

The Vernacular Opera By Mark Clintberg

This essay was written for Kenneth Doren's show at YYZ Gallery in Toronto, ON, which ran September 05 to October 17, 2009.

KENNETH DOREN's *Rule Britannia* launches an assault, from the first moment. That is, after a pensive and slightly sentimental overture. Virtuoso pianists sit back to back on one bench with stoic focus, their posture and performance giving no hint of their bold vocalist's immanent arrival, and the string of expletives she is about to spew forth from two television screens. After a Union Jack flashes on the screens like a test pattern, a shout erupts: «Bloody hell dropped terror from the skies!» Mezzo Soprano Patrice Jegou presents two characters in this section of the work: a pony-tailed adolescent on one screen, a disheveled diva on the other, who each triumphantly chime in to reflect on the former glory of the British empire. «We feckin' ruled,» is the assessment -- and who could disagree? The evidence is compelling. «Rules the waves we did.» Two televisions allow Jegou to sing with herself, converse with herself, question herself.

Tied with the heritage of British comedy that takes nationalistic legacies to task, such as Monty Python and French & Saunders, *Rule Britannia* satirizes an apparent vortex of evil -- lyrically, melodically, with camp and bad taste. In the world of *Rule Britannia* opinion, prejudice, and emotion have eclipsed policy, diplomacy, and tact.

Carl Ayling's text for this libretto is cocksure and ostentatious by turns, echoing the dramatics of Milton, with fragmentary shades of Sex Pistols, Rolling Stones and -- is that Winston Churchill? Classical works by George Friderich Handel, John Field, Arnold Bax, Benjamin Britten, and Cyril Scott, by contrast, inspired the music. These dramatic shifts and contrasts in tone are emphasized by Jegou's motley assortment of characters to underscore the instability of the empire, but also the poetics of an empire's decline. A towel-headed Jegou, who seems to have just emerged from the bath, moralizes on Britain's authority and role in history. As a Kleenex-ascoted choirboy she curses the Queen. As a club kid she relates a tale of flirtation and sexual conquest. This is a group of characters seemingly with no goal, no concrete future, but spleen and pride in spades.

The movement «Foreknowledge» evokes associations between romantic victories and colonial ones. «I was gagging for it, got him in my room,» Jegou sweetly intones, sporting a dramatic bob. Is this lustful account meant to recall the overseas affairs Britain has conducted in the past? Jegou's enthusiastic and strangely empty reflections on her bedroom-romp are not a simple parallel with colonial ambitions. Her club consort is consenting -- or at least, so it seems from her description of the commingling. But is her character's perspective any different from that of a colonial power who sees it as their responsibility to rule, to guide, and to harness the unbridled force of the colony? When an undesired suitor extends a torrid embrace he is in complete ignorance of his consort's desires. This is what makes the act grotesque: from the point of view of this suitor, the embrace offered is a favor, regardless of the desires, needs, or passions of the one they embrace. «Yeh, he was a bit of all right / a real good one to bunk with for a night,» the libretto relates. A nostalgic tale of momentary pleasure. So it is with empires, once the chips are down.

Rule Britannia draws from a past that seems epic in comparison with our lived experiences. Humans cannot rationalize their idea of history with their experience of time, and Giorgio Agamben sheds some light on the reasons for this. He writes, «The fundamental contradiction of modern man is precisely that he does not yet have an experience of time adequate to his idea of history, and is therefore painfully split between his being-in-time as an elusive flow of instants and his being-in-history, understood as the original dimension of man.»¹ This disproportion between the arrested instant we experience as the present and the weight of history we experience as the past can provoke a kind of temporal-nausea. The past is an ungainly horizon, vibrating, wavering, mutating -- and never entirely certain as a point of orientation.

At least two responses are possible to these qualities of the past: canonization or cynical surrender. Doren summarizes the latter position in relation to *Rule Britannia*, writing, «After viewing, this opera may appear jaded and cynical [...] but there is a positive side as well. It looks at the vulnerability of these political cycles and gives humanity hope of change when faced with oppression, knowing that transformation will inevitably happen.»

Doren's position on historical entropy above should be closely considered. One approach to writing history attempts to achieve a self-contained coherence, where each event and outcome leads the reader -- the contemporary citizen -- through failure and success toward a lesson. History may be a fine teacher, but those under its tutelage are abysmal students without fail according to Hegel. He writes, «But what experience and history teach is this -- that nations and governments have never learned anything from history or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.»² *Rule Britannia's* characters, though ponderous, fail to have any lucid sight of the violent history they have been involved with. Nonetheless, can we see *Rule Britannia* a parable?

The historical events that inspire *Rule Britannia* involve death and destruction -- as well as the financial interests, trade routes, infrastructures, and sporting events associated with their outcomes. There must be a moral here, something to guide us toward a better future? How can we be amused by such horrors? Levity in the face of the appalling? The proportion of imperial Britain's history but also the complexity of its legacy might be part of why laughter arrives.

Doubtless, the vulgar language of this work will cause some viewers to flinch, but this is all part of the work's critique of imperialism: the subjugation of nations is an ugly business, not the polite province of the prudish. But more to the point, we should understand the reasons that *Rule Britannia* is humorous for some of us. As observed by Henri Bergson, that there is generally an «absence of feeling» married to laughter since «laughter has no greater foe than emotion.» It is not that the joke cannot inspire emotion, but that for laughter to erupt feelings are momentarily set aside. When an audience becomes a «disinterested spectator [...] many a drama will turn into comedy.»³ Gallows humor, by its nature, is ghastly, and it relies on the conditions Bergson describes. The detail but also the reign of the imagination and interpretation involved in a textual description of history's atrocities can achieve horrific effect for the reader since imagination and interpretation can achieve such heights, be they ultimately exaggerated or accurate. When overwhelmed by the scale of a massive tragedy we laugh to displace emotion and release pressure.

Considering the abjection of *Rule Britannia's* narrative, it seems that History is laughing at us -- the events that it recounts being beyond our control, beyond our scope of understanding -- and so is it not the most humane and resistant act to laugh back. This might be the parable: to laugh in the face of the truly horrible is not always disrespectful. A laugh can be defiant. A laugh can reject atrocity.

NOTES:

1 Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Liz Heron, trans. London; New York: Verso. First published as *Infanzia e storia* by Giulio Einaudi Editore in 1978. First Verso edition 1993. 109.

2 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*. Cambridge. 1975. 21.

3 Bergson, Henri. "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic." *The Artist's Joke*. Jennifer Higgie, ed. London; Cambridge: Whitechapel; MIT Press. 2007. 22-24. Bergson's text first published 1900.

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