Rehearsal Room
Vida Miknevičiūtė (Salome)
VICTORIAN OPERA PRESENTS

SALOME

OPERA IN ONE ACT

Composer Richard Strauss
Librettist Hedwig Lachmann
Based on Oscar Wilde’s play Salomé

Conductor Richard Mills AM
Director Cameron Menzies
Set Designer Christina Smith
Costume Designer Anna Cordingley
Lighting Designer Gavan Swift
Choreographer Elizabeth Hill-Cooper

CAST
Salome Vida Miknevičiūtė
Herod Ian Storey
Jochanaan Daniel Sumegi
Herodias Liane Keegan
Narraboth James Egglestone
Page of Herodias Dimity Shepherd

Jews Paul Biencourt, Daniel Todd, Timothy Reynolds, Carlos E. Bárcenas, Raphael Wong
Nazarenes Simon Meadows, Douglas Kelly

Soldiers Alex Pokryshevsky, Jerzy Kozlowski
Cappadocian Kiran Rajasingam
Slave Kathryn Radcliffe

with Orchestra Victoria
Concertmaster Yi Wang

22, 25, 27 FEBRUARY 2020
Palais Theatre

Original premiere 9 December 1905, Semperoper Dresden
Duration 90 minutes, no interval
Sung in German with English surtitles
PRODUCTION

PRODUCTION TEAM
Production Manager Eduard Inglés
Stage Manager Whitney McNamara
Deputy Stage Manager Marina Milankovic
Assistant Stage Manager Geetanjali Mishra

MUSIC STAFF
Repetiteurs Phoebe Briggs, Phillipa Safey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Surtitles courtesy of Opera Australia
ResolutionX, BAACLight Theatre, Lilydale Theatre Company

© Anna Cordingley, Costume Designer
ORCHESTRA

CONCERTMASTER
Yi Wang *

VIOLIN
Principal 1st Violin
Yi Wang
Principal 2nd Violin
Monica Naselow
Associate Principal 1st Violin
Tomomi Brennan §
Associate Principal 1st Violin
Erica Kennedy
Associate Principal
Jenny Khafagi +
Rebecca Adler
Chair supported by Mr Andrew Fairley AM
Binny Baik
Alyssa Conrau
Rachel Gamer
Matthew Hassall
Rachael Hunt
Philip Nixon
John Noble
Chris Ruiter
Lucy Warren
Tony Zhai
Natasha Conrau +
Karla Hanna +
Lynette Rayner +

VIOLA
Section Principal
Paul McMillan
Associate Principal
Gaëlle Bayet +
Jason Bunn
Nadine Delbridge
Molly Collier O’Boyle +
Beth Hemming +
Josh Stilwell +
Cora Teeuwen +

CELLO
Section Principal
Melissa Chominsky
Chair supported by Lady Southey AC
Associate Principal
Diane Froomes
Sarah Cuming
Philippa Gardner
Tania Hardy-Smith
Andrea Taylor

DOUBLE BASS
Section Principal
Stuart Riley §
Chair supported by Don and Angela Mercer
Associate Principal
Kylie Davies +
Matthew Thorne
Stephen Reeves +
Nic Synot +

FLUTE
Section Principal
Lisa-Maree Amos
Chair supported by Peter Griffin AM and Terry Swann
Associate Principal
Karen Schofield §
Principal Piccolo
Rebecca Johnson +
Dominique Chaseling +

OBOE
Section Principal
Martin Lee +
Associate Principal
Joshua de Graaf
Principal Cor Anglais
Dafydd Camp
Chair supported by Ms Linda Herd

CLARINET
Section Principal
Paul Champion
Associate Principal
Justin Beere
Chair supported by Susan and Leith Campbell
Robin Henry ++
Alexander McCracken +

TROMBONE
Section Principal
Scott Evans
Associate Principal
Kieran Conrau +
Principal Bass Trombone
Ben Anderson

HORN
Section Principal
Jasen Moulton
Chair supported by Mr Robert Albert AO RFD RD and Mrs Elizabeth Albert
Principal Third
Linda Hewett §
Sydney Braunfeld §
Roman Ponomariov ++
Sharon Hatton +
Robert Shirley +

TRUMPET
Section Principal
Mark Fitzpatrick
Associate Principal
Timothy Francis
Anthony Pope

TIMPANI
Section Principal
Guy du Blêt
Chair supported by Igor and Jenny Zambelli with Libby and Jim Cousins AO

PERCUSSION
Section Principal
Mathew Levy
Associate Principal
Scott Weatherston +
Robert Clarke +++
Peter Neville +
James Townsend +

HARP
Section Principal
Alannah Guthrie-Jones +

CELESTE
Phillipa Safey ≠

* Acting § On Leave + Guest Musician ++ Guest Associate Principal +++ Guest Associate Principal ≠ Courtesy of Victorian Opera
Since its premiere in 1905, this opera has fascinated musicians and entertained and startled the public. It remains an extraordinary work, even to the audiences of our time: its harmonic complexity and dazzling orchestration retain their power to astonish. It still sounds contemporary in 2020, 115 years after its first performances.

The virtuosic technique of Strauss is always at the service of the drama and storytelling. It is never an end in itself, but inseparable from the theatrical inspiration and dramatic purpose of the text: a German translation by Hedwig Lachmann of Oscar Wilde’s play, originally written in French.

The subject matter is itself scandalous and outrageous and shocking in its brutality. It remains an exhilarating theatrical experience – a potent illustration of the power of theatre of cruelty to cleanse by ‘pity and terror’.

But it is the transfiguring power of the music which makes the piece operatic on multiple levels, and the vocal demands Strauss places on his singers are extraordinary. The consequent heightened reality explores the limits of human behaviours, the ‘farthest north of humanness’ to use a phrase of Percy Grainger.

Opera after *Salome* could never be the same. Schoenberg and Berg were in the audience for the Austrian premiere in Graz in 1906, and the influence of *Salome* is palpable in both *Wozzeck* (1924) and *Lulu* (1935).

Victorian Opera is proud to welcome our extraordinary cast and celebrate the company debuts of Vida Miknevičiūtė and Ian Storey. Welcome to what promises to be an extraordinary night at the opera.

**RICHARD MILLS**  
Artistic Director and Conductor
DIRECTOR’S NOTE

We find ourselves in a very recognisable location. However, we find this location in a way that we have never seen before. The world we have created for our production of *Salome* is one of decay and destruction, a place once full of beauty, of culture, of humanity, a place provoking thought and freethinking. These values are gone now. A world full of sin waiting for its Messiah, Saviour or Cure. We are in a world where the order of rule has been imposed by a foreign land, its indigenous tribes have been displaced, and the crown that sits on the ruler’s head is full of disease and rot. Corruption, greed, lust, obsession and manipulation are the way of the world.

The world of Herod is one of ultimate power. The painted appearance of the ruling class comes from its desire to deceive people and appear something that they are not. The employment of theatre and makeup is used by the rulers to distract and divert people from the real issues of the day. It is when Salome removes this veil, she instantly becomes more potent as a real woman without the need for this artifice her powers ignite and only then is she is able to hold Herod to his word and make him accountable. It is her strength and unwavering will that bring Herod to his knees and eventually this piece to its end. Salome and the women in this opera are continually silenced and dismissed and when they dare to stand tall and hold their ground they become a threat to the powers that be and therefore become too dangerous to have around.

Our production has tried to simultaneously look forward and backwards; to its origins in the biblical story and to the opera’s original text, the Oscar Wilde play of the same name, and forward to the ongoing relevance to these themes moving into the 21st century. I feel that this piece serves as an allegory or a warning to the world as to what can happen when we as the human race turn away from humanity, compassion and empathy.

Creating *Salome* has been a career highlight and to create it with this particular company, creative team and cast has been a complete honor. I thank everyone for trusting me to bring this masterpiece by Strauss, Lachmann and Wilde to life.

CAMERON MENZIES
Director
SYNOPSIS

On the terrace of Herod’s great palace, soldiers talk and guard the imprisoned Jochanaan. Their captain, Narraboth, watches Salome intently. Herodias’ Page tries to warn him of the danger of his infatuation, but he ignores her. Jochanaan’s voice is heard from the cistern, proclaiming the coming of a great Messiah.

Salome enters, escaping the banquet and the lingering gaze of her stepfather, Herod. The Page again warns of danger. Jochanaan speaks and Salome recognises him as the one who denounced her mother for marrying her husband’s brother. Refusing to return to the banquet, Salome requests to speak directly to Jochanaan. Narraboth initially denies her request but she seduces Narraboth into opening the cistern.

As Jochanaan emerges he denounces Herod and Herodias before turning on Salome as the daughter of her sinful mother. Salome is spellbound by Jochanaan and expresses her desire for his body, then his hair and, finally, his mouth. In despair, Narraboth kills himself. Jochanaan rejects Salome, telling her to seek salvation. She ignores him and her obsession with Jochanaan intensifies. He curses her and returns to the cistern.

Herod, in a maddened state, comes looking for Salome. He offers her food and wine, but she refuses it. Herodias berates him for paying so much attention to her daughter. They are interrupted by the voice of Jochanaan, who resumes his tirades. Herodias demands that Herod hand the prisoner over to the Jews, but Herod refuses, leading to a theological debate between the Jews and Nazarenes.

Herod turns his attention back to Salome and asks her to dance for him. After rejecting his first two requests, she finally agrees when he swears an oath to give her anything she desires. Salome dances seductively for him.

In a state of excitement Herod asks her what she desires. To his horror, Salome requests the head of Jochanaan on a silver platter. Herod is shocked and tries instead to offer her many treasures, but she insists on Jochanaan’s head. Reluctantly, Herod gives in. Herodias, pleased with her daughter’s request, takes the Ring of Death from Herod’s finger. This seals Jochanaan’s fate.

Salome impatiently awaits her prize. When the head is brought to her, Salome takes it in her hands and speaks passionately to it. Filled with lust, she finally kisses the lips she so desired. Herod, disgusted by what he is seeing, orders his guards to kill Salome.
Rehearsal Room
Front: Ian Storey (Herod)
Back: Raphael Wong, Carlos E. Bárcenas, Paul Biencourt (Jews)
CREATIVE TEAM

Victorian Opera’s Artistic Director Richard Mills AM, is an internationally recognised composer pursuing a diverse nationwide career as conductor, artistic director, and advisor for over 30 years. Having conducted all of Australia’s major symphony orchestras and opera companies Richard also has an extensive discography of orchestral compositions including his own works. This year Richard conducts Victorian Opera’s Salome and Three Tales, and a revival of his Summer of the Seventeenth Doll for State Opera South Australia. Richard’s commissioned works include concertos, symphonic works, ballet and chamber music, song cycles and his operas, Batavia and Love of the Nightingale. He is currently a Senior Fellow, Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne and Adjunct Professor of Music, University of Queensland Research.

Cameron is a Helpmann and Greenroom nominated artist who has worked and directed for London Philharmonic Orchestra, Shakespeare’s Globe (United Kingdom), Diva Opera UK, Opera Australia, Victorian Opera, Short Black Opera Company, Adelaide Cabaret Festival, Brighton Festival UK, Deutsche Oper Berlin and Australian International Opera Company. Cameron is the Artistic Director of The Classics: Opera for City of Stonnington, Associate Artist (Director of Productions) Diva Opera (United Kingdom), and Associate Artist for the Meow Revolution. He has directed over 50 productions including opera, music theatre, cabaret and theatre throughout Australia, China, United Kingdom, United States, Europe and South Africa. He is the recipient of the Berlin New Music Award 2011, Besen Fellowship Malthouse Theatre 2011 and Bayreuth Opera Award 2008.

Christina has worked extensively as a set and costume designer over the last 20 years, designing for companies including Victorian Opera, New Zealand Opera, Seattle Opera, State Opera of South Australia, Opera Queensland, Melbourne Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Playbox, Black Swan State Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, The Production Company, Belvoir, Sydney Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, WA Ballet and Australian Ballet. Recent productions for Victorian Opera include Parsifal (costumes), Voyage to the Moon, Banquet of Secrets and The Flying Dutchman (set). Christina is also currently a Performance Design lecturer at the Victorian College of the Arts.

RICHARD MILLS
Conductor

CAMERON MENZIES
Director

CHRISTINA SMITH
Set Designer
Anna is an award-winning set and costume designer whose designs have been seen by audiences throughout Australia, Europe, Britain and the United States. Anna also designs exhibitions and events; and creates public art and installation. Selected designs include: for Victorian Opera, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *The Threepenny Opera* (with Sydney Theatre Company and Malthouse); *Don Giovanni* (Opera Queensland); *Aida* (Opera Australia, costumes); for Melbourne Theatre Company, *Storm Boy* (with Queensland Theatre), *Jasper Jones*; *Abigail’s Party* set; for Bell Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra, Richard III*; for Malthouse, *Meow Meow’s Little Mermaid*. She is currently designing a new production of *Carmen* for Opera Australia. Anna has won a Helpmann Award for Best Set Design and two Green Room Awards.

Elizabeth began her career as a classical ballet dancer with West Australian Ballet. Moving into choreography and directing, she discovered her love of opera. She has created or restaged productions for several state opera companies and Opera Australia. Her credits include: *Die Fledermaus, The Gypsy Princess, The Tales of Hoffmann, My Fair Lady, The Pirates of Penzance, Rusalka, Lakmé and Arabella*. Elizabeth regularly collaborates with Stuart Maunder and Roger Kirk. Joining Victorian Opera in 2012, Elizabeth has directed mainstage productions such as *Pelleas and Melisande* and was the company’s Executive Producer from 2014-2019. She was appointed Victorian Opera’s CEO in May 2019.

Gavan’s musical lighting designs include *Heathers the Musical, Mamma Mia!, Mack & Mabel, The Mikado, The Pirates of Penzance, Hot Shoe Shuffle, Little Shop of Horrors, Sweet Charity, Fiddler on the Roof, Jolson, Buddy, Oh What a Night, Footloose, Hair, Xanadu* and *Saturday Night Fever* both in Australia and on London’s West End. Gavan was the lighting designer for *Moby Dick* at San Francisco Opera, Washington National Opera and LA Opera. For Opera Australia he designed *Lakmé* and for OzOpera he designed *Carmen, La bohème* and *Midnite*. At the Brisbane Baroque Festival Gavan designed *Faramondo*. He has also designed the lighting for The Production Company’s *Thoroughly Modern Millie, Anything Goes, Sugar, The Music Man, Hair, Mack & Mabel* and *Mame*.
Lithuanian soprano Vida Miknevičiūtė recently made her debut as Chrysothemis (Elektra) under the baton of Daniel Barenboim at the Berlin State Opera, to which she will return in the 2019/20 season as Helmwige (The Valkyrie). After studying in Kaunas and Leipzig she was a member of the International Opera Studios in Zurich and Hamburg, performing roles such as Pamina, Gretel, Micaëla, Wellgunde and Freia (Rheingold) as well as Helmwige. Since 2011 she is a member of the ensemble at state theatre Mainz and a regular guest on renowned European opera stages and festivals. Vida’s repertoire includes Elettra (Idomeneo), Tatjana (Eugene Onegin), La Traviata, Elisabetta (Don Carlo), Blanche (Dialogues of the Carmelites), Chrysothemis, Empress (The Woman without a Shadow), Eva (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg), Senta (The Flying Dutchman) and Elisabeth (Tannhäuser).

Born in the United Kingdom, Ian has performed in six languages including title roles in Peter Grimes, Otello, Samson, Tristan und Isolde. He has performed Tristan in Milan, Berlin, Oslo, Bilbao, Barcelona, Zurich, Genova, Venice, Düsseldorf and Washington DC; Otello in Naples, Trondheim, Antwerp, Los Angeles (US debut at the invitation of Placido Domingo), Verona and Düsseldorf. His Russian repertoire includes Pikovaya Dama in Madrid, Bologna, Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk in Riga and Naples, Boris Godunov in Venice and Turin. In Czech he has performed the main tenor roles in Jenůfa, Kát’a Kabanová and Věc Makropulos. His concert works include Dream of Gerontius (Berlin Philharmonic) and the title role in Rienzi in New York.

International bass-baritone Daniel Sumegi has sung over 100 roles at the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Covent Garden and the Paris Opera, as well as major opera companies across the United States, Europe, Asia, South America and Australia. Recent appearances have included: Der Ring des Nibelungen (Melbourne, Seattle, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles), Madama Butterfly (Metropolitan Opera, Seattle), Rigoletto and Billy Budd (Los Angeles), Salome (Israel, Washington, Hong Kong), Die Walküre (Stuttgart, Singapore) and Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, The Magic Flute, Pearl Fishers, Luisa Miller, Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, Rigoletto and Eugene Onegin (Opera Australia).
Born in Australia, Liane is a specialist in the works of Mahler and is a regular soloist with MSO in concert and oratorio repertoire. Her extensive career has been divided between leading roles in Australia and Europe. She has performed for Victorian Opera (Pelleas and Melisande, William Tell, The Flying Dutchman); SOSA (Erda, First Norn and Waltraute: Der Ring Des Nibelungen, Azucena: Il Trovatore); OA (Erda: Der Ring Des Nibelungen, Ulrica: Un ballo in Maschera); ENO (First Norn: The Twilight of the Gods); Theater Hagen (Klytämnestra: Elektra, Mistress Quickly: Falstaff, Leocadja Begbick: Aufstieg und fall der Stadt Mahagonny) and Deutsche Oper Berlin (Anna: Les Troyens, Emilia: Otello, Marcellina: Le Nozze Di Figaro, Siegrune: Die Walküre).

Dual Helpmann Award-winning James Egglestone is one of Australia’s finest tenors. Roles for State Opera of South Australia have included Laurie in Little Women and Nadir in The Pearl Fishers; for West Australian Opera – Nadir, Almaviva, Ismaele in Nabucco; for Victorian Opera - Don Ottavio, Ferrando and Peter Quint. Most recently, James has sung Pinkerton in Madama Butterfly, Lensky in Eugene Onegin, Cassio in Otello and Lysander for Opera Australia and Rodolfo (La bohème) for State Opera of South Australia. His performance as Edrisi (Krol Roger) for OA won the Green Room Award for Best Male Performance in a Supporting Role.

Appearances for Victorian Opera include Green Room Award winning performances in Lorelei, Cherubino in The Marriage of Figaro, Orphée in Orphée et Eurydice, Alice in Through The Looking Glass, Arsamene in Xerxes, Nireno in Julius Caesar, Flora in La traviata, Beggar Woman in Sweeney Todd, Helpmann and Green Room Award nominated Lucy in The Threepenny Opera, Clara in Midnight Son, roles in Banquet of Secrets, The Riders, Nixon in China and Sunday in the Park with George. Also Cherubino, Carmen and Rosina in The Barber of Seville for Opera Australia, roles for Opera Queensland and Chamber Made Opera, Katchen in The Black Rider for The Malthouse and the title role in The Ghost Wife at the Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and London’s BITE02 Festivals.
CAST

PAUL BIENCOURT
Jew
Credits include Mr Erlanson (A Little Night Music), Rodolfe (William Tell), Brighella (Ariadne Auf Naxos), Tmolus (Phoebus & Pan), Rodolfo (La bohème), Basilio (The Marriage of Figaro), St Brioche (The Merry Widow), Remendado (Carmen) and Ferrando (Cosi Fan Tutte).

DANIEL TODD
Jew
Credits include Pasek (Cunning Little Vixen), Tamino (The Magic Flute), Basilio (The Marriage of Figaro), Pluto (Orpheus in the Underworld), Rodolfo (La bohème), Joe (La fanciulla del West), Albazar (Il turco in Italia) and Prince Walheim (Sleeping Beauty - world premiere).

TIMOTHY REYNOLDS
Jew
Performed with Opera Holland Park, Hampstead Garden Opera, The Gesualdo Consort Amsterdam, Victorian Opera, Pinchgut Opera, Opera Australia, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Ludovico’s Band, Australian Brandenburg Orchestra and understudied roles with Oper Stuttgart.

CARLOS E. BARCENAS
Jew
Credits include Alexander (Il Re Pastore) Michael (Pecan Summer), Arnaldo (Guillaume Tell), Elvino (La Sonnambula), Tebaldo (I Capuleti e i Montecchi), Edgardo (Lucia di Lammermoor), Steuermann (The Flying Dutchman), Third Squire (Parsifal) and Sir Bruno (I Puritani).

RAPHAEL WONG
Jew
Two-time finalist in the Herald Sun Aria, runner-up in the National Liederfest, and a Green Room Award nominee. Recent credits include Schaunard (La bohème), Louis (Sunday in the Park with George) and performances with Victorian Opera, Lyric Opera and Opera Australia.

SIMON MEADOWS
Nazarene
Credits include Guglielmo (Cosi fan Tutte), Junius and Tarquinius (Rape of Lucretia), Demetrius (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), Marcellino (La bohème), Marco (Gianni Schicchi), Figaro (Il Barbiere di Siviglia), Cascada (The Merry Widow), Marullo (Rigoletto), and Silvio and Tonio (I Pagliacci).
DOUGLAS KELLY
Nazarene
Winner of 2019 Liederfest and final list of the 2016 Herald Sun Aria. Credits include Basilio (Le nozze di Figaro), Aeneas (Dido and Aeneas), Sandman (Hansel and Gretel), Henry Crawford (Mansfield Park), and Anfinorno and Eurimaco (Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria).

ALEX POKRYSHEVSKY
Soldier
Alex performed in Victorian Opera’s productions of Parsifal, William Tell, Pelleas and Melisande, and in Opera Australia’s productions of Turandot, La bohème and Die Meistersinger. Other credits include Banquo (Macbeth), Rafael (The Creation) and Jesus (St John Passion).

JERZY KOZLOWSKI
Soldier
Jerzy works regularly with Victorian Opera, and has performed with Opera Australia in every Melbourne season since 1996. Credits include Christus (St John Passion), Arthur (The Riders), The King (Princess and the Pea) and Leuchtold (Guillaume Tell).

KIRAN RAJASINGAM
Cappadocian
Credits with Victorian Opera include Herod (The Play of Herod), The King (Cendrillon), Mr Mayor (The Pied Piper), Scientist #1 (The Grumpiest Boy in the World) as well as chorus roles in Parsifal, La Sonnambula, William Tell, The Capulets and the Montagues and Cunning Little Vixen.

KATHRYN RADCLIFFE
Slave
Winner of the 2014 Herald-Sun Aria, Kathryn Radcliffe has recently made several important débuts - Delia (Il viaggio a Reims) for Opera Australia, The Queen (The Princess and the Pea) for Victorian Opera and Frasquita (Carmen) for the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra.
IN DEPTH

SALOME AND THE NEW WORLD

She is probably the most renowned striptease artist in history, yet the bible story concerning Salome does not even tell us her name.

In the gospels of St Matthew and St Mark we read of her as the daughter of Herodias. Herodias deserted Salome’s father Herod Philippus for his half-brother Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great); the preacher John the Baptist condemned the new marriage as incestuous. For this, and his prophecy of the coming Messiah, Herod Antipas had John imprisoned in a dungeon. One night, after a banquet, Herodias’ daughter danced for the guests, and her performance so pleased Herod that he offered her whatever she desired. Encouraged by Herodias, she asked for John’s head. Although the gospels tell us that Herod was ‘sorry’, he kept his promise, and had the executioner bring to her John’s head on a silver charger; she then gave it to her mother.

There is nothing in the story of Herod’s lust for Salome, of Salome’s desire for John, of Herod ordering Salome’s death or even that the dance involved seven veils (or veils of any kind). These embellishments were the work of Oscar Wilde, in his play Salomé, which he wrote, in French, in 1891. A failure in France, and banned in Britain, the play had been a success in Germany, where it was first performed in 1901. It represents part of a resurgent interest in the Salome story, which coincided with what might be described as the rise of the femme fatale in late 19th century art. There were Salome pictures by Lovis Corinth and Gustave Moreau (and many others), Flaubert’s short story Hérodias and Massenet’s opera based on it, Hérodiade.

Wilde’s Salomé first came to Strauss’ attention through a young Viennese poet, Anton Lindner, who offered to create an opera libretto based on the play, and even wrote some sample scenes. Strauss was underwhelmed, and preferred the new translation by Hedwig Lachmann, created for the production staged by Max Reinhardt in Berlin in 1902. By the time Strauss came to see the play that November, he had already jotted some musical ideas down in his copy of the text. So, after the performance, when a friend said to him: ‘Surely you could make an opera of this,’ Strauss could truthfully reply: ‘I am already busy composing it.’

Strauss had first been attracted to the musical possibilities suggested by the play’s opening line: ‘How beautiful is
the Princess Salome tonight!’ He then created his own libretto by cutting Wilde’s text by more than a third. Secondary characters disappeared, as did anything not germane to the central plot.

If any two operas can be said to announce the 20th century in music, they are Debussy’s Pelleas and Melisande of 1902, and Strauss’ Salome, which premiered three years later. In both, the declamation of traditional libretto poetry is cast aside in favour of a prose text taken straight from spoken drama. Both composers use this operatic freedom to explore emotion and psychology with exceptional vividness, and to make the orchestra equal – and sometimes dominating – partners as they strike out on bold new paths of expression. The extent to which the orchestra anticipates and comments upon the characters’ emotional states in Salome led Strauss’ contemporary, the French composer Gabriel Fauré, to describe the work as ‘a tone-poem with vocal parts added’.

Not long before he’d finished the score, Strauss played Salome for his father, who responded: ‘My God what nervous music. I feel as if my trousers were full of insects.’ It is this restlessness – harmonically, tonally and rhythmically – that allows Strauss to paint each moment in the opera so precisely, from Salome’s mounting infatuation with John to Herod’s increasingly desperate pleas to Salome. In finding a sound for this erotically charged story of obsession, Strauss, in his own words, ‘penetrated to the uttermost limits of harmony [and] psychological polyphony...’. And in showing how a complex emotional landscape could be explored in a pungent, richly expressive musical language, he also paved the way for the operas of Bartók, Korngold, Berg, Shostakovich and Britten. At the dawn of the 20th century, Salome announced a new era of operatic possibility.

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Writer and Presenter
FOR LEASE

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REIMAGINING THE POTENTIAL OF OPERA, FOR EVERYONE

Based in Melbourne, Victorian Opera is a national leader in presenting unforgettable opera experiences. As the state opera company of Victoria, we are committed to making creative and accessible opera and musical theatre for everyone, and evolving the art form in adventurous ways.

From opera diehards to first-timers, over 30,000 people experience our work annually through live performances and streamed events throughout Victoria. We premiere at least one new Australian work each year and have staged 22 new works since the company formed in 2005.

While we do not have our own opera house, we do perform in Victoria’s best theatres and concert halls, choosing our venue to suit the scale of each production and to give our audiences the best possible experience. Some of our wonderfully characteristic venues include Arts Centre Melbourne, Palais Theatre, Melbourne Recital Centre and The Coopers Malthouse.

We employ hundreds of people across the creative industries, recruit some of the finest singers from Australia and around the world, and collaborate with Australia’s leading companies, venues and learning institutions. The next generation of talent is developed from the ground up through the Victorian Opera Youth Chorus Ensemble (VOYCE) and our innovative Access All Areas: Livestream Program. As part of our commitment to developing the art form, we also stage opera annually in Tasmania.

Recognised for our unique voice and contribution to the country’s operatic landscape, Victorian Opera became an Australian Major Performing Arts company in 2019.

Victorian Opera inspires eclectic audiences with an imaginative approach to opera, and we invite you to join us.

Visit victorianopera.com.au to discover more about the company through blogs, videos and podcasts.

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