

New Spaces of Authenticity. Scenography Working Group of the International Federation of Theatre Research. Prague. 17-19 June 2007

Maureen G. Shanahan, Assistant Professor of the School of Art & Art History and Interim Director, Honors Program, James Madison University
101 Hillcrest House, MSC 1501, Harrisonburg, VA 22801; shanahmg@jmu.edu; 540-568-6029

Proposal Abstract

“Thea Musgrave’s *Simon Bolívar* (1995): Staging Revolution”

Thea Musgrave’s opera *Simon Bolivar* (1995) narrates the Liberator’s overthrow of Spanish colonial rule in Venezuela in 1819 and his struggle to create a united Latin America and, as such, claims historical truth or authenticity. Musgrave has described the theme as one of national unity, a reoccurring problem through history, a theme she linked to the fall of the Berlin wall and the re-unification of Germany, which took place while she was writing the opera. The opera represents Bolivar’s failure to unify Latin America as tragic especially because of his infamous suspension of the republican constitution he crafted in favor of military authority.

This paper is based on original research and interviews and will explore the ways that the narrative, costumes (David Murin), and set designs (John Conklin) stage “the people” and “the nation.” It will give particular attention not only to authenticity as a goal in the period costumes but also to ideas about the African, the Incan, slavery and liberation. Musgrave’s opera, like many other Bolivar narratives, remains silent on the issue of slavery and the status of the Incans, although both Africans and Incans figure in the narrative and have minor singing parts. The paper will also explore the sites of performance – Virginia, U.S., London, and Regensburg, Germany – as themselves sites of contested conceptions of authenticity in terms of citizenship and national identity. Authenticity in décor, costumes, staging and narrative thus provoke larger problems of what “nation” or “unity” we are asked to envision and desire.

Biography

Maureen G. Shanahan, J.D., Ph.D., is a modernist art historian and Assistant Professor of the School of Art & Art History and Interim Director, Honors Program at James Madison University. As part of a book project on the art of Fernand Léger, she has conducted research on his set and costume designs for the ballet *La Création du monde* (1923) and the opera *Simon Bolívar* (1950) and presented this research at previous FIRT conferences. The current presentation is part of a new project on how opera, film, art and fiction narratives of Bolívar’s revolution and its participants envision ideas about liberation, nation, democracy, and dissent.