

# BUILDING A BETTER MAUS TRAP

*By Eric Myers*



*Edmond Morin's painting of the party scene in the play by Meilhac and Halévy, *Le réveillon*, on which the *Fledermaus* libretto was based.*

When Johann Strauss, Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus* received its premiere in Vienna 140 years ago, it was hardly a failure, but it was not an instant success, either. Its popularity grew slowly over the years as productions made their way from one country to the next, steadily gaining momentum. Now it holds pride of place as the world's best-loved and most frequently staged operetta. Nearly a century and a half old, this party is still going strong. Even if operetta itself is a genre whose popularity is hardly what it once was, *Die Fledermaus* continues to hold the stage, always a welcome staple in the repertoire of the world's major opera companies.

Why is this the one German-language operetta – aside from Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, a distant second – that seems to have defied time? Certainly Strauss's score is a cornucopia of delectable numbers, including Adele's Laughing Song, the ensemble "Brüderlein und Schwesterlein," and the rousing overture, even though none is as instantly familiar to the general public as "Tales from the Vienna Woods" or "The Blue Danube." The premise is not altogether cheerful, either – it centers on a notably unsavory protagonist, Eisenstein, a brawling *haut-bourgeois* drunk and gleeful philanderer who seems to care little about the

pain he inflicts on his wife Rosalinde. The man is hardly a hero, and he receives a well-deserved comeuppance by evening's end. Despite these dark undertones, *Die Fledermaus* always leaves its audience laughing, and it's become known as an ideal show for the holidays, especially New Year's Eve.

From early on, the piece has proven flexible enough for updating, standing up to the often-outrageous visions of adventurous directors. Even at its first performances, it was marked by a peculiarity: Here was a modern story, about modern social attitudes and mores, taking place in modern dress. Operetta audiences in 1874



*Hermann Thimig, the debonair actor who played Eisenstein in Reinhardt's Berlin production.*



*Max Reinhardt, the legendary director whose production of Die Fledermaus dazzled Berlin in 1929.*

preferred their works set safely in the nostalgic, exotic past. Now, when we see a traditional production of *Die Fledermaus* set in the nineteenth century, we miss out on that *frisson* felt by its earliest audiences. It's regarded as a glamorous period piece, which it most emphatically was *not* at the time of its inception.

Throughout the twentieth century and up till now, progressive directors have sought to recapture that rather daring aspect of the work. The British public showed no great fondness for *Die Fledermaus* until 1911, when, in a revised modern-dress version known as *Night Birds*, it finally caught on. It didn't make it to Paris until 1904, where it gained few admirers (despite having been based on a French play, *Le réveillon*, by *Carmen* librettists Meilhac and Halévy) and wasn't heard there again until 1933.

It was the legendary director Max Reinhardt who mounted a successful reimagining of the work in 1929, on the stage of Berlin's Deutsches Theater. Scrapping the original orchestrations, he brought in musical *wunderkind* Erich Wolfgang Korngold to adapt the scoring. Korngold not only added his unique touch; he also interpolated some of Strauss's other well-known waltzes and polkas. Eisenstein was played in song-speech, à la Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*, by the highly regarded stage actor Hermann Thimig, and the trouser role of Prince Orlofsky was cast with a biological male. (Although this imbalances the vocal ensembles, it's done fairly frequently – tenor Wolfgang Windgassen performed the part, and today it's often sung by countertenors.) Reinhardt actually staged the overture, setting it in a wine tavern where Dr. Falke sat smoking and drinking. By the end of the overture, Falke joined the crowd in the famous waltz, his cape spreading out in a bat-like wingspan that visually echoed the *Fledermaus* of the title. Reinhardt's most memorable effect was his staging of Act Two on a turntable, which permitted Orlofsky's salon to spin slowly into the audience's view with the arrival of each guest.

The production created enough attention that it moved to Broadway later that year under the title of *A Wonderful Night*. Opening at the



*The glamorous Dorothy Sarnoff starred in the title role of Rosalinda on Broadway in 1942.*

# OPERA NOTES



*(Left) Anton Walbrook as Dr. Falke in the 1955 film, Oh...Rosalinda! (Center) In the film, the title role was played by Ludmilla Tchérina, pictured with Mel Ferrer as Alfred.*

SEEDGE LEBLANG/METROPOLITAN OPERA ARCHIVES



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*The party scene in the 1951 Metropolitan Opera production included (left to right, foreground) John Brownlee as Falke, Risë Stevens as Orlofsky, Patrice Munsel as Adele, and Nana Gollner as Ida. The production's endearing Frosch was Broadway actor Jack Gilford (photo top right).*



DAN REST



DAN REST

*Die Fledermaus at Lyric Opera, 2006-07 season: Act One – Dr. Falke (Martin Gantner) and Eisenstein (Bo Skovbus) look forward to the evening’s festivities; Act Two – the gentlemen at Orlofsky’s party are captivated by Adele (Marlis Petersen).*

Majestic Theater, it starred one Archie Leach in the role of Eisenstein (here renamed Max Grunewald). Mr. Leach went on to Hollywood fame a few years later under the more euphonious name of Cary Grant.

A *Wonderful Night* was only a moderate success, but *Fledermaus* returned to Broadway in a new guise in 1933 with the title *Champagne, Sec.* Its Orlofsky was 23-year-old Kitty Carlisle, who would also go on to make her mark in Hollywood the following year playing opposite Bing Crosby and The Marx Brothers.

The Reinhardt/Korngold version returned to Broadway in 1942 under the title of *Rosalinda*, dressed up with choreography by George Balanchine. This time it was a hit, and it ran for 611 performances. Dorothy Sarnoff (who created Lady Thiang in *The King and I* nine years later) played the title role, and a bit player named Shelley Winter soon added an “s” to her name, decamped to Hollywood, and became a multiple Academy Award winner.

Inevitably, as *Die Fledermaus*’s worldwide popularity grew, it reached the screen. A silent version, now lost, was filmed in Germany in 1923, followed by an early sound version in 1931, and two more that were made under the Third Reich. Subsequent versions were filmed for cinema and TV during the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. Even Cecil B. DeMille stole the plot for his early-talkie musical *Madam Satan* (1930), in which the big party was outrageously staged aboard an Art Deco dirigible.

In 1955, the famous writing/directing team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (*The Red Shoes*, *Black Narcissus*, *I Know Where I’m Going*) came up with a completely updated cinematic reworking of *Die Fledermaus* entitled *Oh...Rosalinda!!* A wide-screen, Technicolor spectacular, it was set in a Vienna that was still, at that time, divided into four post-World War II zones occupied by the Allied powers. Few of the film’s cast members – who included Michael Redgrave, Anton Walbrook, and Ludmilla Tchérina – were known for their singing voices. The exception was lyric-soprano superstar Anneliese Rothenberger, a

charming Adele. A visual feast of 1950s candy-box kitsch décor, the film is no masterpiece, but remains an enjoyably offbeat take on a classic.

With its droll spirit and lengthy dialogue scenes, *Die Fledermaus* has frequently been catnip to modern comedy writers. One of Sir Rudolf Bing’s best box-office brainstorms resulted in a new translation, a collaboration by playwright Garson Kanin and lyricist Howard Dietz, that was directed by Kanin in his house debut at the Met. Premiering during Bing’s first season in 1950, the production featured an all-star cast including Set Svanholm, Ljuba Welitsch, Patrice Munsel, Risë Stevens, and Richard Tucker. It was an instant smash that played for season after season and spawned a national tour. Kanin’s wisecracking English dialogue had a subtly contemporized American flair that delighted the crowds, who loved seeing their favorite opera stars kicking up their heels in this froth.

One of the most effective elements of that production was the casting of comic Jack Gilford, a favorite of television and stage audiences, as the jailer Frosch. This non-singing character, who dominates Act Three, became a *tabula rasa* for Gilford to inject a career’s worth of vaudeville shtick. Audiences lapped it up, and Gilford came to own the role at the Met, racking up 76 performances over seventeen seasons. Since Gilford, the Met has maintained a tradition of presenting well-known comedy guest stars in the role of Frosch. Sid Caesar and Dom De Luise brought down the house with their antics in subsequent seasons.

Inevitably, contemporary directors in Europe have bent *Die Fledermaus* to fit their own very idiosyncratic visions. In Hans Nuenerfels’s 2001 Salzburg staging on DVD, one can hear the hoots, boos, and whistles of an outraged audience. Rewritten, highly salacious dialogue is only the start of this production’s contrivances. It is set in Nazi Germany yet it also features a dreadlocked contemporary jazz singer playing an Orlofsky who snorts cocaine. Onstage intimacies abound, Frank is costumed to look like a gigantic wedding cake, and Frosch is played by a female.



*Act Three of Die Fledermaus, Lyric Opera, 2006-07 season: Prison Warden Frank (Andrew Shore, left) is losing his patience with jailer Frosch (Fred A. Wellisch, right).*

More recently, in Frankfurt in 2011, Christof Loy staged *Die Fledermaus* on one set consisting of tall beige walls and post-Biedermeier furnishings. Altering the sequence of the acts, he began with an expanded Act Two showing Dr. Falke setting up his jest, then wove Act One in via flashbacks. Further reshuffling placed Rosalinde's *csárdás* near the evening's end. Meanwhile, a red-lined closet off to the side of the stage was revealed as a spot where plenty of explicit trysting took place.

Have any of these past "improvements" really succeeded in helping contemporary audiences connect with *Die Fledermaus*? Their directors would likely answer in the affirmative, while audiences seem to prefer the work when it's left alone to do what it does best. Max Reinhardt's production is the only one that seems to have gone down in history as an illuminating concept that enhanced the original.

Despite being subjected to so much pummeling, *Die Fledermaus* is like the Timex watch that takes a licking and keeps on ticking. It absorbs all manner of directorial experimentation and remains a perennial favorite that shows no signs of losing its grip on its popularity. This season, Lyric Opera's production will return *Die Fledermaus* to its traditional *echt*-Viennese roots. Set firmly in period, it will be entirely in the original German, including the spoken scenes (no longer a problem for operagoers

in the age of the supertitle.) Bo Skovhus is renowned for his Eisenstein the world over, and the other principals in the cast are primarily native German speakers, including the Rosalinde, Juliane Banse; Daniela Fally, who is the resident Adele of the Vienna Staatsoper; and Adrian Eröd, also of the Staatsoper, as Falke. Steeped in Viennese style, the staging promises to transport audiences straight to Austria from Wacker Drive.

For *Die Fledermaus*, it seems, the corks will always keep popping and the champagne fizzing. And it continues to be as beloved by performers as it is by audiences. American soprano Brenda Lewis, who may well hold the record for the most Rosalindes after having starred in the long-running Met touring production during the 1950s, might have the key to its enduring popularity. "Every night I went on in the part," she says, "I looked forward to it; I couldn't wait to go onstage. And you know why? Because it was a *party*, and I knew I was always going to have a ball."

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*Eric Myers is the author of Uncle Mame: The Life of Patrick Dennis, as well as two books on the history of Hollywood set design. His writing has also appeared in Opera News, Opera, Time Out New York, Variety, and The New York Times magazine and "Arts and Leisure" sections.*