

thisislondon.co.uk

the entertainment guide

Add your view

More articles by [Fiona Maddocks](#)

When American director Diane Paulus flew in from the States last month, the passport official asked her what she was doing here. "I'm staging a new opera," Paulus began brightly. "Uh huh," replied the official, head down, bored. "An opera based on a film, David Lynch's *Lost Highway*," she persevered. The official looked up. "Now that's more interesting."

Paulus, 40, a warm, spunky, half-Japanese New Yorker, is here to help launch an exciting new venture between English National Opera and the Young Vic which takes place next month. Two chamber operas will be produced by ENO, in the round, in the Young Vic's 450-seat theatre.

The stagings, using both hi-tech and traditional approaches, promise to be bold, intimate and visceral. If it succeeds, the collaboration, certain to become an annual event, could lure new audiences and help give contemporary opera, traditionally regarded as difficult and esoteric, a chic and radical makeover.

The works in this first season are *Lost Highway* (2004), the opera after Lynch's film by Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth which Paulus will direct, and *Punch and Judy* (1968), Harrison Birtwistle's violent, rude music theatre piece, still shocking after 40 years.

Another young American director, Daniel Kramer, will tackle the Birtwistle. The productions, costing a combined total of £300,000, come out of ENO's budget, and are supported by Sky Arts who will make short documentaries on the operas. In the absence of the opera company, the Coliseum will stage ballet to replace lost revenue, "but the Young Vic idea came first," stresses an ENO spokeswoman.

"This is a fantastic encounter between totally different organisations and two different worlds," Paulus observes. "What's so exciting about *Lost Highway* is the hybrid nature of the undertaking, which is perfect for the ENO-Young Vic crossover. It's called an opera, but there's no singing at all for the first 20 minutes. It just starts with mysterious whispers. Then, as the drama unfolds, the music starts."

Paulus, whose own background includes staging karaoke and discostyle Shakespeare Off-Broadway as well as straight opera, describes *Lost Highway* as, "in David Lynch's own words, about a man in trouble. He said later he was thinking about OJ Simpson when he made the film. But you can see Othello in this story, too - the destructive power of jealousy, the madness it drives you to." The music, too, is a riddle of different styles, sampling everything from Monteverdi and Kurt Weill to Cole Porter and Lou Reed. "Everyone is on microphone," Paulus says, "Which in itself is different from usual opera. There'll be an ensemble with traditional orchestral instruments as well as accordion, electric guitar and drum kit. And above the stage a kind of plexiglass box exploded to make four giant video screens."

The audience will sit either side of a "highway", with a Mustang in situ, surrounded by cinematic and surroundsound effects. On stage six singers, including countertenor Christopher Robson as Mystery Man, and six actors will perform live, interacting with music and visual, both live and prerecorded.

Punch and Judy, by contrast, will use a thrust stage and commedia dell'arte techniques. Whether from oversight or over-enthusiasm, the Royal Opera is also staging this work in the Linbury, a co-production with Music Theatre Wales opening next week ahead of the world premiere of Birtwistle's *The Minotaur* in the main house. The chance to compare stagings of this pivotal work, in which Mr Punch bludgeons all in sight including his baby, is a rare bonus.

Despite every effort, mainstream opera companies have never successfully solved the problem - partly perception, partly practicalities - of what to do about new opera. You could fill a decade of seasons with mainstream repertoire and satisfy audiences without playing anything written after 1950. Even Berg's *Wozzeck*, premiered in 1925, scares the crowds and is habitually sold with reduced price tickets.

Yet no one working in opera can stomach the idea that their art form is moribund, just kept alive with ever more grotesque directorial facelifts performed on old favourites: a *Brokeback Mountain*-style gay cowboy staging of Eugene Onegin currently showing in Munich, with the ball scene set in a transvestite disco, shows the danger.

How has a once wildly popular art form, the pastime for all social classes, lost its way so badly? Composers historically wrote for the theatres of their day, to commission, with performances and audiences guaranteed, and few competing distractions. They knew exactly what was required, and their entire training and musical apprenticeship prepared them.

If a composer today gets the call from the Royal Opera House, the likelihood is that they've never written a fullscale theatre work and have no idea about the technical or dramatic requirements. Few would spend the long hours required writing a work no one has asked for. Through inexperience they choose over-wordy librettos and misjudge pacing and scale. If they prefer to write a small ensemble piece, perhaps on a domestic subject more in the style of modern theatre, the 2,000-seat auditorium is hopelessly unsuited.

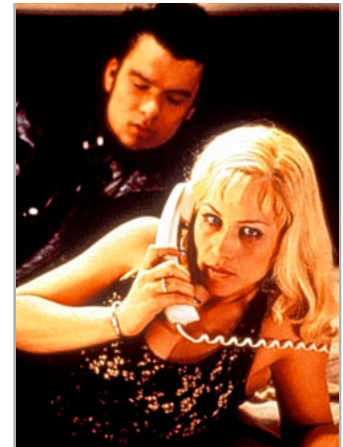
This is why the Young Vic/ENO project is eye-catchingly different. Since its inspired revamp, the small Waterloo venue is thronging from breakfast till midnight. It has an independent, highprofile identity. Under the inspirational leadership of David Lan, it has already staged opera (*Tobias and the Angel*, the South African *Magic Flute*) when circumstances seem right. Loyal audiences, happy to experiment, may try the unfamiliar ENO works because they are there - though with seat prices at £30 each, some commitment is required.

"I have absolutely no doubt the season will catch on. You really sense a special mood of open-mindedness at the Young Vic," Paulus says. "David is making things happen and for a huge, grand, proscenium arch company like ENO to collaborate with this small, vibrant outfit is really pioneering, the kind of thing New York would envy."

With two young children back home in New York with her husband, producer Randy Weiner, who runs The Box, one of New York's glitziest nightclubs, Paulus has been enjoying her freedom, cramming in as much West End theatre and opera as possible. "And wow, it's been amazing. I've been blown away. London is buzzing. Four last week: Peter Grimes, Pinocchio, Lucia di Lammermoor, Salome. All great theatre, and packed houses with people



Eye-catchingly different: New Yorker Diane Paulus hopes the collaboration will attract a fresh audience to contemporary opera



From screen to stage: David Lynch's 1... road movie, *Lost Highway*

really sitting forward, listening, watching, not just clocking in on some culture. How do you make that atmosphere?

"Back in New York we're only just catching on to the idea that opera can be theatre. Everyone's talking about Anthony Minghella's Butterfly at the Met. And where did that originate? The Coliseum! So London's showing the way."

That conspicuous success aside, English National Opera has had a rickety few years, with a handful of artistic fiascos in the name of audience expansion. *Lost Highway* and this latest journey across the river to the *Young Vic*, may turn out to be the company's fast route to salvation.

Lost Highway opens 4 April; *Punch and Judy* opens 19 April. Both at the *Young Vic* (020 7922 2922). Tickets £30; 50 tickets available for every performance at £9.50. www.eno.org/youngvic

READER VIEWS (0)

[Add your view](#)

No comments have so far been submitted.

ADD YOUR COMMENT

Name:

Email:

Your email address will not be published

Town and country:

Your comment:

[Terms and conditions](#)

You have 1500 characters left.

[make text area bigger](#)

Remember me - this will save your name, location and email address for when you leave your next comment.

Email me a link to these comments.

Clear

submit comment

[DAILY MAIL](#)

[MAIL ON SUNDAY](#)

[TRAVEL MAIL](#)

[THIS IS MONEY](#)

[METRO](#)

[Loot](#)

[Jobsite](#) | [Homes & property](#) | [London jobs](#) | [FindaProperty.com](#) | [Primelocation.com](#) | [Educate London](#) | [Holiday Villas](#)

Associated Northcliffe Digital

Part of the Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday, Evening Standard & Metro Media Group
© 2008 Associated Newspapers Limited [Terms](#) [Privacy policy](#) [Advertise with us](#) [Advertise in London Lite](#)