

# Passion and the princess

Director Barrie Kosky's dazzling production of Eugene Onegin features award-winning Asmik Grigorian as Tatyana. They both tell **David Kettle** of their strong family links to Tchaikovsky's opera

**T**here's definitely a strawberry jam thing going on." Director Barrie Kosky is reflecting on a tiny but significant detail in his vivid production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*.

Originally seen at Berlin's Komische Oper in 2016, where Kosky is artistic director, it jets in to the Edinburgh International Festival from 15 to 17 August. "In 99.9 per cent of my productions, my first job as director is to ignore the existing stage directions, ignore what the composer wanted. But in this particular case, I just loved the direction that two women are making jam at the very beginning."

The sticky conserve makes a reappearance – or at least its jam jar does – as the receptacle in which naive young Tatyana sends her famous letter of all-consuming love to cocky visitor Onegin, only to be rejected. And it returns again in the hands of the older Tatyana – now the wife of a prince – when she in turn spurns Onegin.

"It becomes something else – the taste of it, the smell of it, the memory of it."

Some kind of symbol, perhaps?

"No, it's not a symbol for anything. It's a jam jar. It's jam. It means there's a jam jar."

Despite his protestations, however, Kosky's jam seems to encapsulate something of the sensuous intensity of this remarkable production, which gets its second revival in Berlin shortly after its three Edinburgh performances. It's a sensuousness that's echoed in the ever-present

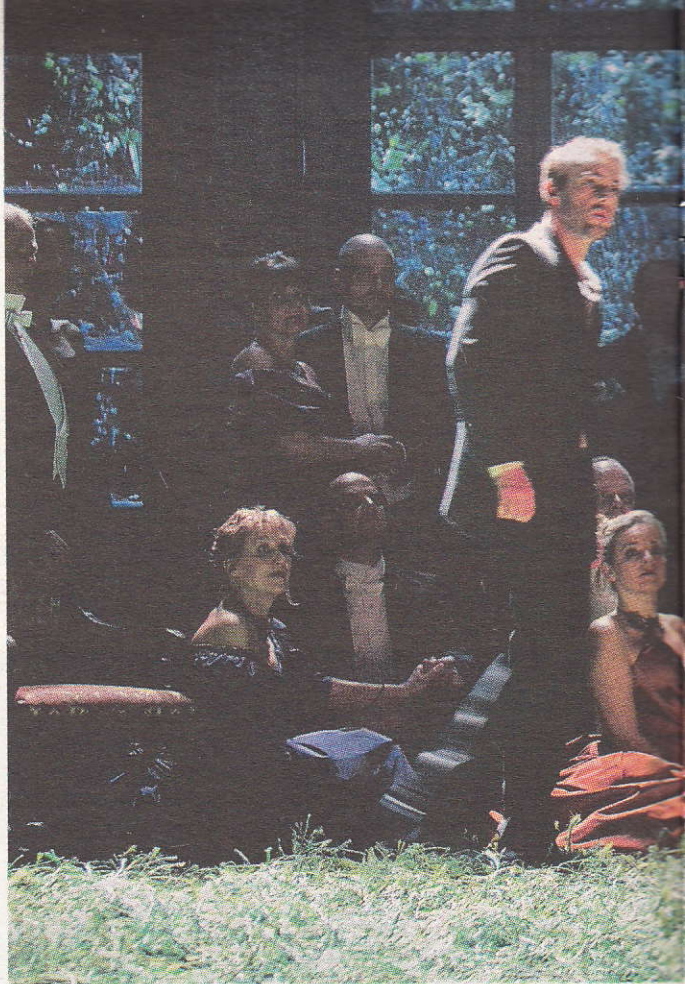
meadows and forest of Rebecca Ringst's striking designs, a reminder of the opera's seemingly idyllic opening, perhaps, or of the wildness of nature never far from the surface sophistication of pre-revolution Russian society.

*Eugene Onegin* is clearly an opera that's close to the hearts of both Kosky and of the production's lead soprano, Lithuanian-born Asmik Grigorian, who sings the conflicted Tatyana. "At the beginning," remembers Grigorian, "I thought: this is totally not my role. Tatyana felt so far away from me. But somehow now I can't imagine Tatyana without Asmik, and Asmik without Tatyana."

Kosky's memories of *Eugene Onegin* go back to his formative years. "I first saw it in Melbourne, when I must have been 11 or 12, and I got the piano score shortly afterwards and stumbled through it in my own very bad piano-and-singing way. Tchaikovsky spoke to me from my childhood, and *Eugene Onegin* in particular sparked something in my little 11-year-old soul."

What does he particularly respond to in the opera? "I love it because it's so unusual, and so complicated in the relationship between Tatyana and Onegin. They are two of the most interesting and sad characters in opera, and it's not even really a love story, because she fantasises and projects her love onto him. After his rejection, she goes away, grows up and marries her husband, whom she loves – I don't think there's any doubt about that. It's such a wonderful, ambiguous, non-black-and-white

**Asmik Grigorian as Tatyana in Eugene Onegin, main; director Barrie Kosky, right**



exploration of love from childhood to middle age."

For Grigorian, it's an opera with strong family associations. "I have some special emotional connections with Tatyana, because this is the role where I met my husband," she reveals. The man in question is Russian-born director Vasily Barkhatov, who directed Grigorian in *Eugene Onegin* for the Lithuanian National Opera in 2012.

"I did a really funny audition where I kept dropping my score, and he told me that's how he fell in love with me. I went into the audition thinking I didn't want the role because I was already singing it with another Vilnius opera company. But my husband married me to have me as his Tatyana!"

Four years later at the Komische Oper, however, Grigorian experienced some very different family connections with the work. "It was a very difficult time for me, first because I was pregnant, but also because my father was dying at the time. I seemed to spend my life going between rehearsals and the hospital. It was a very strange period, very emotional."

Grigorian's father was himself a singer, Armenian tenor Gegham Grigoryan, and had sung in *Eugene Onegin* during his daughter's childhood.

"I remember every single time he sang Lensky's aria," she recalls. "It was a very difficult time."

Was she able to channel those emotions into her portrayal of Tatyana? Rather than being a

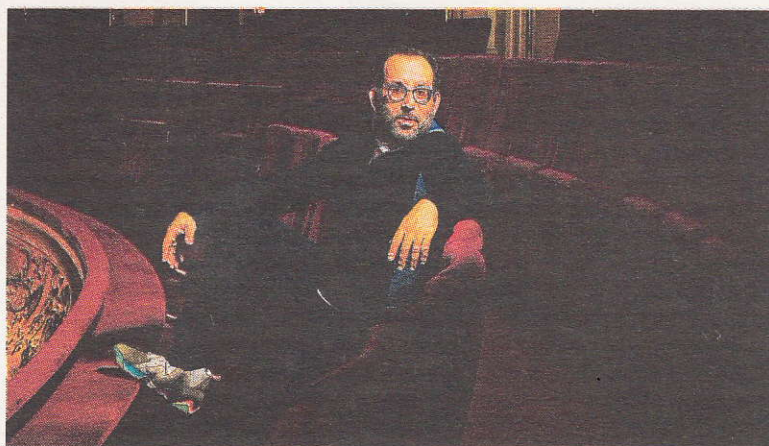


**"Every role I sing is actually me. I'm always telling my own story – because it's the only story I know"**





Photographs: Freese/drama-berlin.de, Jan Wondszus



conscious intention, Grigorian feels that that's perhaps inevitable.

"Every role I sing is actually me. I'm always telling my own story – because it's the only story I know. I would never sing any role if I don't feel I have some connection."

Kosky singles out Grigorian's role of Tatyana as the opera's principal focus. "Tchaikovsky had major identification with Tatyana. As a closeted gay Russian he is really identifying with her and her isolation in the work. But that's what's fabulous about this opera: the Tatyana we first meet is a 16 or 17-year-old, but by the end she's a princess. She grows up emotionally, too, and by the end she has the courage – if you want to call it courage – to protect herself. She could easily fall into Onegin's arms and begin a torrid affair. But she doesn't."

It's an interpretation of Tatyana's life journey that Grigorian shares. "I think Tatyana is a very lucky girl," she asserts, perhaps surprisingly. Why

lucky? "One wrong step and she could have destroyed her life. She was hurt, yes, but she became a princess. When you are hurt, you can become bitter and make bad choices. But Tatyana instead made good choices."

"On the other hand," Kosky continues, "the piece isn't successful if the audience don't feel for Onegin. People sometimes play him cold from beginning to end. You think: what an arsehole. But that's not in the music, and I don't think it's Tchaikovsky's intention. I think he actually identifies with both of these characters, because they're both outsiders, on the fringes of society, looking in, feeling frustration and loneliness." And Onegin, too, has his own epic journey to make across the opera, Kosky feels. "The man we meet in the first act – that know-it-all, slightly repressed guy – is not the passionate volcano that erupts in the extraordinary last 15-minute scene."

Kosky has been a regular visitor to

the Edinburgh International Festival since his eyebrow-raising *Poppea* melding Monteverdi and Cole Porter in 2007, returning with *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *Bluebeard's Castle* and 2015's unforgettable live cinematic *The Magic Flute*, made with theatre company 1927 (who are back this year). "I absolutely adore my trips to Edinburgh," he enthuses.

His *Eugene Onegin* is a more straightforward, even realist show than the earlier ones we've experienced.

"Yes, it's a very poetic, very unpretentious production," he agrees. "But I think every production I do is different. Each show inhabits its own world, and with a piece like *Onegin*, you can't stylise it. It doesn't work. It has to be treated as a very extraordinary piece of heightened realism. It doesn't work if the characters are not three-dimensional and very believable."

It was Grigorian's intense performance as Tatyana in Berlin that contributed to her being named female singer of the year at this year's International Opera Awards. How has that recognition changed her career?

"It's been a big joy – and one I can share with all my teachers and everyone who helped me get to where I am now. But it's helped me to jump up a step. Now I can choose where and what I sing. I have some kind of freedom. That's really the biggest gift that any artist can hope for." ▀

**Festival Theatre, Edinburgh, 15-17 August, 0131-473 2000/www.eif.co.uk**