

And Then? They Do.

Ronald Jones

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I

Symphony of a Missing Room – archive of the forgotten and remembered, unfolds a tender poem bound up between the hearts of Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl. Rhythmically, emotions materialize in *Symphony*, then fade away, only to reemerge as elegies of experiences, past and present. As the pulse of their work quickens so too does your sentiment and fervidness. In essence, this is the Lundahl & Seidl imprimatur. Emerging through the exponential growth of artistic complexities, and layering moods, their mixt narratives evolve.

At the outset of the performance - it was first conceived in 2009 - visitors pull on nearly opaque goggles designed to translate crisp reality, the reality immediately beyond the goggles' lenses, into milky impressions, moody with atmosphere. You may have already intuited that the blinding goggles are not to narrow experience, as one

could suppose, rather, the very opposite. But the blinding effect? Well of course it envelops you, and precisely for that very reason, you skate along experience's freshest edge.



Symphony of a Missing Room – archive of the forgotten and remembered, 2014. Drawing, mixed media on paper, courtesy Lundahl & Seidl, Royal Academy of Arts, London

If you have no idea what is coming next, well, just imagine . . . things begin to close in, and equally if oppositely, exaggerate what you are living through. Why? Because in the end, the simple goggles first isolate *only to intensify*. The effect pricks intimate experience, which outside the goggles has become all too scarce. In lieu of sight, your other senses gradually heighten, eclipsing your

eye's literalism with the *visionary*, with *apparition*, even flickering *insight*. Immediately following on, it becomes apparent that Lundahl & Seidl have designed-in a second stage to your initial experience; a stage, no one could have foreseen . . . ethereal encounters creep in, and however blinded, you are hardly *visionless*, and while not hallucinating, you feel as if you see *into* what others hardly can. Startled when your Guide gently sides-up, you can't help but sense you're on the verge of something . . . of some unfamiliar form of cunning artfulness, which feels as if it is about to cave in around you.

Just as with some passages in life, where you are emblematically blinded, just as it is here, you literally carry on beneath the grace of *unexpected guidance*. This realization emerges, the moment your Guide materializes, when, ever so lightly, she takes your hand in her own, and begins delicately weaving you into, and through the various spatial and temporal episodes of *Symphony*. Your passage is narrated by a disembodied voice, as friendly as curious. Some episodes carry you through architectural interiors, some are literary, others inscrutable. Ironically, it is precisely the faintness of this experience of your enactments that automatically triggers the compensating enhancement of your remaining senses, still intact. At

first merely amplified, your sanities become gradually intensified. The Guide, the seer, is equally if oppositely like the blinding goggles, opening your way to other, now increasingly heightened experiences.

Masked within shadowy twilight, I imagine this clutch of people, to whom I now belong, as if seen from above. Huddled together, we cautiously *feel* (not literally groping, we have our Guide and one another) *along*, making our way a Pilgrim's Progress if you will, through trials of sorts. I'm thinking, from the outside, mustn't we all look positively enigmatic, just as it feels embedded here within our chiaroscuro worlds? Light and quivering shadows from the outside, steadily smear one passage of raw experience into the next. We have been cast in a role akin to Alfred Lord Tennyson's Sir Lancelot, who, upon first setting eyes on the *shadow* of the Lady of Shalott was defenseless to love. We too feel as helpless, but like the knight, hardly afraid.

From earliest efforts, Lundahl & Seidl's art was an unhurried affair, never losing its bearing - however you want it - with crucial particulars?, historic keystones?, artistic monuments? I could go on, but its effect? Kaleidoscopic. Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, and Sir

Alfred Munnings and Oscar Wilde and there are more . . . Sir Joshua Reynolds and Charles Darwin, and then? Still more to come . . . If only lightly grounded *by* history, their story is always grounded *in* history.

II

It is difficult to believe, but *Einstein on the Beach*, this masterpiece, premiered nearly forty years ago at the Avignon Festival where its stylistic resonances, and visionary ambiguities surfaced and with crucial consequences. Not least amongst them was the radical reappraisal of opera's future, which billowed, and then filled out through the sensitivities of Glass and Wilson. With efficacy, these reappraisals, forwardly thoughtful, and deeply passionate, were turned into repertoire. Lundahl & Seidl pinched from Glass and Wilson what they wished for, what they needed, or simply wanted, feeding their own idiosyncratic and closely-read interpretations of human emotion and deeds.

My intuition about the future of opera first stirred beneath the spell of *Einstein*. The next time something remotely reminiscent happened was when I woke to the

future of the performative arts under the spell of Laurie Anderson, and now for the third time, Lundahl & Seidl. That's pretty good company. And just to be clear, when I say the performative arts, I hardly mean its poor cousin "performance art" whose fate - self-immolation - was sealed some time before. Early in their career, Lundahl & Seidl "never *looked back over time*," instead they willfully embraced immediacy - the forward-most edge of the time arts, architecture, music and not least the theatre - with eloquence, though occasionally with raw vitality. That said, from their beginnings, they were always "*reflecting back, over time*," if you can appreciate the difference between looking *at*, and reflecting *on*, and of course you do. Isn't it true that younger artists have been mostly selfish to the core, while the intelligent and sensitive ones, at any age, reliably know from whist they came? Lundahl & Seidl fall into the second lot.

Remember the scaled-up production numbers, like the section in *Einstein* titled "Spaceship?" It features Wilson's three story graphic and morphing light scheme arrayed across fourteen stacked cubicles, where twenty or more characters pantomime workman-like movements; their rhythmic dance set against Glass' pulsing score. Abundant was its measured and layered gesturing, and

expression. The chipped magnificence of old-school opera's out-sized production was a hand-me-down, but one with a foreshadowing significance for Glass and Wilson; they re-fashioned it into what *they* would become; *their future with its past*.

For all the other touchstones these two duos share, the Big production numbers, "Spaceship" just isn't one of them. Why? Well for one, Lundahl & Seidl productions are allergic to "acting up," to the conventions of the proscenium stage. Bombast? Never a part of their DNA. If you have a circus to run, there is nothing wrong with **Bombast**. However, this is to not to say that the style, the motif hasn't its sophisticated range either; think back to how *elegantly Bombastic* suits Matthew Barney's prescience with film. But with Lundahl & Seidl, they smartly dialed it back to bombast, and only then did they maneuver ahead, capturing everyone's attention.

Taking things a step further, Lundahl & Seidl set themselves and us – their audience – against the tidal waves of stylistic grandiloquence, transforming us into collaborators, borderline characters. Each in our inconspicuous roles, our oddly silent chorus was afoot in the first twinkling of *Symphony*. But we were likely

oblivious to our roles, at least in those early passages . . . then instinctually we begin to improvise, from the outside in, rather than the other way round. *The other way round* is for actors, and the singers. Wilson and Glass seem allergic to inviting us inside, and why wouldn't they given the stylistic and aesthetic complexity of everything going on, from their sets to the script to their score? Maybe, some day, a sensational Lundahl & Seidl production will override their current intimacy. Thus far it hasn't, and it's worked to an advantage.

What strands of the Glass - Wilson DNA were carried over, and instrumentalized, what has insinuated itself into Lundahl & Seidl? Well if not Big numbers on the presidium stage, it is the irresistible compulsion for, and a taunt obsession with, the heroic or mythical character. To ask simply: a meditation on the historical figure? Yes and No. Wilson and Glass use Einstein as their front man of course, but in the case of Lundahl & Seidl characters, while historical *to be certain*, as often as not, they personify schizophrenic institutions. London's Royal Academy, as one example, has been set between two notorious and clashing personalities in *Symphony of a Missing Room – archive of the forgotten and remembered*. It seems counterintuitive, but Lundahl & Seidl always want to

handle a craving for ravaging contrasts with a deft, even sensual touch. And then, they do.

It is true that in the work of Lundahl & Seidl institutions may personify a notorious individual or two, whether Sir Alfred Munnings, the painter of horses and gypsies, and great enemy of modernism, whose infamous speech can be heard echoing once again from the Academy's Reynolds Room, where it was originally delivered, or Oscar Wilde, friend of the new. Wilde attended the 1888 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition; the year in which he published his collection of fairy stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and the year in which the future Sir Alfred would have turned ten. And while it might well be true that little Alfred Munnings had already out-grown Wilde's storybook by then, I doubt it. And why? Well, once I was ten. What we know is that the book was as popular as it could be in 1888. Perhaps Alfred read it, his innocent brush with the notorious Wilde.

Walking through the Summer Exhibition that year, the author of *The Happy Prince* searched for, and found the painting he had especially come to see. It was hung in Gallery VI. *The Lady of Shalott*. J.W. Waterhouse's 1888 canvas, stirred by Alfred Lord Tennyson's Arthurian poem, culminates in her deep, if spontaneous, love for Sir



The Lady of Shalott. 1888 J.W. Waterhouse, Tate Britain

Lancelot. It was a love christened by her having seen no more of the knight than his shadow. Tennyson, an artist with greater gifts than Waterhouse, or for that matter, most of us, gave life to her blind passion. And for Wilde, whose own artistic romance ranks with Tennyson's, as for him? He left the Academy's galleries that summer day ever more fulfilled - one of the era's balmiest romantics; a romantic *with* his art, but greater even still, *within* his life.

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