

MADAME BUTTERFLY

A stage like a floating sheet of paper

The lake stage built for this year's festival looks like a scrap of paper, crumpled up and thrown into the water. The paper is an image of the soul, says Elisabeth Sobotka, artistic director of the Bregenz Festival. It reflects the turbulent emotions of the delicate Cio-Cio-San, called Butterfly. The sorry story of the young girl, emotionally and sexually exploited the US marine Pinkerton, is told in Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* with "great, powerful music", Sobotka says. The big open-air stage standing in Lake Constance at Bregenz will, for the next two summers, be the setting for an intimate, deeply sad drama.

The iconic stage sculpture, created for the production by the Canadian set designer Michael Levine, is "poetic and full of magic" in the words of Wolfgang Urstadt, technical director of the Bregenz Festival. Urstadt and his team of festival technicians assisted by twelve companies are transforming the designer's ideas into a three-dimensional material object. The chief components of the set are a piece of paper floating on the water with a delicate Japanese landscape painted on it, and a boat with elements of the US flag painted in what looks like a child's hand.

For the stage sculpture, 117 individual pieces of varying size were made of wood and polystyrene foam at an assembly hall in the neighbouring town of Lauterach. When finished, they were transported to the lake stage, where the elements were pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle and mounted on the underlying steel girder construction. The result was an upward curving surface, initially dazzling white, with a total area of 1,340 square metres. Gradually the sculpture acquired more crinkles and contours. By the end of May its surface will be decorated with a Japanese landscape painting.

The particular challenge of this stage sculpture lies in deception. "We want to suggest the lightness of a thin sheet of paper," Urstadt says, "even though its weight is around 300 tonnes!" How can that be done? "With a simple trick that every painter knows – it's called perspective," the technical director explains. The stage surfaces taper towards the edges and "seem wafer-thin". Building the stage required a lot of patient trial and error in matters of practical mechanics: "The audience is supposed to see a thin sheet of paper, and yet the stage has to withstand snow load and wind and above all wave action from Lake Constance."



The force of the water, which acts upon the construction from underneath, has to be absorbed. To protect the structure from the wash of the waves, eight special tension anchors have been fixed into the lake bed. Their task is to divert the high tensile forces that are created when the water pushes up against the thin edges of the paper material. "Of course we took the utmost care about water protection while working. Very high water protection standards apply for Lake Constance as a drinking water reservoir," Urstadt adds.

Technical challenges were also presented by the surface of the *Madame Butterfly* stage. The 117 jigsaw pieces – the largest of them measuring 17 square metres, the smallest piece six – had to be fitted together without visible joins. Also, 47 loudspeaker openings had to be inserted in the paper surface, invisible to the audience, and openings had to be made in the creases for performers to enter "in a way that leaves the audience wondering where the people suddenly appear on stage from".

Frank Schulze, scenery builder and owner of the firm La Mimesi, is now in his 25th season at Bregenz. He's working on the stage surface. It's the job of the scenery builder to create stage illusions by constructing and painting scenery. With the Bregenz lake stage set a particular consideration is the light, Schulze says. "The stage sculpture is lit all day by constantly changing light and it has to pass muster under that lighting." Cracks and flaws are visible immediately, he says, and consequently precision work is required. To ensure that what is not meant to be seen is not seen, you keep having to take a few steps backwards, "to take a look at the stage from the audience's perspective," Schulze explains.

The materials used are carefully tested to see if they will survive exposure to the elements for two seasons. Prototypes of the prefabricated parts, for example, are put in so-called ageing chambers and exposed to artificial weather conditions. There two years of cold, heat and humidity can be simulated in six weeks.

The stage for *Madame Butterfly* will see an interplay of sculpture, fantastic costumes and lighting effects, Urstadt promises. To summon up that sought-after magic, the production will also make use of digital stage effects. All Urstadt is prepared to reveal about this at the moment is that it will take one whole week to digitally scan the stage – the prerequisite for using lighting and projectors. As for the special effects themselves, he is keeping mum. It should after all be a surprise for the audience.

The 2022 Bregenz Festival runs from 20 July to 21 August. For tickets and information please visit our website www.bregenzfestspiele.com or call 0043 5574 4076.