

Natalie Dessay: Comedienne dell'arte

The French soprano Natalie Dessay dazzles in comic roles. But she's deadly serious about the business of opera, she tells Jessica Duchen

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When the Royal Opera presented Donizetti's *La Fille du régiment* last winter for the first time since the 1960s, it was champagne for the soul. At the centre of Laurent Pelly's glittering production was the trio of Natalie Dessay, Juan Diego Florez and Alessandro Corbelli – and they were not merely three of the greatest voices on the planet. Dessay's first entrance as the regiment's ginger-pigtailed tomboy mascot, clutching a pile of ironing bigger than herself, began a tour de force of superlative acting and perfectly timed slapstick comedy. (The production will be broadcast on BBC4 this Christmas.)

Dessay is now such a star that her two Barbican appearances this month and in January – the French soprano's first concert appearances, as opposed to operatic ones, in London – are already almost sold out. She was the toast of New York a few months ago in the title role of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. *Variety* wrote that her performance had "a visceral depth... not likely seen or heard since the days of Callas". And now she's gearing up for her first *Violetta* in *La traviata*, planned for Santa Fe, New Mexico, the year after next.

Dark, petite and fiercely intelligent, with a quick, cutting sense of irony, Dessay is anything but a traditional diva. Indeed, she had never intended to become an opera singer at all. "It's not a choice. Opera chose me," she declares. Originally, she wanted to be a ballet dancer. "At 13, I realised that I wasn't gifted enough, and I was disappointed. But I thought, OK, I can go on stage as an actress instead." She started taking acting lessons when she was 18, and eventually dropped out of university to work in the theatre. There she discovered, aged 20, that she "had a voice". A year later, she joined the chorus at the opera house in Toulouse, and further advanced opera studies took her forward at a rate of knots.

It wasn't long before she was wowing audiences with high coloratura roles such as Olympia in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* and the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*.

"But even now I don't consider myself a musician," she insists. "I know that I am, but I don't have that background and I consider myself more as a singing actress." Her intense stagecraft could make her the ideal *Violetta* – Verdi's Lady

of the Camellias, who goes from free spirit to painful death via the renunciation of the man she loves. Two of Violetta's arias kick off Dessay's new CD of Italian opera extracts, just released on Virgin Classics.

Violetta is quite a distance from where Dessay began her career. Does she intend to move increasingly towards the great lyric soprano roles? "No, because I want to be able to do many different things," she explains. "I'm happy to do Violetta, but also *La Fille du Régiment*, Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, or bel canto operas such as *Maria Stuarda* or *I Puritani*. The point is that I don't want to be bored." And singing Lucia or Violetta is certainly not boring: "I love the stories – I love extreme situations with big emotions and lots of blood!"

Given her predilection for the stage and for bloodthirsty legends, it could be a surprise to find Dessay appearing instead on the concert platform in the apparently pure, refined world of the baroque repertoire. Her December concert features Handel's "Dixit Dominus" and Bach's "Magnificat", conducted by the baroque specialist Emmanuelle Haïm, who is also French, and Dessay is particularly excited about the prospect: "For once, it's music that you can only do in concert; it's not something you can perform on stage. And I love working with Emmanuelle – she's like my sister. The way she sees the music, the way she conducts it, is very passionate, full of flesh very human. Some critics think that baroque music should be intellectual and rather disembodied, and that only specialist baroque voices can sing it. I think that's totally wrong. Music is music. We bring a roundness to the sound, and I love the way that one can achieve such a variety of colour in this repertoire."

Dessay's career trajectory hasn't always been smooth. Some years ago, she found herself beset by a sensation resembling sand in her throat. Medical investigation revealed that she had a cyst on one of her vocal cords. She underwent surgery and a lengthy recovery, only to find that the problem had not gone away. It turned out that a polyp was lurking on the other cord. Another operation followed, another year of recovery, and an evolution in Dessay's approach both to vocal technique and to the demands of mixing an international operatic career with family life.

How does she feel, looking back on this episode now? Dessay declaims in dramatic tones, before the question is even out: "It is the past!" She continues, "I'm happy to have lived through that and to have left it behind, because of course it was worrying, it was hard and it was long." She learnt, she says, that in terms of her singing, "I didn't need to scream all the time; the important thing is to build up the voice from pianissimo to fortissimo, not the other way around.

"Also, I had time to rethink everything and reorganise my life and my ideas about the job, art, family, children, and where my priorities are. My conclusion is that people are more important than art, but art is as important as the air we breathe! So it's not a very good conclusion. At least now I know that I don't have to make a choice. I have to be well organised to make it work, that's all. But it's also impossible. You have to realise that and not try to do everything perfectly. As long as you have children, you know that you're going to do your best, but you'll be wrong anyway."

Dessay, 42, is married to the baritone Laurent Naouri. They live in the Paris suburbs with their two children, now 12 and nine. "My daughter doesn't like it when I kiss the tenors on the lips on stage," Dessay adds, laughing. She frequently works with operatic heart-throbs such as Diego Florez and Rolando Villazon. "I try to explain that it's just my job!"

Hot on the heels of her recent recording of Bellini's *La sonnambula*, and beside the CDs of Italian arias and Bach and Handel choral works, Dessay is planning a disc of Bach cantatas with Haïm conducting. "I'll be dedicating it to the memory of Martin Luther King, who was assassinated 40 years ago next year," she adds. "He was a huge influence on my thinking and my life. I don't think many people will remember this anniversary; but it's important, we have to remember it."

Her other heroes are jazz singers – "Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Billie Holliday... perhaps in another life I was black!" – though she says that she has no intentions of trying her own hand at jazz: "I'm very far from that freedom and that musicality – I will never be able to do it. It's a totally different way of approaching music." Whether singing actress, acting singer or simply, as her CD is entitled, "the miracle of the voice", Dessay is clearly one of those performers who will never be content to stand still.

Natalie Dessay is appearing at the Barbican, London EC1 (020-7638 8891) on 17 December (Bach and Handel) & 26 January (Italian arias); her latest CD of operatic arias is out now on Virgin Classics