



CARMEN

Flying cards and water dancing

Before the fateful story of the seductive Carmen runs its course on the Bregenz lake stage, before the women workers at the cigarette factory, policemen, smugglers and toreros love, hate and kill, it's technicians and craftsmen who rule the stage. Their role is to search for a middle course between artistic vision and technical feasibility, "between construction and optical effect" (technical director Wolfgang Urstadt).

The stage resembles a building site where cranes, lorries, fork-lift trucks and working boats follow a precise choreography. Every technical operation on the set must be on time and on target. Carpenters, metalworkers, mechanical engineers, scene painters and constructors, and control technology specialists are working in a meticulously detailed and coordinated way on the scenic world conceived by British set designer Es Devlin for the lake stage. As the spring advances, the building site starts to look like an art work that gives a tantalising glimpse of what's in store for visitors to this summer's Bregenz Festival.

Floral tattoos and red fingernails

In her work as stage designer Es Devlin switches between the genres. She has created sets for pop acts like Adele and U2 but also for major opera houses. For Georges Bizet's passionate drama *Carmen* she has designed an exceptional setting: filigree scenery that gives great scope to the lake – the central figure in a stage picture that constantly changes with the weather.

What we see is a colossal pair of women's hands with red fingernails and tattooed forearms showing delicate rose patterns. The hands are trying to hold a set of playing cards, or perhaps attempting to perform the flying shuffle when the cards fly artistically from one hand to the other. The trick doesn't seem to have worked, as a lot of cards are lying strewn on the ground. Have they been dropped, or are they ready and waiting for the next trick? "You can interpret it in lots of ways," says Wolfgang Urstadt. "Es Devlin leaves a lot of scope for the audience's imagination."

Devlin creates spaces for the imagination and makes extensive use of video in her work. She developed her ideas for the production in her London studio and sent them to Bregenz digitally. Now it's up to the specialists at the Festspielhaus to translate those ideas into physical form.



Stage elements built in winter

During the winter months the colossal pair of women's hands were fabricated by Frank Schulze and his team. Each one has been put together from around 190 individual components. The right hand is 18 metres high, the left one towers 21 metres above the water's surface. The cards are supported by a steel framework that looks a bit like a tree and cannot be seen from the seating area. When finished, the set will be 43 metres wide and 24 metres high. Invisible to the audience are hollow spaces inside the arms and fingers, as well as trapdoors and ladders leading up to the highest cards. While the opera about love and betrayal is playing, the cards and fingers will turn into escape routes for smugglers and locations where spectacular stunts are performed.

Flying and floating cards

The technical director and his team distinguish between three types of playing card. Firstly the Flying Cards, which are attached to the steel "tree" and appear suspended in mid air. Secondly the Beach Cards on the ground, which slope slightly towards the water's edge. Thirdly the Mesh, consisting of several non-slip cards beneath the water's surface. In the centre of the stage there is a specially constructed revolving stage ten metres in diameter, on which stand two more playing cards – the only ones that can be mechanically moved. The mobility of all the other cards is computer-generated.

Each one of these 59 cards measures 30 square metres and would thus fill a small apartment. But it would take a giant to move them because they are made of solid wooden panels and weigh about 2.5 tonnes each.

The audience sees the back of the cards. This is decorated with an intricate, oriental-style pattern, embossed in beige on a white background which causes magical shadow effects according to the time of day and incidence of light. During the performance the cards are used as a display surface for video. Video projection brings them to cartomantic life – hearts or diamonds, black or red, love, passion, death.

The Flying Cards have an additional function as a sound wall. They conceal loudspeakers, as do the hands and forearms. The scenery builders have to make sure the membranes covering the speakers can't be recognised as such. "They've got to work from a distance, but also through telephoto lenses and opera glasses," Wolfgang Urstadt says.

Underwater action

Among the challenges for the technical team was the mound of Beach Cards. These look like they have been dropped or thrown down and lie on top of each other. It was necessary to arrange them in such a way that performers can move across the different levels without risk.



The Mesh Cards have been coated with coarse material so that dancers and singers will be unable to slip. "There will be some scenes in and under water and it's essential to ensure the artists' safety," says Urstadt. As if by magic the underwater cards can be made to move and can be effortlessly adjusted to changes in water level.

Wolfgang Urstadt: "That sounds easy, and as a matter of fact it is. But you've got to figure it out first. Only our specialist company for control engineering can do that." A deflection drive has been developed for the purpose of lowering the mesh. The cables are hidden in lake-bed piles and the hydraulics are housed in the rear section of the stage.

The underwater world of Lake Constance will have dramatic significance in Kasper Holten's production of *Carmen*. The exact details are still a well-kept secret, however.

The 72nd season of Bregenz Festival opens on 19 July with the premiere of *Carmen* and ends on 20 August. Twenty-eight evening performances of *Carmen* are scheduled. For tickets and information, visit www.bregenzerfestspiele.com or call tel. +43 (0)5574 407-6.