

Los Angeles Times

## Los Angeles Times

Arts & Culture  
OPERA REVIEW

### Live: 'Satyagraha'



Ken Howard

**SATYAGRAHA:** Richard Bernstein stars as Lord Krishna in the Metropolitan Opera's new production of Philip Glass' work. **The Metropolitan takes Philip Glass' work on Gandhi to exalted levels.**

By Mark Swed, Times Music Critic  
April 14, 2008

NEW YORK -- The production of [Philip Glass'](#) "Satyagraha" that opened Friday night, the first at the [Metropolitan Opera](#), is more than opera. This epic new vision of a Minimalist masterpiece revolving around the events in South Africa that inspired [Gandhi's](#) philosophy of nonviolence is also more opera than I have ever witnessed at the Met or learned about in the annals of the storied company.

To sit in the large, tasteless house in Lincoln Center and, after hours of, say, Wagner, fall under the spell of a soprano or bass as the midnight hour approaches is, for many of us, the definition of opera. Orchestra, conductor, singers and great music conspire to transport us to some mythical place that inevitably transcends a banal production or a composer's rotten soul or a physically clumsy singer with a cold. If opera is transcendental art, you need something to transcend.

Or do you? Everything that reached the ear and eye Friday was on the same exalted level. Gandhi's goodness and his political impact are not, I hope, in dispute. And at a long evening's end, when the American tenor Richard Croft cast a neo-Wagnerian spell, he did so to offer guidance for enriching the wayward world that we were about to reenter. That is the way in which this was more than opera and was, I'm quite sure, a first for the Metropolitan Opera.

Premiered in Holland in 1980, "Satyagraha" is the second of Glass' many operas and the first written for the resources of a standard opera company. Four years earlier, the composer and director-designer Robert Wilson had broken the operatic mold with "Einstein on the Beach," music theater of images created for the composer's own ensemble and with no sung libretto.

"Satyagraha" began Glass' entry into a more traditional musical world. But although he wrote for classically trained singers and a standard orchestra, he did not leave his experimental roots behind. The era of high Minimalism, begun some 15 years earlier, was ending but not over. "Satyagraha" has all the repetition in the orchestra anyone could hope for, and the Met orchestra, conducted by Dante Anzolini, an Argentine making his Met debut, let the arpeggios luxuriate. The sound was gorgeous.

Gandhi's 20 years in South Africa are treated as ritual in historical scenes that take place between 1896 and 1913. The ingenious libretto, which Glass devised with Constance DeJong, is taken from the Bhagavad-Gita, the

sacred Hindu text to which Gandhi was devoted.

In it, the Lord Krishna tells the warrior Arjuna to put pain and pleasure aside, that action is a moral duty: Be unconcerned with consequences, with victory or defeat, but act with the world's welfare as your intention. Krishna's words fit eerily well with the opera's well-known events, which include Gandhi's protest movements and the publication of the newspaper Indian Opinion.

The extraordinary new production, originated by English National Opera, is the improbable work of Britain's [Improbable theater company](#). Run by director Phelim McDermott and designer Julian Crouch, Improbable was the force behind the popular Victorian ghoul show of a few years back, "Shockheaded Peter."

Following Gandhian principles of self-sufficiency, Crouch creates unforgettable sets before the audience's eyes with newspapers, tape and other "humble materials." The backdrop is a curved wall of corrugated iron, which just happens to have excellent acoustical properties.

The production is a work of genius that ranges from the very simple to the fantastically ambitious, looking at times as if all of the Whitney Biennial has found its way onto a miraculous Met stage. There are aerialists and huge, amazing puppets. A sense of playful fantasy somehow suits the meditative mood of the music and the serious needs of the religious and political subject matter.

Each of the opera's three acts has a patron saint (and each act in this slow, luminous performance lasts in the neighborhood of an hour). Tolstoy and then the Indian poet Tagore look on from cutouts in the backdrop.

Throughout the last act -- which is taken up with the New Castle March, when Gandhi led thousands of protesting indentured workers -- Martin Luther King Jr. stands at his podium. Eventually he dominates the background against a cloud-spotted sky as Gandhi sings of eternity in the foreground. The effect, exactly one week after the 40th anniversary of King's assassination, was, I thought, unbelievably moving.

The singing, from soloist and chorus, was uniformly wonderful. Croft's Verdian rapture and Mozartian purity were just the beginnings of his creation of an imagined character. I couldn't have been happier with the voices of the women in Gandhi's life -- Rachelle Durkin, Ellie Dehn, Maria Zifchak and Mary Phillips. Richard Bernstein was Krishna and Bradley Garvin Arjuna in the mythical opening scene, when Gandhi gets his spiritual bearings.

If "Satyagraha" is general director Peter Gelb's new Met, then there really is a new Met. The opera so resonates with the moment that a month's worth of Gandhi symposiums and events are taking place around Manhattan. Tibetan monks involved in their own nonviolent demonstrations right now were in the audience, as was a Gandhi grandson. Glass received a hero's welcome at his curtain call.

But Gelb left out one important thing: "Satyagraha" is not among this season's high-definition broadcasts of Met productions at movie theaters. Someone who knows the ways of the company told me that adding it to the schedule could cost a million dollars.

They should find a million dollars.

[mark.swed@latimes.com](mailto:mark.swed@latimes.com)

Inserted from <<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-et-satyagraha14apr14,1,2468878.story>>