

THE DEVIL'S COHORT





An unusual, and highly creative, design team gives a new look and feel to Gounod's *Faust*

By: David Barbour

Faust, one of the more venerable entries in the standard opera repertory, received refreshingly original treatment this spring in a co-production between Lyric Opera of Chicago and Portland [Oregon] Opera. In an opera scene roiled by the continuing debate about the relative worth of traditional versus high-concept stagings, the director Kevin Newbury's approach suggested a kind of third way—reflecting a contemporary sensibility without resetting the action of the story in a totally foreign context. The result was controversial with the press, but also highly intriguing, especially in its combination of high and low technologies.

This *Faust* featured a unique design team, comprised of new faces and established pros, collaborating with John Frame, a noted visual artist, who, making his opera debut, acted as a production designer. (The rest of the team included scenic and costume designer Vita Tzykun, projection designer David Adam Moore, and lighting designer Duane Schuler.) The result was a *Faust* that has roots in the mid-19th century world of composer Charles Gounod and librettists Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, while simultaneously striking a distinctly modern profile. It also reframed this spiritual fable, taken from Goethe's titanic drama, in terms of contemporary philosophy and science.

Newbury has emerged in recent seasons as a dedicated director of significant new opera works, including *Bel Canto*, seen at Lyric Opera of Chicago; *Fellow Travelers*, at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Cincinnati Opera, and New York's Prototype Festival; and *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, staged last summer at Santa Fe Opera and scheduled for Seattle and San Francisco. But he also has a fresh way with repertory items.

Among this production's innovations: Faust was portrayed not as a burned-out philosopher but an artist. Sharing his studio was "O-Man," a sculpted human figure with lenses placed on a telescoping pole affixed to his head. Mephistopheles, Faust's tempter, had four henchmen, fitted with large, satanic heads, who shadowed the action. The action was paced by often-surreal projections featuring stop-motion animation and silhouette imagery.

"John Frame's work was the jumping-off point," Newbury says. "The production was inspired by his world, which comprises sculptures, stop-motion animation, and shadow puppets. But it also reflects John's vision: Faust is often portrayed as a scholar with dusty books, or as a mad scientist building a nuclear bomb or robot. We wanted to portray him as an artist, searching for meaning, who has shut himself off from the world."

Frame, a Californian, works as a sculptor, photographer, composer, and filmmaker. His work has been seen in many group exhibitions internationally as well as solo shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Long Beach Museum of Art, and Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. Among his major works is *The*

All photos: Cory Weaver/Portland Opera



In addition to scenery, Tzykun designed the costumes. Because Frame only sculpts male characters, she created women's clothing based on the production's overall color palette and feel.

Tale of the Crippled Boy, which combines sculpture, photography, installation, music, and film. According to Wikipedia, "The installation is unique in the artist's career in that it includes not only 35 pieces of sculpture but also sets, photography, and animated vignettes, all based around an eclectic cast of sculpted characters, most of whom are fully articulated, with moving fingers, bodies, and jaws." Virtually all these aspects of the artist's work made it into *Faust*.

"This was John's first time doing an opera," Newbury says, "and we wanted to bring in a design team to support him. We have all worked in close collaboration on this for a couple of years, in what has been a really exciting process. It's a unique production; it remains faithful to the story, but it isn't your grandfather's *Faust*. John is a natural collaborator, an exciting person to bounce around ideas with."

Frame, with self-deprecating wit, says, "It has been a long hiatus between my third-grade play and this." He notes that he was recruited by Christopher Mattaliano, general director of Portland Opera: "Christopher noted that I have a very performative approach to my work. My

degree is in literature, with an emphasis on Shakespeare and modern drama. Certainly, at the beginning of my career as a sculptor, my work had a very frontal, presentational aspect. Also, I've designed a working theatrical stage for my stop-motion animation work. For the last ten years, I've been in a theatrical environment." It's significant that the art critic David Pagel, writing about *The Tale of the Crippled Boy*, noted, "If John Frame were in the movie business, he would be a costume designer, stylist, set decorator, prop master, lighting specialist, writer, director, editor, producer, agent, and publicist, all rolled into one do-it-yourself lover of every little detail of every little job."

The process, Newbury says, "started with John and I meeting in Portland for dinner and drinks. Then we brought Vita and David out to immerse themselves in John's work. We had long dinners, talking about art, and lots of Skype conversations." Frame says, "Our first conversations had to do with the way I would want to approach creating a body of work that would serve the purpose of telling the *Faust* tale. For my part, it would be intuitively derived. I'm not really interested in working symbolically. Kevin made it clear that he would, in large meas-

ure, be responsible for that part; he freed me from the obligation of telling the tale. I made stuff that intrigued him and felt right for the story.”

Indeed, Newbury notes that some of the collective brainstorming with the full design team aimed at bridging what he says are “narrative gaps” in the opera. For example: “At the end of Act III, Faust and Marguerite are in love, but, in Act IV, he ignores her, and she has the baby alone. In our production, he is a socially awkward artist who is devoted to his work; even though he goes back in time [returning to a youthful state], he still has the same personal challenges, which is a good way of explaining how he treats her.”

In any case, Frame says, the collaboration quickly bore fruit: “Right off the bat, when Kevin and Vita came to see me, there were no sharp egos. One of Kevin’s rules is that the best idea wins. It’s very fluid. I had a number of pieces that I thought might work for *Faust*. Eventually, we selected them down to the elements that we really felt were right.”

A key piece is O-Man, which, according to a feature story in the Portland newspaper *The Oregonian*, is “a stand-in for the never-ending search for truth: all of us gazing at the stars and into our own souls through the lenses of our personal experience.” Frame says, “Faust at his best is a true searcher. He has spent his life trying to make a connection with God, the mystery of life. When he falls and becomes a flawed human, O-Man is there as a reminder of

his higher self. Every time his higher self tries to reassert itself, Mephistopheles is there to push him back down.”

Scenery and projections

Each of the production’s sets reflected Frame’s sensibility. Faust’s study was defined by torn-up walls with the roof ripped off. In some places, the plaster was torn away, revealing widely spaced wooden slats. The remaining walls were covered in Faust’s sketches and notes that reflected his obsession with work, O-Man was stage center; other furnishings included a bed and Faust’s worktable, with many miniature sculptures, an antique video projector, and a hand-made projection screen on which Faust could watch his self-made movies. (A tiny pico projector housed inside an antique camera achieved this effect).

The furniture was based on Frame’s sculptures. A ladder, hung from the flies, dangled above the deck. Behind the walls were drops depicting a fog-filled forest populated with bare-branched trees. The walls and forest formed the basic environment, which cracked and broke apart as the story unfolded.

The studio furniture was used in unexpected ways in order to create a tavern setting for the second act. For Act III, set in Marguerite’s garden, a kind of oversized doll’s house version of her cottage, placed on stilts, sat upstage. (The design constantly toyed with size and perspective.) For the Act IV cathedral scene, five panels, designed with a leaded window look, came in. The two on each side were slanted on the top; the panel in the center formed a steeple. These were later reconfigured to create Marguerite’s prison cell. The final act played out in the forest, with a number of ladders dangling in mid-air, one of them providing Marguerite with her entrée to Heaven.

Tzykun is a founding member of GLMMR—an NYC-based interdisciplinary art collective that fuses the worlds of fine art, audiovisual technology, and live performance, which she created with Moore. (The acronym stands for “Giving Light Memory+Motion+Relevance.”) The collective, she says, “came from our collective desire to merge film and live action on stage in intelligent ways that are musically sensitive. We are interested in collaborating as scenic and projection designers and using projection-mapping technology to integrate video into the set. Since David and I are partners in life as well as in art, we have the luxury of constantly meeting and bouncing ideas off each other, which designers don’t often get; typically, the set designer forms scenic ideas first, and the projection designer comes in at a later stage.”

She adds, frankly, “When Kevin first approached me about [*Faust*] and asked me if I wanted to work with John, I was a bit hesitant; I’d never worked on a production in which I shared creative duties with another production designer. But the minute I clicked on John’s website, I fell in love with his work. And he is the most ego-free collabo-



O-Man, a sculpture in Faust’s studio, haunted the action, a reminder of Faust’s search for truth.

rator I've met in a long time.

"John was hesitant about the project because what he does is very intuitive and non-linear, so it was up to Kevin, David and I to get fueled by John's work and organize it in such a way that would drive Faust's story forward," Tzykun continues. "I created designs for scenery that were inspired by John's world, and we refined it together.

She adds, "Scenic design can be abstract, while clothing cannot, so when it came to costume designs, our col-



Three of the four satanically masked characters who served as Mephistopheles' henchmen.

laboration became even more unusual. John doesn't sculpt female characters, because his work is largely autobiographical and/or abstract, so I designed original looks for all the women in the show based on our overall color palette and feel. We collaborated on designing not only clothes but also custom-printed fabrics for Faust and Mephistopheles, and faithfully re-created four of John's sculptures that were made to be worn by dancer-actors who portrayed Mephistopheles' helpers."

Newbury notes that, for all the set's abstractions, the production's time frame is "vaguely 19th century, approaching the Industrial Revolution. It has a timeless feeling." Tzykun adds, "When John uses found objects, which he does a lot, they are from that period. He is an avid collector of antiques, some of which are vintage toy theatres and magic lantern slides."

Tzykun adds, "The reflectiveness and transparency of the set was something I brought to the table. It was important to create a really good projection surface. The surfaces of the set are treated with a paint formula we devel-

oped for previous GLMMR productions. It incorporates two types of paint, with a percentage of mica mixed in."

Speaking of the upstage forest drops, Tzykun says, "We printed, with double-processing, on the RP screen; I chose the material because I knew it would create a lot of depth in the onstage look. It looks like the forest goes on forever; the material is also great as a projection surface." The set was built by Indianapolis-based McGuire Scenic. "They're convenient to Chicago, and their work is absolutely excellent," the designer adds.

Moore is something of an anomaly in that, in addition to being a projection designer, he is also a baritone with a busy career; among other things, he was seen last season in a principal role in *The Exterminating Angel* at Metropolitan Opera. (He is also a multimedia artist, composer, and director.) "I began working in visual art and electronic music long before I discovered opera," he says. "At a certain point in my university years, when I was studying with Richard Miller [the late, celebrated singer and voice teacher] at Oberlin Conservatory, it was better to concentrate on singing. Once my opera career started and I had a bit of spare time, laptops had gotten a lot faster, and I was able to rekindle my interest in music technology. A few years later, I started doing video editing and motion graphics design. I learned about video software while I was on the road, then began looking for ways to integrate that into my performing career. Some opportunities followed, and I started designing projections and directing."



The coat of eyes, seen at right in the above photo, is one of many custom fabrics developed by Frame and Tzykun.



The production played with scale, presenting Marguerite's cottage in different sizes. As seen above, it also served as a projection surface.

Speaking about the initial meeting with Frame, Moore says, "We worked through the dramatic impetus of the piece and the ways in which it connects with John's world. Out of that, we came up with an abundance of possibilities. We knew that video had to play a major role, because so much of John's work is in photography and film. We agreed that the most obvious and boring choice would be to upscale his characters and present them, life-sized, onstage. Instead, we wanted to find a way to bring the very human characters of the opera into John's world."

Next, Moore says, "I went back, alone, to work with John in his studio for two weeks. He was incredibly generous in allowing us access to his full body of existing work in the video and photographic formats, in addition to creating a great deal of original work for the production. During this period, he and I talked through every scene of the opera, carefully considering what the language of the projections should be." The process "involved taking John's work and adapting it to the environment of the story; I also created a large amount of original video content that could integrate seamlessly into John's aesthetic

world. And I manipulated some of his images and video clips heavily, taking samples from the original and running them through many layers of permutations, often until the end result looked entirely different from the original."

The result, Moore adds, "was an all-new world inspired by John. It was an unusual process for us; we haven't designed with another designer in this way. The thing that shocked us all was the degree to which John was a dream collaborator, because most of the time he works alone. His process is so solitary that we didn't know what to expect."

For example, consider the first appearance of Mephistopheles. "John created a sculpture of Mephistopheles in lifelike proportions," Moore says. "He photographed every stage of sculpting the figure from a block of wood, then created a stop motion animation of it, so that the block of wood appears to carve itself into Mephisto. Vita and John also collaborated on designing a costume for this figure, which John built. In the production, we see this carving materialize within a few seconds, as Faust, on the brink of suicide, conjures up Satan as a desperate last measure to instill his life with a sense of mean-

ing and purpose. It is seen on a scrim behind Faust—a 16'-tall projection. We worked hard to integrate the video into this scene in the most organic way possible. Once the projection surface is pulled down by Faust in an attempt to make the vision go away, a real-life Mephisto appears before him, standing in its place and dressed exactly like the projected figure. I avoided using projection screens whenever possible, opting instead to have areas of the set designed to take imagery in a way that allows the projections to play an unquestionable role in the show's physical environment."

Discussing the forest drop, seen most prominently in the act set in Marguerite's garden, Moore says, "We experimented in John's studio with a pico projector, a very small [handheld] LED unit; we discovered that when you project on an object in the foreground of the set, and then you remove the object and allow the projection to find a place on the background, the effect can be stunning, if you time it right. For example, at the top of Act III, we projected a burned-out forest on the downstage scrim, raised the scrim, and let it lay on the set's upstage walls. We did the same thing with the rolling cathedral windows, which were spread apart, causing the projection to lay on the set in a different way. We used long fade times to keep projections from interrupting the action; we used them to create an environment. We also played with scale; Marguerite's house was presented in three or four scales. We projection-mapped the house at two different scales."

Moore's system consisted of one Christie Boxer 4K30 unit, in a front-of-house center position, using a 256 by 135 (approximately 17:9) aspect ratio. "It gave us a wide swath of coverage and, combined with our special paint formula, delivered a lot of brightness," he says. Also, in balcony left and right light positions, the designer positioned

two Christie Roadster S+22K-J units, each with a four-by-three native aspect ratio: "They were used to get deep into the set from a lateral angle, to get brightness and pixel density on the stage right and left walls."

Among the projected images were large-scale clock faces, a meaningful feature in an opera that plays with time, and a giant eye, which could seemingly stand in for Faust or God or Mephistopheles. Moore says that he and his colleagues were willing to leave such questions unanswered, as long as the effect was compelling: Such imagery "was a way of bringing John's enigmatic sensibility into the production—to introduce powerful symbols and images that could mean different things to different people, but also not to be too thematically disconnected. The eyes seen in the opera are from a character John sculpted named Argus, who wears a coat full of eyes. This coat is a strong image and recurs throughout Marguerite's world in both projected and physical forms. Some of this imagery ended up on the cutting room floor because we couldn't introduce it into the environment without distracting from the performers; still, John made stunning animations of these eyes weeping and blinking. We did want the eye coat to be associated with Marguerite; there are scenes where she is sewing it or carrying it. To me, the eye images also represent Marguerite's purity, her ability to see beyond the miserable earthly life she is living—and the chaos and confusion of the superficial world created by Mephistopheles for Faust—offering an almost supernatural hope for the future."

Moore and Frame also made evocative use of shadow imagery. "It came from our experimentation with the pico projector," Moore says. "John had the original sculpture of O-Man in the studio; I mapped it precisely and tried projecting layers of fire on him. Then we experimented with mapping O-Man negatively, with a delicate halo of fire surrounding him, and with pulling him out the foreground and letting his fiery shadow lay on the wall behind him; we continued to work with creating and manipulating shadows of John's other characters. From this came a lot of the production's shadow play, an idea that has been associated with Mephistopheles. John did at least a dozen simple stop-motion animations of 2D shadows of skeletons and sculptures, some of which he already had made and some of which were new. We had shadows moving all over the stage during the 'Golden Calf' aria [sung by Mephistopheles in Act II]. I made dozens of duplicates of John's skeleton animations, then used After Effects and Premiere to further animate them and set them dancing, running, jumping, walking, and flying in a number of ways. I positioned them to land on various architectural elements of the set—dancing in a doorway, walking on stage from left to right, flying in and out of the walls. We also worked with lighting to blend actual shadows of the performers and shadows of handheld cutouts created by John with



Moore says he avoided projection screens as much as possible, instead using the set's surfaces for his imagery.

the projected shadows. Again, we wanted to have the most organic language possible.”

Frame adds, “One of the dominant images in the church scenes is the two giant silhouettes that flank Faust and Marguerite. (See pages 60–61.) I never imaged that this would be that big a part of the scene. We threw them up onstage in Chicago, and it was magic.” Speaking of the shadow imagery and the masked figures that haunt the action, he notes that, according to his research, “For many years in the early twentieth century in Eastern Europe, *Faust* was performed in puppet theatres. We’re drawing on that tradition.” He also notes that such imagery can seem an allusion to the tradition of caricature practiced in 19th-century Europe by the likes of Honoré Daumier or George Cruikshank.

The production’s media server was the 4x4pro, from disguise. “I built the projection plot in Google Sketchup,” Moore says. “Vita likes to build her sets in a 3D modeling environment, so once I have her detailed 3D model of the set and theatre, along with the information about the possible projector-mounting positions, I calculate brightness, dimensions, and throw distances of various projector/lens combos, then move everything into Sketchup’s 3D environment, where I can precisely model the frustums and work out the best possible angles and coverage. Once this is done, it’s easy to hand my model to a disguise programmer and let the 4x4pro do most of the mapping based on its own 3D environment. I like speeding up and slowing down content, and disguise is particularly good at doing that.” The media server, run independently of the lighting, was programmed by Troy Fujimura.

Overall, Moore says, “The biggest challenge was the abundance of ideas that we had to work with, and crafting them into a very specific plot and score.”



The forest was defined by printed drops, lit evocatively with strip lights by Schuler. Note the tiny version of Marguerite’s cottage at left and the ladder that will take her to Heaven.

"When he drank from it,
his eyes would fill with tears."



Among the projection design's recurring images were those of eyes, which could seemingly represent Faust, God, or Mephistopheles; the design team enjoyed such ambiguities.

Lighting

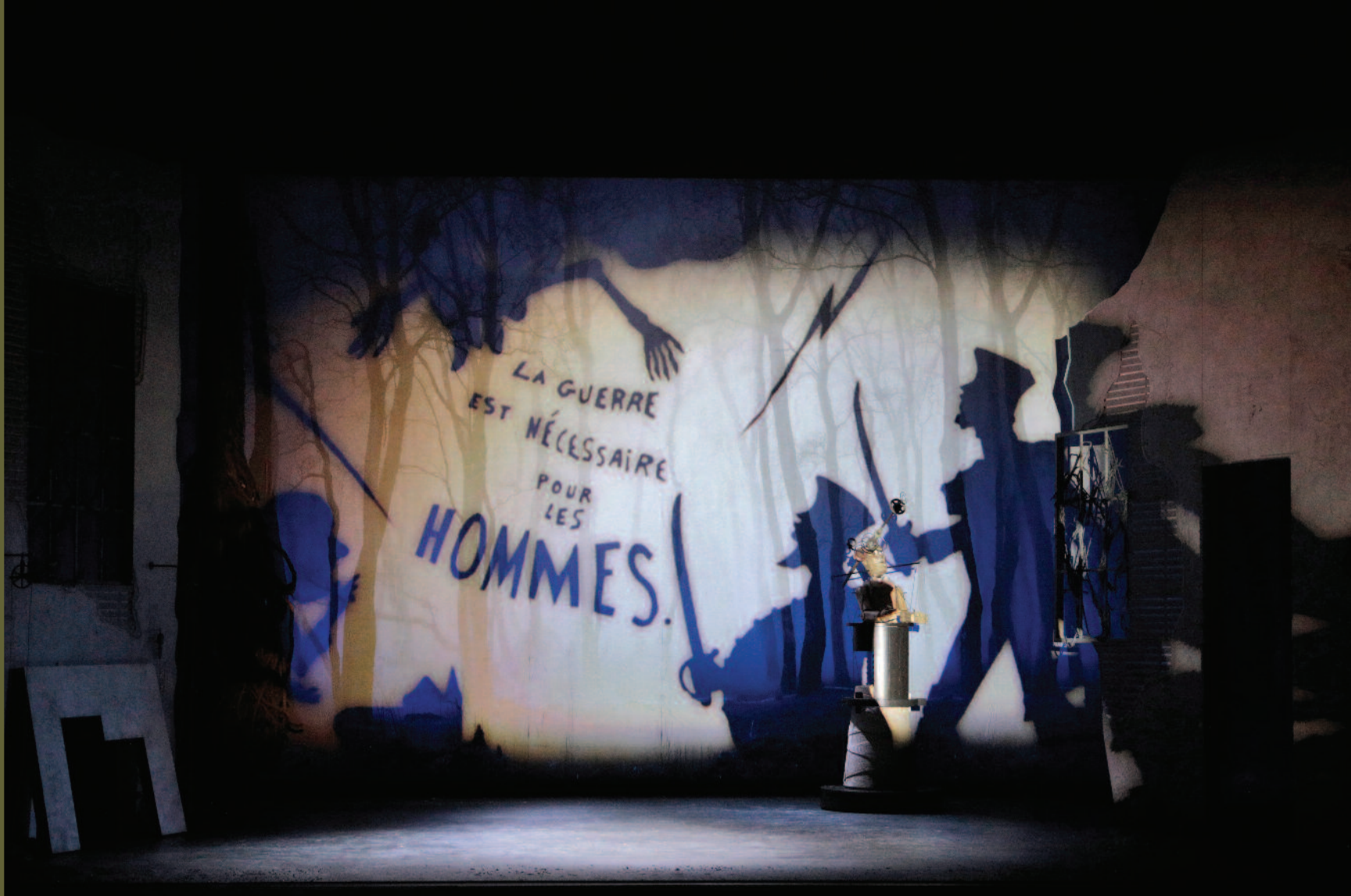
Duane Schuler, the production's lighting designer, is a founding member of Schuler Shook, Theatre Planners / Lighting Designers, with offices in Chicago, Minneapolis, Dallas, San Francisco Bay, and Melbourne; he is also an old hand at *Faust*, which seems to recur in his career every 20 years or so. His first production was also for the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1979. He lit another at Metropolitan Opera in 1997. This time out, the primacy of projections, and their placement, had a fundamental effect on his work. "We were all on the same page about how to approach this," he says. "Vita created surfaces that were terrific to project on; the set had a transparent quality, so you never saw it as a big projection screen. As always, it was important to keep light off the images; there's nothing worse than fuzzy projections. This is getting easier, with the increased intensity of projectors; when you only had PANIs, the lighting was always washing them out."

To give the projections breathing room, Schuler says, "There was almost no front light. It was all done from high

side positions from the first electric and within the set, which was something of a box. I kept the lighting very steep and combined it with good followspot work. Kevin was great about keeping the singers just far enough away from the set to avoid followspot spill."

At the same time, echoing Tzykun's comments, Schuler notes that the upstage forest drops were designed to take light beautifully. "It was an RP printed with images off trees and tree trunks. Vita had the bottom 3' double-printed, to make it as opaque as possible. When you put strip lights behind it, you didn't get that hot bottom; instead, you got a sense of depth. It was a wonderful piece of material. We used [Chroma-Q] Color Force 72 LED strip lights in that position and they created magic."

Other than on the backdrop, Schuler employed a limited color palette, in part, he says, because "most of the color came from the costumes and projections. There was so much going on visually that the last thing you needed was a fade to red or green. Today, we have so many choices, but we have to be careful. A moving light can do so many



Frame and Moore's use of silhouettes and shadow imagery was in keeping with the 19th-century caricature tradition.

things, but, at times, maybe it should just sit there and light someone's face. In the end, we are trying to help tell the story, so much of my job was to effectively carve the singers out from the scenery and projections."

The production's abundant side light units were located in one, in a midstage bay, and another bay behind the upstage set walls. "These cross light positions provided the meat of lighting people and costumes without hitting the side walls," he says, "There was a boom just upstage of the proscenium and one downstage of it in Portland, as well." The latter "was better than a box boom. It helped to carve people out of the space. I also had movers on ladders through the set's windows that created shadows of the windows or O-Man on the opposite wall."

For his automated gear, Schuler used Philips Vari-Lite VL3500 Spots and Washes, part of Lyric Opera's inventory. In Portland, the movers were Martin by Harman MAC Viper Performance and Wash DX units. Lighting was controlled in both cities by an ETC Eos console. "We were able to

move the show file from one city to another," he says.

"The best part was, the color mixing we did with the Color Forces on the backdrop was intact; we could use them as a starting point in reworking the cues for Portland.

"I've got to say, it was a very pleasant rehearsal process," Schuler adds. "The final designs were a true collaboration. I've done shows with Kevin, off and on, for 15 years. He lets people go and edits their work; he also has a thorough vision but is willing to make huge changes when he sees something is working better. The wonderful difference in this process was having John Frame in the mix. We all tried to stay true to his vision. He was more of a silent observer at the beginning of the tech process and we gradually drew him in. It was a treat to see him realize the potential of all of the tools we had at our disposal and get excited by it. It's an interesting team; I hope we get back together." Frame adds, simply, "It ended up being one of the highlights of my working life." 📶