

Four visions of *Salome*

Portrayal of a *femme fatale* in contemporary opera stagings

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1. Introduction

“Killergirl *Salome* magnificent” read the headline of a Dutch review of a 2012 performance of Strauss’s opera *Salome* in Brussels. The headline characterized at once the magnificent performance of soprano Amanda Echalaz and the main character of the opera: Salome, the New Testament teenager who is so determined to have her way that she causes the death of two men. Superficially, this track record alone seems to justify Salome being qualified as a “killer girl.” Guy Joosten, director of the Brussels staging, added an extra layer, though. By situating Salome’s story against a background of child abuse and upbringing in a degenerated milieu, he offered a possible explanation for Salome’s frightening behaviour.¹ Joosten also related the story to the Christian doctrine of the so-called “original sin.” The connection between lethal women and the original sin is not as farfetched as it may seem. Due to her failure to constrain her desire and her temptation of Adam, the early Christian church fathers blamed the biblical Eve, and all women after her, for the exile of mankind from paradise. In *fin-de-siècle* culture, the moment of female seduction, irrevocably fatal to men, was broadly measured out on stage, in literature, and by the visual arts.²

The biblical Salome was a young girl who danced for her stepfather, king Herod, and demanded the decapitation of John the Baptist (Jochanaan) in return. She had John’s head brought to her on a silver platter. Numerous artists have been inspired by this eerie story and Richard Strauss was one of them. He turned a play on Salome, written by Oscar Wilde, into a high-profile opera. The Salome theme was especially popular in his day in *fin-de-siècle* Europe and North America. It was a time of male supremacy and misogyny, but also a time of growing fascination for female eroticism and exoticism. Concurrently, women were beginning to free themselves from their subordinate position and, in a certain way, Salome represented this growing female empowerment.

Consequently, the image of Salome is a complex one. Is she a perverted psychic, a *femme fatale*, a spoilt child, or all of the above? Is she a victim or a heroine? Much research has been done on the significance of Salome in her heyday, from various points of view, including feminist ones. However, little research has been done on the way contemporary opera productions handle the theme. How do present-day directors portray Salome? Is she still a classical *femme fatale* to them? Is she conceived of as a

¹ Biëlla Luttmer, “Killergirl *Salome* groots,” *De Volkskrant*, January 27, 2012.

² For more on this, see Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

disturbed woman gradually losing contact with the real world? Or do they see her as an assertive, self-conscious person? One of the few studies that examine and compare representations of Salome in modern productions was conducted by Lawrence Kramer.³ Kramer scrutinized three video recordings of *Salome* productions dating from 1974, 1990 and 1992.⁴ His main concerns were the strong visual dimension of the opera, the enhancement of the visual aspect by the video recordings, and the influence of the Jugendstil type of scenery in these productions on Salome's portrayal. Kramer describes the encounter with Jochanaan, the dance, and Salome's monologue to the severed head. He concludes that these productions portray her as a stereotyped, lifeless image, not as a strong individual. Kramer compares this to the image of a Jugendstil poster girl: beautiful but sterile, one-dimensional and of little substance.⁵ However, Kramer's opinion is partly based on the Jugendstil scenery. It is unclear whether his conclusion is still valid when productions in a different kind of setting are considered. Furthermore, his study did not involve Salome's relationship to the other characters. Her encounter with Jochanaan is primarily described from a visual angle, and in the other two scenes examined by Kramer, Salome acts alone. A study of more recent *Salome* productions, conducted by Hedda Høgåsen-Hallesby, deals with the usage of space in operatic productions and concentrates on the dance. It is not concerned with Salome's portrayal nor with her relationships.⁶

This thesis examines the portrayal of Salome and her family in four contemporary stagings of Strauss's opera. How do the directors of these stagings make Salome's actions comprehensible to today's audiences? It will be argued that in these four productions, Salome is anything but lifeless and that her family relationships matter. *Salome* is not just about Salome—it is also about her family, which to various degrees is held responsible for her behaviour. The focus of the research will be on Salome's interplay with the other characters in the opera: the guard Narraboth, the prophet Jochanaan and her parents Herod and Herodias. The interactions with the men are the stepping stones on Salome's way to psychological disintegration. The mother seemingly plays a minor part, but she is certainly not an innocent bystander. The research question will be dealt with by answering the following sub-questions:

³ Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴ Vienna Philharmonic, dir. Götz Friedrich (1974); Deutsche Oper Berlin, dir. Peter Weigl (1990); Royal Opera House London, dir. Derek Bailey and Peter Hall (1992).

⁵ Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture*, 167-172.

⁶ Hedda Høgåsen-Hallesby, "Seven Veils, Seven Rooms, Four Walls and Countless Contexts," in *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*, ed. Clair Rowden (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 133-154.

- How was Salome portrayed in the first productions of the opera and how was this received at the time?
- How does Salome relate to Narraboth and Jochanaan in the selected recent productions and how are these relationships visualised?
- How do these productions construe the family relations between Salome, Herod and Herodias?
- To what extent do these productions offer an explanation for Salome's behaviour?

The first sub-question will be investigated by means of a literature research. The second and third sub-questions will rely partly on literature, but mostly on the scrutiny of four video recordings. The answer to the fourth sub-question follows mainly from the preceding sections. In addition, newspaper reviews will be used when appropriate.

The selected recordings are of the stagings by the New York Metropolitan Opera directed by Jürgen Flimm (2008), by the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden directed by Nikolaus Lehnhoff (2011), and two different stagings by the London Royal Opera House, one directed by Luc Bondy (1997) and one by David McVicar (2008). After a brief description of the scenery, a number of scenes will be analysed. Firstly, the scene in which Salome persuades Narraboth to let her talk to Jochanaan. This scene will provide a baseline measurement regarding Salome's behaviour. Secondly, the scene in which she first meets Jochanaan and falls in love with him. Jochanaan is the outsider who disturbs the balance in the family and Salome's derailment starts here. Thirdly, the dance scene and the bargaining with Herod afterwards. These scenes in particular reveal the family relations, and also include wordless interactions with the mother. Lastly, Salome's monologue to Jochanaan's severed head will be analysed, as well as the reactions of the parents at the sight of this ghastly scene. Salome's behaviour and her interactions with the other main characters will be assessed by examining visually observable elements like gestures, gazes, facial expressions, and physical contacts. In different ways, all four stagings will appear to be family tragedies.

2. Salome at the beginning of the twentieth century

2.1 Genesis of the opera

The biblical version of Salome's story can be found in the gospels of Matthew and Marc. King Herod has detained John the Baptist because he rebuked Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Annoyed by these accusations, Herodias wants to see John eliminated, but Herod, uncertain about whether or not to fear this allegedly holy prophet, refrains. On his birthday, Herodias's daughter dances for Herod and his guests. To reward her, Herod promises the girl anything she wants and instigated by her mother, the girl asks for the head of John the Baptist. Herod is left with no other choice than to have John decapitated. The girl's name is not mentioned in the bible but she became known as Salome.

Since then the narrative has been retold and adapted numerous times. Halfway the nineteenth century the interest in the story revived, partly thanks to Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll* (1841-43). In this poem the daughter and her mother Herodias are one character to which Heine added the inclination towards sexual perversity. In Gustave Flaubert's novel *Herodias* (1877) the mother is still the bad genius and the daughter an innocent instrument in mother's hands. The painter Gustave Moreau was obsessed with the Salome theme and made countless paintings and drawings of her. One of the many authors that were intrigued by the story was Oscar Wilde. He was influenced by previous writers and by Moreau's paintings, in particular *The Apparition* (Figure 1) in which a Salome dressed in nothing but jewellery points triumphantly to her trophy. Wilde turned the story into a play. He made significant changes by putting Salome at the forefront. It was Wilde's idea to have Salome ask for John's—or Jochanaan as he is called in the play—head instead of her mother. Salome's love for Jochanaan, his rejection of that love, and her death are other crucial elements Wilde added.⁷ It proved controversial material.



Figure 1. Gustave Moreau, *L'Apparition* (1876). Musée d'Orsay.

⁷ Charles Youmans, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113.

Performance of the play met with difficulties. In London it was prohibited by the Lord Chamberlain, supposedly because biblical characters were not allowed on stage. Paris was also reluctant to stage it. In Germany, however, it became very popular. Richard Strauss had heard of Wilde's play and attended a performance in Berlin in 1903. By then he had already decided to use the story for his next opera. Anton Lindner had offered him a libretto version of the play, but Strauss found himself unable to put music to this. Instead, he decided to use the German text of the play and made the adaptations he thought necessary himself.

2.2 Reception

Salome premiered on December 9, 1905 in Dresden and was an immediate success. The ecstatic audience applauded long enough for thirty-eight curtain calls. The Vienna Court opera refused to stage *Salome*, partly because of its immorality, but other European cities were less hesitant and performed the work uncensored. Before the opera could be performed in London however, the text had to be drastically bowdlerized. The singers of the London premiere gradually forgot their new lines, though, and halfway everyone was singing the original text. Apparently this got unnoticed by the Lord Chamberlain and the performance was a success.⁸ In 1907 *Salome* crossed the ocean and was staged in New York. There it caused a moral uproar and was banned from the stage after one performance.

As for the European performances, the reactions in the press on Strauss's newest opera turned out less enthusiastic than the audiences had been. Fellow composers admired the power of the music and especially the orchestration. They considered the motives rather common, but the way in which they were developed innovative. Most of the fellow composers chose to ignore the ethical aspects of the work.⁹ Other critics in general praised the music, but had mixed feelings about the content. There were mainly two types of reaction on Salome's character. The first one stressed her presumed perversity, the second one was more positive and thought of Salome as transfigured in the end.

In *fin-de-siècle* Germany, the perversity of Salome was strongly related to ideas about Jews and Jewishness. Sander L. Gilman explains how Jews were thought to have

⁸ George R. Marek, *Strauss: The Life of a Non-Hero* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 159.

⁹ John Williamson, "Critical Reception," in *Richard Strauss Salome*, ed. Derrick Puffett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 139-140.

unnatural sexual desires for their own kin and how critics attached the same idea of perversion to Salome. Furthermore, she was not only supposed to be perverted but also hysterical. Common prejudice held Jews to be particularly susceptible to hysteria, due to continual inbreeding.¹⁰ However, according to Anne L. Sheshradi, Salome's perversion was not as important to the public as was the idea of her redemption. Sheshradi states that critics concerned with "Jewishness" considered Salome as a character in between two worlds. She was Jewish yet attracted to the Christian world of Jochanaan, a world so utterly different from her own. Salome was on the verge of being converted and could be saved, despite her genetic predisposition for perversion and hysteria.¹¹ These critics heard a redemptive force in Strauss's music that transfigured Salome.

2.3 *Fin-de-siècle* views of women

Although recipient of less attention in the reviews than her Jewishness, Salome's femininity played a significant part in the wake of the opera. As stated before, *fin-de-siècle* society was not favourable to women. Bram Dijkstra investigated what he called the "iconography of misogyny" in this period. Women were considered subordinate to men as a matter-of-course. They were viewed upon as perverse creatures, unable or unwilling to be chaste and to act according to men's wishes. Dijkstra illustrates how all the visual arts emitted the same message, unnoticed however by contemporaries because it was considered self-evident.¹² In a society fascinated by presupposed female sexual aberrations, Salome became an icon. Most painters, including female ones, depicted her as a crazed lustful virginal headhuntress, playing with John the Baptist's head. One of the few exceptions is a painting by Ella Ferris Pell (Figure 2). Her Salome is a self-confident and sane young woman. The painting was ignored by critics at the time, because it did not fit into the pattern.¹³



Figure 2. Ella Ferris Pell, *Salome* (1890). Private collection.

¹⁰ Sander L. Gilman, "Strauss, the Pervert, and Avant-Garde Opera of the *Fin-de-Siècle*," *New German Critique* 43 (1988): 44, 51, 54.

¹¹ Anne L. Sheshradi, "The Taste of Love: Salome's Transfiguration," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 10 (2006): 37-44.

¹² Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), vii-viii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 388-392.

Linda and Michael Hutcheon explain how medical science at the time viewed female sexuality as pathological. Common sense had it that women were not as able as men to control their sexual desires, so these had to be suppressed. The ideal woman showed no sexual feelings in public. Unfettered female sexuality was a threatening issue: scientists and physicians believed it was dangerous, hysterical, and unhealthy. Hutcheon and Hutcheon also describe how women were regarded as children that had to be disciplined in order to restrain their criminal tendencies. Women, especially adolescents, were at high risk of insanity and this was even worse during their menstruation. A woman's period was believed to cause a strong sexual longing, which made them even more dangerous.¹⁴ In the character of Salome, youth, gender, menstruation and Jewishness are combined and so everything points in the same fatal direction: abnormally strong sexual desires and lunacy.

Salome thus symbolizes a complex conception of female sexual perversity and insanity. On the other hand, she also represents a distinct female empowerment. Hutcheon and Hutcheon contend that Salome is not as powerless as it seems. The continuous gazes of the men in her surroundings, including stepfather Herod, precisely give her power. Jochanaan is the only exception. He refuses to look at Salome, thereby denying her to exert her female power. The pampered princess cannot cope with this and forces her will upon Jochanaan by demanding his decapitated head. Salome's dance may be erotic, but to her, it is simply a way of achieving her goal.¹⁵

The empowering force of Salome did not pass unnoticed by female spectators. Susan A. Glenn demonstrates how Salome, or rather her dance, became a cult symbol in both Europe and North America because of this potential. Many female performers imitated her dance or made their own version of it. The dance also appealed to women outside the theatre and, just like the waltz, it came to be a mode of self-expression. By dressing up in oriental clothes women felt free of restricting moral codes. Salome moved from high culture to low culture and her image, mostly in a comic version, popped up in vaudeville, burlesques, popular songs and movies.¹⁶ At the beginning of the First World War the popularity of the Salome theme declined, only to revive in the 1980s.¹⁷

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "Staging the Female Body: Richard Strauss's *Salome*," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 211-213.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 219-221.

¹⁶ Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 99-101.

¹⁷ Petra Dierkes-Thun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 161.

3. Analysis of four contemporary *Salome* productions

The previous section elaborated on the complex image of Strauss's *Salome* in her day. Her behaviour was construed as a consequence of her female and Jewish inclination towards perversity and hysteria, strengthened by her youth. Although for today's audience this explanation does not satisfy, the fascination with the story is as strong as it was a century ago. The dance may have lost its empowering potential, recent revivals of the *Salome* theme in popular culture still emphasize her extreme sexuality as a liberating force. Other modern interpretations involve the issue of incest or turn the theme into a spiritual love story.¹⁸ How do the selected four contemporary opera directors interpret *Salome*? Do they provide us with alternative explanations of her actions? What is their view on her family relations? This section will examine how recent *Salome* productions visualise her. To give an impression of the atmosphere of each production, the scenery of the productions will be briefly described first. Subsequently, the scenes with Narraboth, Jochanaan, Herod, the dance, and the final monologue will be analysed. Along the way, *Salome*'s psychological disintegration will reveal itself.

3.1 Scenery and clothing

The staging by Luc Bondy is the oldest of the four and a very sober one. The stage consists mainly of concrete and steel, and is partly heightened. On the right there are blinded windows through which some light gleams, suggesting that Herod's party is taking place there. The stage is almost empty. Only the characters that have a part in the action are onstage and there are no objects that are not being used by one of the characters. The lighting is concentrated on the action, leaving the rest of the stage in the dark. The clothing is timeless and simple, without bright colours. Only Herod wears a crimson coat and has a crown like a bandeau around his reddish hair. *Salome* wears a decent dress, long-sleeved and way below the knees. A scarf evokes her Jewish background.

The Jürgen Flimm staging is quite the opposite. The centre of the stage is made of transparent material, with a staircase leading down to Herod's party. On the left is a red wall and a staircase going up, on the right a rock-like construction, and in between a night blue sky. The entrance to the cistern is a mine shaft with a cage lift. The stage is filled with tables and chairs, flowers and fruit bowls, glasses and wine bottles.

¹⁸ Dierkes-Thun, *Salome's Modernity*, 194-195.

Partygoers are drifting on and off the stage, talking, drinking, dancing, or just sitting around. The lighting is bright. The clothing of the guests is modern, with the women in long coloured dresses and the men in dark suits. Herod is an exception in his white suit. The guards are dressed in oriental looking uniforms, with a skirt and a turban-like headgear. Salome, in a long white sleeveless dress, is continually in motion, dancing or running about, twisting her hips, frequently touching her face or hair. In fact, she seems to be drunk.

David McVicar chose a wine cellar as the background for his production. The main colours are blue and beige. There are several doors opening up to other rooms, clothes hanging on the wall, a wine-rack filled with bottles, a staircase on the right leading up to Herod's party. Servants are sitting and standing around, most of them without taking part in the action. Their behaviour shows fear of Herod. Nude women and women in underwear are to symbolize the decadence of Herod's court. The stern-looking executioner bearing his sword is onstage during the whole performance. Narraboth and the other guards wear brown army uniforms. Again Salome is dressed in a long white dress, short-sleeved this time. The dresses of the female partygoers are reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties, including the long cigarette pipes. The men are clothed in the customary dark suits.

Like Bondy, Nikolaus Lehnhoff used mainly concrete and steel. There is nothing hospitable about this scenery. The rubble lying around makes the stage look more like a construction site than a palace. There is a staircase on the right, leading up to a plateau with a parked car. A hanging bridge connects the stage to the room of Herod's party. Only the characters and the objects needed in the action are present. The lighting is mostly blue, sometimes partly yellow, and during Salome's monologue it is red. Salome is in pink this time, a sleeveless wide dress with an uneven length. The guards wear twentieth-century uniforms.

3.2 Narraboth

It is king Herod's birthday and the beautiful sixteen-year-old princess Salome attends the party. As she gets annoyed with the other guests and Herod's relentless gazing at her, she goes outside and starts talking to the guards. When Jochanaan, who is being held in prison in a cistern, starts prophesizing in a loud voice, Salome is intrigued and wishes to speak to him, despite Herod having forbidden everyone to do so. Narraboth, the head of the guards, is infatuated with her and therefore it is easy for Salome to persuade him.

The scene described here takes place at the beginning of the story. Assuming that the opera depicts Salome's process of psychological disintegration, this is the baseline measurement. At this point in time she is still a fairly sane person, behaving in a way that is normal to her. Experience must have taught her how to get her way with men and her mother probably functioned as a role model. The music is also a clue to Salome's state of mind. The chromaticism in her music is often mentioned as a signifier of her insanity. Yet when she enters the scene, she does so in A minor, indicating that at this point she is mentally healthy. Nevertheless Strauss's music glimpses ahead and reveals Salome's rapidly changing moods. Her first theme, introduced at the beginning of the opera, is preceded by a series of ascending demisemiquavers, then starts with a half note hastening into quavers and semiquavers followed by another half note that leaps onto a second series of dazzling ascending demisemiquavers (Figure 3). This corresponds with her first appearance on stage, when she is alternately agitated and quiet. At the few instances when she calms down, so does the orchestra. Her request to Narraboth is made in the same mixture of alternating calmness and excited hastiness, with the repeated "Du wirst das für mich tun" in calm longer notes and the rushed promises to him in short notes.



Figure 3 Strauss's *Salome*, Salome's first theme (scene 1).

How do the four productions under discussion approach this musical dramaturgy and how does Salome relate to Narraboth? All four Salome's are aware of the power of their beauty on men and act accordingly. Narraboth is simply an instrument to achieve their goal (Figure 4). In the Bondy production Salome uses her power in a composed manner. She acts alternately in a demanding and flirtatious fashion. Very decisively she points with her finger to Narraboth several times. She behaves like a girlish but demanding princess, accustomed to being obeyed. Flimm's Salome seems hysterical from the start. She makes her request, sitting behind Narraboth and folding her legs around his neck. The submissive Narraboth looks frightened, confused and yearning at the same time, gasping for breath and obviously overwhelmed

by her presence. This Salome uses her body to the fullest extent and she treats Narraboth like a toy. David McVicar has Salome play a game of attraction and rejection. She swirls around Narraboth, touches his chin, has him almost fold his arms around her. As soon as Narraboth gives in, Salome pushes him hard and he falls to the floor. Yet she makes a nervous impression and seems uncertain about herself. Lehnhoff's Salome is more adult and calculating. She approaches Narraboth seductively, pillowing her body against his and caressing his cheek with a flower. This Salome knows the power of her body, but does not exaggerate in using it.



Figure 4 "The persuasion of Narraboth, scene 2." Consecutively, Royal Opera House London, dir. Luc Bondy (1997), Metropolitan Opera New York, dir. Jürgen Flimm (2008), Royal Opera House London, dir. David McVicar (2008), Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, dir. Nikolaus Lehnhoff (2011).

3.3 Jochanaan

During an orchestral interlude everyone waits for the prophet to emerge from the cistern. He is being announced by the horns playing his motif. Salome is intrigued by Jochanaan, because he is "der, vor dem der Tetrach Angst hat" and because he says "schreckliche Dinge" about her mother. Furthermore, she is attracted to his voice. To Jochanaan, Salome is merely her mother's daughter and assumedly of the same perverted make. He is not interested in her at all, except as a lost soul to save. Salome falls in love with him. Jochanaan is very different from the men in Herod's court and therefore poses a challenge to her. She sings the praises of his white body, his black hair, his red mouth, but this time her seductive airs do not work. Time and again he turns her

down, refusing to look at her. He scorns her as daughter of Sodom and Babylon, and refers to her as a daughter of Eve: “Durch das Weib kam das Übel in die Welt”. Finally she attempts to kiss him, but he fiercely curses her and returns to the cistern.

At first, Jochanaan’s music is diatonic. Yet, as his conversation with Salome progresses, his music gets more and more affected by hers. Salome’s key changes from A major to C-sharp minor to indicate her desire and her despair. For the first time in her life that she feels desire for a man, the man will not look at her. It turns her completely off balance. Nine times she asks to kiss his mouth, and the pitch at the word “Mund” gets higher and higher until it reaches b” at the seventh time (Figure 5). After this moment she makes her request two more times, but by now she realises it will be in vain. The orchestra takes over and keeps repeating her request, combining it with Jochanaan’s motifs.

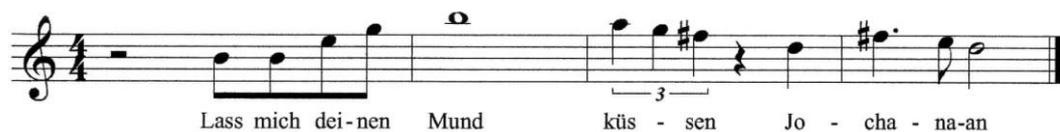


Figure 5. Salome’s request, seventh time (scene 3).

The four Jochanaans in these productions are all robust men with low, potent voices. To modern eyes their appearance is prototypical for an unworldly prophet from the desert: unshaved, long-haired, untidy (Figure 6). In Bondy’s production, a dirty Jochanaan crawls out of his cistern. Salome is fascinated and tiptoes around him. During their talk her face expresses a variety of emotions, ranging from adoration, disbelief and anger to sadness. She is on the verge of crying when Jochanaan rejects her attentions . There is a slight ambivalence in his behaviour, though. He smells at her scarf, puts his hand on her inner leg, pulls her hand to his chest. Is this spiritual love or is he secretly attracted to her? Anyway, he gets back to his senses and rejects her even more forcefully. Salome is actually begging him, wringing her hands, completely losing her self-respect. No wonder his rejection makes her angry. During the orchestral interlude Salome drops a red flower into the cistern, but she makes it look more like a weapon than a kind gesture. Then she folds the scarf over her head and withdraws into her own mind.

In Flimm’s production a blindfolded Jochanaan is being hauled up in his cage. Salome watches him, drinking wine and dangling her feet. During every declaration of

love Salome touches the part of her body that she admires of Jochanaan—successively her body, her hair, her lips—and makes sensuous movements with her hips. She simply cannot believe Jochanaan will not look at her—he is ruining her game. They do not exchange a single gesture of affection. She forces herself upon him several times and actually tries to kiss his mouth. Jochanaan determinedly wards her off, and it frightens her. Salome is out of control during the whole scene, and in particular when she is asking to kiss Jochanaan’s lips. She is hardly able to articulate the words properly.



Figure 6 “The encounter with Jochanaan, scene 3.” Consecutively, Bondy (1997), Flimm (2008), McVicar (2008), Lehnhoff (2011).

A fascinated Salome gradually approaches McVicar’s Jochanaan. His first rejection makes her laugh awkwardly—after all, this is very unusual to her. Jochanaan keeps his eyes carefully averted from her, except when he bids her to find Jesus. Salome, completely self-absorbed, takes this as an overture. She imposes herself upon him, up till three times. Only when he curses her, the message gets through and her face shows that it hurts. When she utters her request for the last time, her voice has become very soft. She seems to be in a different world. Salome curls herself up on the floor, in a foetal position. During the orchestral interlude her face shows despair, anger but also determination. When Herod and his company enter the scene, she is standing near the cistern with clenched fists.

Lehnhoff’s Jochanaan throws Salome back, every time she approaches him. Her words alternately seem to surprise or torment him. To her it is a funny game until he rejects her for the third time. When he talks to her of Jesus, they embrace and he

presses her hand against his cheek. This tender moment is brutally disturbed when Salome again expresses her wish to kiss his mouth. He pushes her off for the last time. This empowered Salome cannot believe it, she rolls back and forth on the floor in anger. She even tries to follow him to the cistern, but is being withheld by the executioner. With a stony face she wraps herself in the cloth that Jochanaan left behind. Later she will use it as a veil in her dance.

3.4 The Dance of the Seven Veils

Herod, Salome's mother Herodias and their company enter the scene. A listless Salome is present onstage, but nobody takes notice of her state of mind. The Jewish guests quarrel among themselves about the prophet Jochanaan. In vain Herod offers Salome fruit and wine. Then he asks her to dance, which at first she refuses. Not until he swears an oath to reward her with anything she wants, she agrees. And so "Salome dances the Dance of the Seven Veils," as Oscar Wilde dryly wrote in his play, leaving the rest up to the imagination of stage directors. Strauss obviously could not leave it at that and had to provide music. His music to the dance has often been criticised as vulgar and cheap, but Strauss simply defended this by stating that it was music "that Herod would like."¹⁹ This section will examine the dance, a pivotal episode in the opera. Santini describes the connotations of the dance during the *fin-de-siècle* as a way of self-expression, but also as a vehicle for mental transformations. Strauss used the dance not as a ballet but as an essential element in the dramatic action. This was a new phenomenon in the world of opera.²⁰

The music to the dance is a mixture of themes and motifs from the entire opera as well as distinct oriental elements. The keys are Salome's keys. The dance starts with an introduction and a first part in A minor, moves on to a waltz-like middle part in C-sharp minor and C-sharp major, and ends with the last part and a coda in A minor. The part in C-sharp major is interspersed with what Lawrence Kramer called Salome's "Desire-motif" (Figure 7). The first appearance of this theme can be heard during Salome's conversation with Jochanaan. In the dance it points forward to the gratification of her desire.²¹ The dance ends with a large orchestral crescendo and then an expectant tremolo on strings, combined with the Desire-motif.

¹⁹ Youmans, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, 285.

²⁰ Daria Santini, "'That Invisible Dance': Reflections on the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' in Richard Strauss's *Salome*," *Dance Research* 29 (2011): 237.

²¹ Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture*, 149.



Figure 7. Salome's Desire-motif (scene 4a).

The way in which the selected four present-day productions respond to the music differs, but the dance tends to be used to show the audience things that have not been worded (Figure 8). In Bondy's production the scene preceding the dance reveals the family relationships. Basically we are shown a father and mother fighting each other over the child. Both Herod and Herodias want Salome to act according to their wishes and they push each other away from her. Salome has her own agenda, though, and this time it suits her to do what father Herod wants. Her dance starts out with very stylized gestures, but turns out to be a truly sensual one, almost as if Salome is looking forward to her reward "für ihren eigenen Lust." Herod takes part in the dance but he is the subordinate character. He imitates Salome's movements and initiates all the attempts to have physical contact, often prevented by Herodias who watches him very closely. During the waltz Salome and Herod dance together shortly. In the other parts Salome dances virtually alone and seems totally absorbed in herself while expressing her sexual desires, or rather while acting out the fulfilment of her desires.

In Flimm's production Herodias appears to be a good-humoured and loving wife, concerned with Herod's neurotic whims but also mildly ironic about it. Towards Salome she is totally indifferent. Salome's dance is focussed on Herod. He is the one that has to be satisfied. She blows kisses in Herod's direction and approaches his chair time and again. In the meantime she dances with the male guests, who help her undress. She appears to be enjoying herself. Her dance is not sensual for a moment, but it evokes pole dancing, SM games, even sexual intercourse—and Herod is aroused by it, as Salome very well knows. Nobody will mistake this Salome for a virgin. The waltz, although the music is clearly different, does not change the nature of the dance. Herodias watches, amused and slightly bored, with a bottle of wine on her lap. She does not interfere once.

McVicar's Herod and Herodias are affectionate towards each other, but Herodias also shows a complex mixture of disdain and fear for Herod. The glances Herodias and Salome exchange before the dance are not exactly friendly. Salome is clearly defying her mother. Yet Herodias seems genuine in her resistance against her

daughter's dancing. The reason for this becomes clear afterwards. Salome and Herod virtually perform the dance together, behind closed doors. Herod helps Salome change into another white dress that she seems reluctant to wear. During the waltz-section they actually waltz together. Salome seems in trance, staggering, rolling on the floor, hanging in Herod's arms like a ragdoll. She is splashing water and makes washing gestures, as if to clean herself. It makes Herod laugh. During the tremolo, at the end of the dance, the screen turns black. Herodias anxiously awaits their return. When they reappear Herod looks content and Salome exhausted. The suggestion that they had sexual intercourse imposes itself. Herodias seems concerned and caresses Salome's arm. McVicar's dance turns out to be a story within a story, showing the audience how Salome has been abused by Herod from childhood on. It has left her shattered, immature, uncertain of herself, but not powerless. The mother knows of the abuse, but has done nothing to protect her child.



Figure 8 "The Dance of the Seven Veils, scene 4a." Consecutively, Bondy (1997), Flimm (2008), McVicar (2008), Lehnhoff (2011).

Lehnhoff shows rivalry between Herodias and Salome. Both are strong women and they clash at every glance. Herodias's relationship with Herod is not particularly loving as well. Salome starts her dance lazily. She uses Jochanaan's coat as the first veil and is well aware of the implications. Herodias looms large during this dance and tries to interfere several times, but unsuccessfully. Herod acts passionately, bites his nails and sucks his thumb. Salome humiliates him during the dance. She is pushing him around, forcing him to sit on all fours, hitting him with a veil. Herodias is amused until she gets

hit as well. Salome seems angry with the whole world. The waltz-part is being used for a short interaction between Salome and Herod, during which she half-heartedly dances with him and is disgusted when he touches her breasts. The dance ends aggressively, with a dominant Salome and a submissive Herod. It appears to be not only a way of achieving Salome's goal—revenge on Jochanaan—but also a battle with the mother. She is openly provoking Herodias and it seems as if Salome is trying to liberate herself from her mother's dominance.

3.5 Herod

After the dance Salome is entitled to her reward. Herod is taken aback by her wish for Jochanaan's decapitation. He offers a range of alternatives in the form of jewellery and power, but Salome insists that Herod keeps his promise. Since he has sworn an oath, he has no other choice left but to yield. So, with a strong sense of impending doom, he orders Jochanaan's death (Figure 9). Strauss's music for Herod indicates an agitated and fragmented character. He has no clear theme, key or rhythm. The prevailing prejudices against Jews at the time are all present in Herod's music. His neurasthenia is expressed by the use of whole-tone scales and chromaticism, unexpected modulations and the mingling of leitmotifs. His degeneracy and effeminacy appear from the frequent changes of meter and the high notes.²² Salome's determination is expressed in the stubbornly repeated notes we hear in her every demand for Jochanaan's head. The same notes are also a death motif.

Sitting on Herod's lap, Bondy's Salome expresses her wish. This time the daughter strategically teams up with her mother. Herodias is at her side every time Salome repeats her demand and has nothing but disdainful looks for Herod. Herodias and Salome may have a common goal, but below the surface they have their own struggle for power. As far as Salome is concerned, their co-operation is only temporarily. Salome is demanding, pushes Herod and throws the offered jewellery on the table. She does not really need her mother's encouragement to insist. The last time she demands Jochanaan's head she screams at Herod and turns over the table—signs that she is losing control of herself. Herod gives in and throws his coat over his head. The matter is out of his hands now. Herodias triumphantly runs off with the death-ring.

²² Similar remarks were made, amongst others, by Anne Seshadri in "The Taste of Love," 31-33.

When Flimm's dance is over Salome quickly makes an end to Herod's dream. The first time she utters her request Herod spits out his drink in terror. The good-humoured Herodias is content and laughs, but there is no union between the women here. Salome hardly pays any attention to her tipsy mother. Herod acts fatherly, convinced that he can make Salome change her mind. Salome behaves like a child and seems to think it is all a game. Every time she asks for Jochanaan's head she dances around or moves back and forth flapping her arms. Trembling all over Herod finally gives the death-ring to Herodias, obviously blaming her.



Figure 9 "The bargaining with Herod, scene 4a." Consecutively, Bondy (1997), Flimm (2008), McVicar (2008), Lehnhoff (2011).

It is a thin voice with which McVicar's Salome asks the first time for Jochanaan's head. Yet, she also laughs and regains strength quickly. Herodias tries to communicate with Salome several times, but although it is too late for motherly affection they do have a common goal: the downfall of Jochanaan *and* Herod. Salome is demanding, looks Herod in the eyes, draws close to him. Suddenly, she is the most powerful one in the family. When Herod sums up all his jewellery, she circles around him like a predator. Herod lets Salome have her way, almost strangling her mother in anger and despair when he gives in. In triumph Salome stretches her arms above her head, as if she is carrying the silver platter already. At this point her behaviour seems a revenge on both her parents, not on Jochanaan.

During the bargaining in Lehnhoff's production there is little contact between Herod and Salome. No matter how self-conscious and demanding this Salome is, the real

battle seems to be between Herod and his wife. Herodias has lost her fight with Salome, but she can still win this one. Salome realises this and leaves it partly up to her mother. For minutes she is not even onstage, as she went down into the cistern to repeat her demand from there. While Herod is getting more and more desperate, the amused Jews light a cigar and bet on the outcome of the game. Herod caves in. On seeing his own image in the silver platter he is terrified and he throws it away. Herod falls to the floor and Salome seizes the platter in triumph. She detests Herod but the revenge seems not on him. It is on the dominant mother and on Jochanaan, who dared to resist her.

3.6 Salome's monologue

Jochanaan's fate is sealed. The death-ring from Herod's finger is handed over to the executioner who descends into the cistern. After a blood-curdling interlude, during which Salome is waiting near the cistern, anxiously listening to the silence, he reappears with the severed head. Salome sings her final monologue, addressing the head. She reproaches Jochanaan for not looking at her, for if he had he certainly would have loved her. She also sadly remembers his beauty. At last she is able to kiss Jochanaan's mouth. Herod is appalled with his stepdaughter's behaviour and has her killed by his guards (Figure 10). This scene is the climax of the opera, in which previous musical motifs and symbolic keys reoccur. The predominant keys are C minor/major and C-sharp minor/major. They represent two different worlds, the sincere world of Jochanaan and the decadent world of Salome. The Desire-motif returns several times, for example in the oboe when Salome recalls the beauty of Jochanaan's white body. After she has finally kissed Jochanaan's dead mouth, the Desire-motif can be heard once again in the piccolo and the oboe. Is this kiss really the fulfilment of Salome's desires?

To Bondy's Salome it probably is. Herodias hands a silver charger over to her and she happily strokes it, as if she already sees Jochanaan's head lying there. Both her way of singing and her face show that she is now completely out of control. When the executioner comes up with the head, covered in a cloth, she sighs with relief. Yet the child in her is still there. When she sings "Warum woltest du mir nicht ansehen" the despair of the child is shimmering through the eyes of the madwoman, but the madwoman takes over. Salome's movements suggest that she is actually sexually aroused while fondling the head. She is finally experiencing some sort of physical love, albeit in a grossly distorted way. Herod sits there with his head covered, denying all responsibility. Now that her mission has been accomplished, Herodias is disinterested

and carefully avoids to look. When Salome eventually kisses Jochanaan she is disgusted and leaves the scene, abandoning her sick daughter. The bond between them is broken. Herod's guards kill Salome with their shields and she dies crawling to the cistern.

Flimm's executioner, dressed like a traditional tribal warrior, descends into the mine shaft. Again a blindfolded Jochanaan is being hauled up, but this time it is just his severed head. Salome seems startled when she catches sight of it, as if she realises for the first time what she has done. Herodias is dozing off, Herod keeps his eyes averted. All the guests have disappeared by now, nobody wants to be involved. Salome seems to have sobered up. During the monologue she regularly loses her singing voice and she is even singing out of tune. Her kiss on Jochanaan's mouth appals Herod, but Herodias is too tired and too drunk to take notice. Salome is to be killed by the executioner, by the sword. At first she looks surprised, then she uncovers her neck willingly. She might have preferred a living Jochanaan after all and is willing to follow him into death.



Figure 10 "Salome's monologue, scene 4b." Consecutively, Bondy (1997), Flimm (2008), McVicar (2008), Lehnhoff (2011).

"Es ist kein Laut zu vernehmen." McVicar's Salome is the only one who sings these words instead of speaking them. Then the naked, blood-covered executioner appears. He holds the dripping head at its hair and presents it to a nervous Salome. She embraces the executioner and falls on her knees, grips the head and pulls it to her chest. Unlike Herod, Herodias is watching ceaselessly, at first with a blank face but gradually showing a mixture of fear and horror. Salome fondles the head, tries to open its eyes, to pull the tongue out of its mouth. She clings unto it, rocking to and fro, as if the head is

her only hold in life. Yet when she thinks back of Jochanaan's beauty, she forgets the head completely and it rolls on the floor. The guests watch her struggle in silence. Salome's last emotion is triumph, before the executioner breaks her neck and lays her to rest. Herodias faintly tries to prevent her death. It is uncertain what Salome's desires were. Maybe she hoped Jochanaan would change her life, which in a way he did.

Lehnhoff has Jochanaan's head neatly wrapped up in a cloth, lying on a blooded charger. Salome and her mother have anxiously been waiting for it together. Salome unwraps it carefully. When she sings of his silent tongue she pokes with her finger into his mouth but quickly withdraws it again, as if he might suddenly start to speak. Herodias seems detached now, and Herod is hiding. Salome shows the appropriate emotions, is lost in her own mind but never seems totally out of control. She sings her monologue partly to someone invisible, in a remote distance. Herodias walks by when Salome raises Jochanaan's head up to her face and kisses him. A close-up of Herodias's face shows her disbelief and disapproval. Salome swirls around in triumph and falls to the floor. The executioner enters, strangles Herodias on his way down and walks towards Salome. Herod orders to kill her and crouches down in a corner, like a little boy. The killing of Salome is not shown—she seems already dead.

4. Four visions of *Salome*, four families

Salome is an uncanny and shocking story, even today. The productions analysed show us four different renderings of a *femme fatale*. They present four Salome's who are not lifeless poster girls, nor icons. They are women of flesh and blood, and part of a family and a society. They appear to us as real persons and this is why we feel the need for an explanation of their abnormal behaviour. In order to be able to pity Salome, or to sympathize with her, we need to understand what moves her. The directors discussed here have achieved this to different extents, but what they have in common is that they all included a view on Salome's relations with the other characters. Salome's behaviour does not come out of the blue, but is influenced by her upbringing, her family and her social background.

Luc Bondy's version of *Salome* draws on a long tradition of portraying her as a perverted and deranged *femme fatale*, including the corresponding symbols like flowers and apples. Salome's dance may not be a striptease, but it is still sexually charged. Apparently it was not Bondy's intention to explain Salome's behaviour. In a comment on

his staging Bondy is quoted to have said “you can’t start explaining. Every staging that attempts to explain an opera turns into something dreadful.”²³ Yet he added the family dimension to the story, and it is indeed a dysfunctional family, as Edward Seckerson called them.²⁴ The focus on the triangular relationship between Herod, Herodias and Salome is reinforced by the lack of bystanders and the lighting that leaves the surroundings in the dark. The parents fight over the child, but have only their own interests at heart. The same goes for the daughter: she chooses sides with either one of the parents, in accordance with her own goals. Her behaviour towards Narraboth is also goal-oriented. Salome measures up to her mother in dominance and wants to be out of Herodias’s shadow. Herod plays the neurotic underdog. Yet there is a certain balance in the family relations and this is being disturbed by Jochanaan. It causes a sudden and major crisis, in which all the pent-up frustrations of the daughter erupt.

Jürgen Flimm shows us an environment drenched in alcohol. Drinking and partying seems to be the principal aim of life. Salome’s belittling behaviour towards Narraboth is exemplary in this respect. Mother Herodias shows herself to be a caring wife, but not exactly a loving mother. Herod on his part is only interested in Salome’s body. Nobody seems to care about Salome but herself. They all seek nothing but pleasure and instant fulfilment of their desires. In this sense Jochanaan is a total stranger in their midst. Anthony Tommasini, in one of the reviews, states that this performance finally made him understand why Salome is drawn to Jochanaan. She cannot believe the man has no desires at all and therefore he poses a challenge to her. In the end it turns out to be a challenge she can only meet by having him killed.²⁵ Jochanaan’s rejection, combined with a large amount of wine, causes Salome’s fuses to melt. Flimm presents us a Salome that appears to be hysterical and childish, but who is basically unhappy, leading an empty life in a non-caring environment.

The family that David McVicar serves up is even more complicated. Here we have a dreaded father who has sexually abused his stepdaughter for years and a mother who is aware of the abuse, but chooses to close her eyes on it. The dance is used to convey this message to the audience. In an interview with Edward Seckerson, McVicar explains why he staged the dance in this way. In his opinion the usual interpretation of the dance as a striptease is too easy. He needed “a psychological explanation and it had

²³ David J. Baker, “Problem Child,” *Opera News* (March 1996): 17.

²⁴ Edward Seckerson, “*Salome* Royal Opera House, London,” *The Independent*, April 7, 1997.

²⁵ Anthony Tommasini, “Met Opera Review; *Salome* Unveils Emotions (and a Soprano),” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2004.

to be about Herod.”²⁶ It has made McVicar’s Salome a complex character. On the one hand she has low self-esteem and is uncertain about herself, on the other hand she is strong and determined to have her way. Salome has no idea what love is and confuses it with sex. She has only learned how to please men with her body, and her mother never showed her a proper alternative. Her tricks work on most men—like Narraboth—but not on Jochanaan. His unexpected rejection is too much for her to bear. Salome’s decay is painful to watch, and we cannot help but pity her.

Finally there is Nikolaus Lehnhoff’s version: two powerful women that virtually seem to be one. Together they dominate a submissive Herod. However, the mother also manipulates the daughter and Salome wants to free herself from this stranglehold. The gazes they exchange are particularly telling: everyone is a showdown. Salome is a strong and powerful personality, a true match to her mother and she is dominating all the men. Although she is not unfriendly, as her behaviour towards Narraboth shows, her strength does make her appear distant, cold and calculating. This also makes it hard to sympathize with her. Salome and her mother seem almost symbiotic and, perhaps therefore, Salome’s attempt to free herself causes both their deaths.

5. Conclusion

Opera has restrictions in terms of music and text, but these boundaries leave enough room for stage directors to express their own views on the characters and their actions. They can choose specific angles or highlight social issues. They can present a traditional view or adapt an opera to modern times. Views in general on how opera should be performed also change over time. At the time of Salome’s premiere for instance, the oriental and Jewish characteristics were stressed. This is seldom the case today. Performing the dance as a striptease has gone in and out of fashion. Although many studies have been conducted on *Salome*, her portrayal in present-day productions has not been investigated extensively. Lawrence Kramer studied three video registrations of *Salome* productions and contends that these production show a stereotyped puppet-like image of her. Considering his material this is an appropriate conclusion. These Salomes were girls with blank faces that hardly showed any emotion. These were iconic images, not real women, and for this reason their behaviour does not call for an explanation. Moreover, there was virtually no interaction with the other characters, besides the ones

²⁶ “David McVicar on His Production of Salome,” accessed May 12, 2014, at <https://soundcloud.com/royaloperahouse/david-mcvicar-on-his>.

prescribed in the score. These Salomes did not force themselves upon Jochanaan, hit Herod with a veil or exchange angry glances with Herodias. The focus chosen for the present study—Salome’s image in the context of her relations with the other characters—would not have been applicable to the productions that Kramer selected for his study. Kramer attributed his observations and conclusions partly to the Jugendstil scenery. The productions discussed in the present thesis had a different type of scenery and were also more recent than Kramer’s, which may account for the differences in Salome’s portrayal.

At the time of the opera’s premiere, Salome’s extreme behaviour was explained by the fact that she was an adolescent woman, and a Jewish one too. She was portrayed and perceived as a perverse and hysterical madwoman, the opposite of a decent Christian woman according to *fin-de-siècle* mores. In a time after the sexual revolution of the 1960s-1970s and after several feminist waves, this image of her has changed. Luc Bondy’s view is the most traditional of the four, but even he adds a modern twist by presenting the story as a family tragedy, a universal theme. McVicar addresses a contemporary issue and seems to be building on a new tradition. Like Guy Joosten, discussed in the introduction, he turns the opera into a story on child abuse. His Salome is a victim that we can feel sorry for. Another modern issue is Flimm’s alcohol abuse among teenagers. Flimm shows us a world of hollow pleasures and parents that give the wrong example to their children. Even his Salome, who presents herself as a brainless hysterical flirt, arouses our sympathy in the end. In Lehnhoff’s version Salome is a strong and powerful personality, as is her mother. Below the surface this also addresses a recent, but maybe still inarticulate, issue: the over-empowerment of women, or, for that matter, the “emasculatation” of men. The way the women treat Herod and his own behaviour in this production call for a renewed empowerment of men.

Four performances, four visions of *Salome* have been analysed. Have the directors of these productions been able to carry us—the audience—away and convince us of their view? This study was not intended to judge the quality of the selected opera stagings. Yet after comparing the four productions, a judgement imposes itself. Both Bondy and McVicar offer a convincing rendering of the story. Salome’s behaviour can never be fully grasped, but both directors enable the audience to suspend its disbelief during the performance and pity her in the end. Flimm and Lehnhoff succeed less in this. Lehnhoff portrays Salome as a relatively sane and empowered woman. Compared to the more customary perverted vamp, this may seem refreshing, but it does not quite work out that way. However, as one of the reviewers remarked, the

video recording may have been of influence, in enhancing the impression of a cold-hearted Salome. The focus of this study does not always coincide with the focus of the camera, and this may have had impact on the results. The implications of the use of video recordings as a research method have been deliberately ignored in this study and this should be examined more thoroughly. The possibility of establishing the quality of an opera production by means of video recordings is controversial and has been discussed before,²⁷ but also deserves further investigation.

The Salome theme remains popular, not only in the theatre but also in films that often still show us a traditional *femme fatale*. For instance in *Cookie's Fortune* (1997), directed by Robert Altman, where the main character tries to frame her male opponent with a crime that could cause him a death penalty. Other popular versions turn the theme into a love story, like Carlos Saura's flamenco film *Salome* (2002), in which Jochanaan struggles with the choice between a spiritual and a physical love. Saura has the couple rest peacefully together after their death. Although two of the four directors discussed here did add a touch of love between Jochanaan and Salome, they did not intend it to be a love story, and none of them turned Salome into a depraved killer girl. These four directors, be it deliberately or involuntarily, have managed to raise current social issues in an age-old story. They brought the real world into the theatre by turning the *Salome* theme into a family affair.

²⁷ See, for instance, David J. Levin, "Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9 (1997): 47-71; James Treadwell, "Reading and Staging Again," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 10 (1998): 205-220; David J. Levin, "Response to James Treadwell," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 10 (1998): 307-311.

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