



## A CONVERSATION WITH SIR DAVID McVICAR

**ROGER PINES, Lyric Opera dramaturg:** *How would you characterize the dramatic content of Rusalka?*

**SIR DAVID McVICAR:** It's a fairytale for adults – ghostly, supernatural, romantic, profoundly sad and tragic. It's obviously derived from the same sources as Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid" story, as well as the stories of Undine and Giselle.

We've seen productions like David Pountney's [1986, English National Opera] and Robert Carsen's [2002, Opéra National de Paris] where the implication is that Rusalka dreams the prince. Our take is that the prince dreams Rusalka – or rather, summons her into existence. We're playing him as a romantic fantasist, somewhat like King Ludwig II. Longing to commune with nature, the prince finds himself creating Rusalka almost as a necessity.

**RP:** *Humankind's problematic relationship with nature is hugely important in your vision of the piece.*

**SDM:** The theme of man destroying nature runs through the entire production. Ježibaba in Act Three is essentially saying to Rusalka, "Why do you think you could love a human being? Man long ago severed his ties with nature." She orders Rusalka to kill the prince so she can wash man's embrace away in his blood.

**RP:** *Can you elaborate on the production's depiction of man's destruction of nature?*

**SDM:** We have a romantic forest with a pond, where a dam has been built. In Act Two, in the kitchens of the prince's palace, we see the carcasses of forest creatures that have been hunted. When we return to the lake in Act Three, we see that a storm has ripped through the forest – there's a real sense of desecration. The central ball scene in Act Two resembles a hunting lodge, its walls lined with the heads of stags, something like Balmoral [the British royal family's retreat in Scotland]. It's impressive in its way, but for Rusalka it's a terribly sinister place, the most uncongenial environment imaginable to a creature of nature.

**RP:** *Aren't the prince's guests meant to be pretty sinister as well?*

**SDM:** Yes, we depict a very oppressive society. The period of the costumes is the 1870s – dark, high Gothic. The architecture of the prince's world is Gothic as well, something like Ludwig's Neuschwanstein. It's gilded, hot, and stifling.

**RP:** *The foreign princess typifies that society.*

**SDM:** No doubt she's the prince's former lover, and she clearly expected to marry him at some point. She's almost more of a witch figure than Ježibaba, because she's so completely civilized. In a way, she's the apogee of civilization – absolutely what Ježibaba is talking about: mankind has cut himself off from nature, and the princess is the polar opposite of nature. She's also the polar opposite of whatever Rusalka represents – simplicity, childlike devotion to the prince. In the princess we see something very urbane going on – calculating, manipulative, but very human.

**RP:** *Your preparation has included a great deal of fascinating research.*

**SDM:** We're heavy on respecting the folkloric sources. I found that *rusalka* means "unquiet dead being" (think of *nosferatu* in Hungarian). There's something uncanny, spooky, and sad about Rusalka. The *rusalky* of Slavic mythology are like the wilis in *Giselle* – the suicidal young girls who have been betrayed and thrown themselves into the lake. They need to be *near* water, but we should remember that *rusalky* have legs, not tails. They're able to leave the water to sit in trees – that's all there in the folklore.

**RP:** *What about Ježibaba?*

**SDM:** Russians call her "Baba Yaga." She's the guardian of the forest – synonymous with the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* – willing to advise or to help, but always at a very high price.

**RP:** *And Vodník?*

**SDM:** He takes many forms in different cultures. Sometimes we see him as a strange, half-toad-like creature – the water horse in Scottish folklore is another version. Czech folklore has him as the grandfather of the lake, taking human form. He's an old man, dripping wet, who sits on the stones of the lake smoking his pipe, but he's not necessarily benign – he can also drag people to their watery deaths.

**RP:** *He has two wonderful scenes with the wood nymphs.*

**SDM:** The way they tease him in Act One is great fun – he's doing his "Alberich turn" in that scene – but they introduce the very serious theme of erotic yearning that runs through the whole plot.

**RP:** *Surprisingly, we get a bit of comic relief in the gamekeeper and kitchen boy.*

**SDM:** They're the common folk, with a different relationship to the forest than the prince and his guests. They're important in that they can show man having more respect for nature than the prince does. He's a hunter who takes from nature – the gamekeeper lives in harmony with nature. The prince violates nature, as he violates Rusalka.

**RP:** *So far we haven't said much about the music.*

**SDM:** It's haunting and, from the opening of the Act One prelude to the end of the opera, terribly sad. But it's also incredibly melodious, thanks in part to its folk roots. There's so much more to this piece than the "Song to the Moon"! The final scene, for example, is certainly one of the best duets any composer has ever written, absolutely heartbreaking.

That duet lacks the neatness of a Wagnerian redemption motif, or any kind of redemption for the characters. The prince hopes for *oblivion* (which is actually very Wagnerian), but there's no redemption at the end of *Rusalka* – she hasn't saved him, and she hasn't saved herself. She simply fades away into nature. The prince, after annihilating himself with her kiss, finds the peace with nature that he's been seeking through the entire opera.