, double bass and percussion – drew on Balkan, Middle Eastern and klezmer styles, rhythms, and techniques. Rather than providing obvious harmonic support or counter-melodies to the vocal lines, these instead provided a disturbing, dissonant, threatening, rhythmic background against which the vocal lines were sung. The vocal lines were rather jagged, with little obvious tonal melody or expansions into aria or *arioso*, and with interjections of *Sprechgesang* (rhythmical speech with undefined pitch). At the same time, the vocal lines did not push the singers to the extremes of their ranges, where enunciation is often necessarily sacrificed in favour of pitch and volume, the word-setting was largely syllabic, and the instrumental accompaniment never overwhelmed the vocal line, so that the singers' diction was remarkably clear and the sung text consistently comprehensible even without the assistance of the supertitles that were projected slightly above the performers, thus allowing the eye to take in the whole stage picture while reading the text. As a result, if these clearly sung lines worked to elicit empathy, the musical writing obstructed an easy emotional identification with characters, the lack of arias – and even of an instrumental accompaniment that expressed solidarity with the vocal line – restricting opportunities for the sense of apparently unmediated access to a character's inner life that operatic arias often provide.

As mentioned above, *Den Rejsende's* use of found text was not restricted to the words of migrants or victims of war: if the ex-Yugoslavian children's texts gave an insight into the experience of war, the opera also drew attention to the role of Danish law and lawmakers in the difficulties faced by migrants attempting to flee that experience. It places at its centre a quotation from Inger Støjberg: "Det er kun rimeligt at tage smykker og penge fra flygtninge" [taking jewellery and money from refugees is only reasonable]. This was delivered in *Sprechgesang* by Einarsson in the character of a Danish gendarme at a border control point, with shouted interjections of agreement – "Kun rimeligt!" [Only reasonable!] – from the musicians, as Anne Nihal tried to cross the Danish border, the gendarme verbally abusing her, raising issues of ethnic nationhood and taking her jewellery. Støjberg introduced the notorious amendment L87 to the Danish Aliens Legislation, the so-called *smykkelov* or "jewellery law", in 2016. Among other things, this gave police the right to search asylum-seekers' clothing and luggage and to seize any valuables, including money and jewellery, in order to put these assets towards paying for the asylum seekers' state subsistence. Having the gendarme and the musicians shout Støjberg's words at Anne while the gendarme takes her jewellery suggests how the words of

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14 Calico 2008, 70.

those in positions of elected power permit not only legal action but give implicit permission for wider abusive attitudes towards others: indeed, the UNHCR had already warned the Danish government that this legislation risked increasing xenophobia not only in Denmark, but elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

If eliciting empathy with refugees and other migrants risks leading merely to a feeling of powerlessness to help them, feeling ashamed at the generalized actions of our governments can have the same result. As Alison Jeffers points out, “if shame is the *sole* outcome of seeing plays about the injustices meted out to asylum seekers, there is a danger that the effect will be enervating, sapping energy and leading only to despair and lack of action.”<sup>16</sup> However, *Den Rejsende* did not create a generalized shame: the use of an elected representative’s words opens up possible areas in which audience members do have the power to make changes, if not immediately.

I know *Mother Courage*, and was aware of Støjberg’s words, but would not have recognized the ex-Yugoslavian children’s texts unprompted. However, free programmes were distributed to all on entry to the theatre building, in Danish and English versions. These included the Danish libretto (short and easily readable before the performance) or its English translation: the Danish-language programme gave the original UNICEF quotations and page references, while the English-language version gave a condensed attribution, alongside an explanation of Støjberg’s words’ political context. Both versions explained the opera’s use of *Mother Courage*, detailing that Kondrup drew on a production by Odin Teatret from the early 1980s for the opera’s “rammefortælling” [frame story], and that the music drew on Balkan, Middle-Eastern and klezmer styles. This clarification created an awareness of further layers of migratory experience. This free peritheatrical material exposed the opera’s multiple layers and references to anyone prepared to read it, whether before the show, setting up frames for reception, or afterwards, clarifying moments of uncertain reception that otherwise risked being opaque or open to misunderstandings.

*Den Rejsende* appears to be a good example of opera’s potential to provide a site not only for the creation of empathy with regard to migrants, but for the learning and reflecting that might lead individuals to political action. For me, *Den Rejsende*’s political potential was unlocked through a combination of the opera-as-artwork and the opera-as-event, the interaction of the performance itself and its peritheatrical material in the form of the programme and the libretto, both of which I read before the performance began and also the day after the performance. A combination of music’s habit of lodging itself in the mind and reappearing spontaneously in snatches later, the memorably vivid stage images relating to *Mother Courage*, the uncanny sense of character instability, and the uncertainty as to the location of the final scene, whether a village in Denmark or elsewhere, kept me processing the production – and as a result its (and my) engagement with migration – for several days. The extended reflection on the opera’s use of *Mother Courage* and the ex-Yugoslavian children’s texts to stage Europe as both a producer and receiver of refugees prompted shifts in my understandings of contemporary migration and Danish and European discourses around it.

Opera’s social responsibility can thus extend beyond the accessibility and outreach initiatives that have dominated opera companies’ practices from the middle of the last century, to the creation of affective access to ways of conceptualizing migration through directorial interventions in revivals of existing works, and in the creation of new works, such as *Den Rejsende*. However, as Frankfurt Oper’s *Troyens* and the Deutsche Oper Berlin’s *Viaggio a Reims* demonstrate, a lack of care in guiding audiences’ reception of onstage action can lead to (presumably) unexpected meaning-making that undermines a production’s apparent attempts to transform existing operagoers’ relationship to migration. Further, as Berlin’s Tipi am Kanzleramt production of *Frau Luna* and *Den Rejsende* show, prompts to reflection on migration can be packaged in the opera-as-event as well as in the onstage opera-as-artwork.

Nonetheless, a review of *Den Rejsende* demonstrates that, however carefully a production provides operagoers with peritheatrical framing material, the political potential of multilayered operatic stagings that rely on such material can be neutralized if individual audience members

15 UNHCR 2016, 2.

16 Jeffers 2011, 154; emphasis in original.

refuse or simply fail to engage with it. Søren Kassebeer, reviewing for the conservative newspaper *Berlingske*, mentions neither *Mother Courage* nor the ex-Yugoslavian children: indeed, lines he highlights for their banality are in fact children's verbatim text, unattributed in his review.<sup>17</sup> This is understandable if he had not read the programme and disingenuous if he had: in themselves the lines are not emotionally charged, becoming so when the receiver is aware of their source. Instead of the nuanced approach to contemporary and historical migration the opera offered me in the instability of its layered characters and referents, Kassebeer appears to relate only to Anne Nihal, received as a single, stable character, whom he assumes the production "feels 100% solidarity with."<sup>18</sup> Instead of finding the opera a complex work, Kassebeer finds it "unbearably stupid."<sup>19</sup> Instead of experiencing the opera's multiple threads as an invitation to consider the complexities of the migratory experience from the standpoints of both migrant and host country, Kassebeer finds that the opera "talks down to people" "as if to spell out the message of Denmark's asylum policy as pure evil" such that "one might ask oneself whether Eva Noer Kondrup considers the audience to be mentally handicapped."<sup>20</sup>

This reading is difficult to justify, and indeed suggests a bad-faith reception on Kassebeer's part. The opera's layered structure, its musical and textual eclecticism, and its setting of migration to Denmark in wider historical and geographical contexts demand active interpretation by audiences, and the peritheatrical material given to all audience members makes it clear that interpretation is expected. The fact that individual audience members might read the programme and libretto before or after the production means that their acts of processing, interpreting and exercising of judgment will occur at different times. The possibilities for mass recognition by audiences of an apparent message in the opera (whether or not they receive the opera as "talking down" to them with that message) are significantly reduced compared with, say, the appearance of Didon as Angela Merkel in the Frankfurt *Troyens*. Further, for those who experienced the instability of the Anna Nihal/ *Mother Courage* character, it would be difficult to assume that the production felt "100% solidarity" with her: regardless of how we received Anna Nihal, *Mother Courage* is hardly an entirely admirable character.

Kassebeer's review is nonetheless useful in suggesting limits to the potential of opera to engage with migration in socially responsible ways: some level of open-mindedness among audience members may be required for an opera to prompt them to reflect on their own responsibilities and ethical standpoints. That a conservative newspaper critic resisted this opera's invitation to self-reflection does not mean that the opera could have done anything differently that would have caused him to change his views; that conservative newspaper readers who skimmed the review are likely to have outnumbered audience members does not cancel out the opera's impact on those who engaged with its challenges. Indeed, the fact that a newspaper review must be submitted very soon after a performance while the effects of the complex artform of opera lend themselves to delayed processing means that we cannot be sure that Kassebeer's review reflects the opera's extended effects on him. If an otherwise carefully constructed socially responsible opera does not touch every audience member immediately, this is not a sign of its general ineffectiveness or failure in a particular case, but a reminder that opera is part of a network of competing discourses and media circulating among individuals who are receptive to different forms of communication in different ways. If operagoers are numerically smaller than newspaper readers, the extended impact of the complex art of opera on those receptive to it is potentially transformative.

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17 Kassebeer 2018.

18 *ibid.* "solidariserer sig 100 procent med."

19 *ibid.* "ubærligt dumme."

20 *ibid.* "taler ned til folk"; "ligesom at skære budskabet om dansk flygtningepolitik som den rene ondskab ud i pap"; "man må spørge sit selv, om Eva Noer Kondrup anser tilskuerne for at være mindre begavede."

**AUTHOR**

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