

Calixto Bieito interview: Opera director on the inspiration behind his bloody new take on Verdi's 'The Force of Destiny'

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by Jessica Duchon, November 7th 201

Calixto Bieito is directing *The Force of Destiny*. Those words might strike terror into the hearts of any opera-lovers who like their Verdi presented with quaint costumes and park-and-bark stances. Bieito, who has been likened to radical film directors such as Quentin Tarantino or Pedro Almodovar, could not be further from that approach if he tried.

Opera forums have been buzzing with the pros and cons of his take on Puccini's *Turandot*, which recently opened at Northern Ireland Opera in Belfast, set not in ancient fairy-tale China, but in a doll factory in the communist era. Among his other productions have been a cannibalistic *Parsifal* and a *Matrix*-like *Fidelio* – and while much has been controversial, his contemporary production of *Carmen* has been enjoying enormous success in opera houses all over the world for 15 years. But for Bieito, *The Force of Destiny* may prove to be a special test.

“For me this is a very personal show,” says the softly spoken and self-confessedly melancholic Spanish director, who is 52. He has not tackled it before. “I was offered it, but I said no. I felt that for this I had to be much more mature than I was 15 or 20 years ago. I think this is a good moment to do it – but the music has been with me for a long, long time.”

La forza del destino, to give it its original Italian title, is a marathon three-and-half hour epic. Two star-crossed lovers, Leonora and Don Alvaro, attempt to elope, but Alvaro accidentally shoots Leonora's father when he intercepts them. Her brother Carlo seeks revenge and the lovers try to escape: Leonora becomes a hermit, courtesy of fanatical local priests, while Alvaro joins the

army under an assumed name and encounters Carlo, also in disguise, at war. A series of impossible-sounding coincidences leads, inevitably, to tragedy.

The plot is sometimes dismissed as confused – indeed, the opera used to be considered “cursed” – yet it is based on a Spanish classic, *Don Alvaro; o La Fuerza del sino* (1835), by Duque de Rivas, the play credited with initiating romanticism in Spain. “The text is extremely familiar to me because it belongs to Spanish culture and it’s obligatory in school. I read it for the first time when I was maybe 12 years old,” Bieito says.

It is not so much a crazy opera, he adds, as an opera about insanity. “It’s related to the themes of the romantic period and the time of Verdi. It’s related to religion, fanaticism, nationalism, anger and revenge. In this opera, the family is the mirror of the war and the war is the mirror of the family. There’s a sentence I like very much, written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, ‘Civil war is not war but a disease. The enemy is internal, people fighting themselves.’ And I think that this piece is about three people who are fighting themselves all the time.”

“The piece in that sense is a kind of oratorio in chiaroscuro for the family,” he says. “Finally forgiveness and the goodness of the people is very important. In this opera the problem is the hate, the anger, the revenge, the blood of the family that provokes an explosion.”

Bieito has set his production in the 1930s during the Spanish Civil War, an era that has strong personal significance for him. He grew up in Miranda de Ebro, north-eastern Spain, not far from Guernica. “It came as a shock when I saw for the first time Picasso’s *Guernica*,” he says, “because I went to Guernica many times in my childhood. Guernica was the first time the Germans were bombing a city not with military objectives, but just bombing the people.” That was in 1937; the Luftwaffe attacked Guernica to support General Franco against the Basque government.

“It was only when I went to university after many years that I discovered that the biggest concentration camp in the south of Europe was in my city,” he recounts. “Nobody talked about this. In the 1940s the boss of the concentration camp was a German general, but in the civil war for sure it was a Spanish one.” The camp was closed in 1947.

Bieito’s grandmother lived through the civil war. “A lot of images in this show come from the stories my grandmother told me about that time,” he says.

ENO’s staging is a co-production with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where it will form Bieito’s house debut, in 2017-18; and with the Canadian Opera Company, Toronto, another first for him. Is this take-up in new territories perhaps a sign that the world is readier to accept the extreme darkness and intensity of the Bieito vision?

“I have never tried to horrify or shock,” Bieito says. “I’m trying to be honest with myself – and I feel privileged to express myself with the music of a

fantastic composer and with the text of a wonderful writer. Everything is interpretation. All opera, all art is interpretation. An artist must open his heart to express himself. I think – in a humble way, a simple way – that’s what I am doing.”

‘The Force of Destiny’ is at London Coliseum to 4 December in rep (020 7845 9300)