



Expansion and Contraction: The Play Spaces of *Todd and the Vampire*

Abstract: What happens when the music production processes and spaces of a traditionally live art form such as opera are digitized? What is the relationship between community and isolation for artists when their workspace is lifted from the theatre—with its interpersonal connections—and placed in the virtual world? What opportunities and what risks does this pose for performers? Are there parallels to other art forms that developed or expanded as the result of new media technologies? This article will explore these issues by considering the production processes of the animated YouTube opera/movie *Todd and the Vampire*, composed and created by Ronen Shai, with contributions by musicians and visual artists working simultaneously, but independently, around the world. How does this piece utilize technology to challenge and transcend traditional notions of space and identity? What are the implications of this somewhat disembodied process for performers, audiences, and for the art form itself?

Keywords: opera, music, singing, animation, space, media, embodiment

Introduction

Todd and the Vampire, an animated opera, is the brainchild of New York-based Israeli composer Ronen Shai. Like a cartoon, *Todd and the Vampire* is dependent upon technology for its production and distribution processes and is designed for widespread viewing in the homes of audience members anywhere in the world. It is not the first animated opera but it is the first to exploit media technology to challenge and create a new artistic process for opera production and engagement.

Play scholar and sociologist Thomas Henricks writes, “[o]ur experience of the world is wrapped in space and time. To enter the playground is to adopt new understandings of these ideas.”¹ In other research, I have suggested that

1. Thomas S. Henricks, *Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 13. I am evoking the definition of play introduced by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*. Musical

theoretical demarcations of play space by experiences of time are more significant than those of space because perceptions of time reflect changes in consciousness.² *Todd and the Vampire* challenges this by forcing a new consideration of space that includes the space of the virtual world.³

This article will explore the challenges and implications of artistic work in a community defined through virtual space and in part (and perhaps ironically) by isolation. I am qualified to address the processes of the piece from an artistic perspective as I am the voice of the vampire.

Local and Global Opera Production Processes

Traditional opera production spaces are local, performances happen on a stage in a hall, rehearsals happen in large rooms – often in the same building or close to the building housing the hall. Performers who reside in other cities travel to the location for the duration of the rehearsal and performance period. Aspects of production and performance processes have become globalized through media technology, for example, the Metropolitan Opera House live high-definition broadcasts of performances, which often include interviews backstage with artists or members of the production team.

In contrast, *Todd and the Vampire* challenges the notions of global and local in opera production in new ways. Each musician records his or her line of music alone in a highly localized setting, that is, a practice room or other rehearsal space, or maybe even the musician's home. The animators also work alone. Contributors are located all over the world and communicate with Shai primarily via email. Media technology thus enables the production process to function on simultaneously local and global levels, and to the extremes of each.

Finally, Shai's work is localized and comprehensive. Shai does all the work of composing, sound and visual mixing, etc., alone at his computer. Like the work of producing a film, many people have different roles to fulfil but ultimately the project is his vision. It is not unusual for composers to work alone, however,

activities have the potential to become play activities in the theoretical sense of play, with temporal and special demarcations. While an extended definition of musical play is beyond the scope of this chapter, notions of space in play and musical play activities are relevant and expanded by *Todd and the Vampire*.

2. Erin Heisel, "Good News! A New Methodology for Music Analysis, Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance Using Johan Huizinga's Theory of Play, Including a Play Analysis of David Del Tredici's Song Cycle *Miz Inez Sez*." (PhD diss., New York University, 2013), 65–77.

3. This also expands on Mary Reichling's notions of physical space, sound waves, and play. See Mary J. Reichling, "Music, Imagination, and Play," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 41–55.

it is unusual for a composer to be so deeply entrenched in every aspect of opera production and simultaneously utterly alone in the work. In this way, his work is both broad in scope but geographically local.

Musical Collaboration for *Todd and the Vampire*

Shai is the only other person I have met who is connected to the project and we have met in person twice. The first time was at a concert in New York City where we performed separately. The second time was August 2013, when we met for dinner. I have been with the project since December 2012.

The process works by Shai telling me what measures he needs me to record next and I record them, typically within a couple of weeks. Then we have a short dialogue until the recordings are suitable. It is imperative that things like tempo, style, and mood or effect be correct, as well as pitches and rhythms. All communication is via email.

The recording process for this piece is challenging; the music is difficult and it can be hard to judge how long it will take to learn a section accurately. I record in small pieces, sometimes one measure at a time. I will often record and listen back for musical accuracy, intonation, effect, diction, etc. When the recordings are suitable, I convert them to .mp3 files and send them to Shai. Feedback can be anything from requesting adjustments to the tempo or asking me to re-record sections using a variety of vocal effects.

My work is a localized effort; I am alone with my score and computer in a room. I am without most things I would have in a traditional performance situation to help or to distract me. There are no colleagues to inspire me or to react to or with, no conductor to guide me, no instruments to sing with or tune to. However, I have sent Shai recordings from New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Germany, and I have corresponded with him about the project while in South Africa, Mexico, and England. In this way, although the work is extremely local, the communication that is the foundation of our collaboration happens on a global scale. To be geographically independent but still connected to a project is a very new and exciting experience.

Seclusion and Autonomy in the Production Process

Like traditional opera productions, *Todd and the Vampire* is an international collaboration. However, in this case, the artists are scattered all over the world. The only other person I have communicated with in my work process for *Todd and the Vampire* is the animator known as Moai. We had an email and video

exchange for a part of the animation where my face is briefly visible. Shai has also never met the animator Moai although they have been collaborating on the project for some time. Shai writes:

I've never met him outside the computer. I do feel [as though we are friends], and that is great. It is a totally new thing in our age, to become friends without meeting and it will become more and more a common thing. Now it is still viewed as a bit strange. Others for example are, Switzerland, Poland, Netherlands, and Israel. I like the idea of an international group. I enjoy Peter Brook's idea of combining people from everywhere into a creative group. But also, in the process of this work, location is not something challenging, since the work can be done online.⁴

The production process is not affected by distance because the communication and collaborative processes happens in the neighbourhood of the virtual world. Nevertheless, the work is solitary, a result of the extreme localization.

Singers are used to collaboration and the solitary nature of the work initially challenged my sense of identity as an artistic collaborator.⁵ However, as an artist interested in experimentation and new modes of expression, I am inspired and invigorated by the independence Shai's method affords me. I had a recent conversation with a violinist who told me that just hearing about the solitary nature of this process made her feel sad. She would miss the conversation with other musicians through music.⁶ This response never occurred to me. For me, the change in work environment has been provocative and stimulating. Because I work in a separate, localized place, I can schedule my recording sessions at times and places convenient to me. I can record anywhere there is no ambient noise and I can work on sections until I am satisfied. I can take breaks whenever I want or need to. I can even wear my pyjamas if I want – no one will see me on a rehearsal or performance stage. I have come to enjoy the freedom this method provides me. I do not have to mould myself to any external situation, follow anyone else's schedule, or create anyone else's vision. I can simply do my best work and rely on Shai to use what I send in the way that best serves the project.

4. Ronen Shai, e-mail correspondence to author, 6 July 2014.

5. Recalling Helfgot and Beeman's work in *The Third Line: The Singer as Interpreter*, a primary challenge here was, in effect, constructing my own dramatic third line without a full dramatic picture. Shai filled some of this in during our correspondence, telling me what was happening or how to emphasize certain words or lines to fit the vision of the piece. Nevertheless, the "third line" was not fully revealed to me until I was able to see the complete film at its release.

6. This brings to mind some of Stedman's work in her thesis, "Singing and Self: The Psychology of Performing," Northwestern University, 1985, both in terms of independence (though Stedman is primarily discussing the student-teacher relationship) and embodiment.

The visual artists engaged in the process experience similar notions of localized space and autonomy in the work. Shai writes, “[s]ome parts in the visual aspect are created by me, and some by others. I give them almost total freedom to bring their style in to the work and I combine (mix) the segments together.”⁷ Shai carefully treads the line between making sure his own vision for the project is realized while allowing his collaborators artistic freedom. Although he has the final say in how the pieces come together, he respects each artist’s stylistic identity and, despite geographic distance, has created an artistic dialogue that exists in and through media technology.

Disembodiment in *Todd and the Vampire*

The primary play space of a singer is extremely localized; it is the singer’s own body. A singer creates the music physically, while also considering the emotions and motivations of the characters he or she portrays. On a subtle level, physicality in live performance communicates not only aspects of character, but also a particular kind of knowledge and confidence that musicologist and conductor Eleanor Stubley refers to when she writes, “In some instances, the musicians appear so immersed in their bodies that their movements seem to define their total sense of being or self-awareness.”⁸ In a live performance, there is a visceral empathic connection between the singer, the character, and the audience. The singer is more than “in” or “part of” the music; rather, the music is “of them,” coming from the core of the performing body. This is not a metaphor. Witnessing the physical embodiment of a character with whom the audience empathizes and seeing the movements that come through the intimate space of the singer’s body can be deeply moving and is an important part of live operatic performance.⁹ I call this “empathic embodiment.”¹⁰ *Todd and the Vampire* is an experiment in empathic disembodiment.

7. Shai, e-mail correspondence, 6 July 2014.

8. Eleanor Stubley, “Being in the Body, Being in the Sound: A Tale of Modulating Identities and Lost Potential,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 32(4) (Winter, 1998): 94.

9. It is also an important part of most character preparation practices, as Wesbrooks outlines throughout *Dramatic Circumstances: On Acting, Singing, and Living Inside the Stories We Tell*.

10. For more information about the transformative power of play, see Herbert Blau’s chapter “Universals of Performance; or Amortizing Play” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For connections between play, empathy, and embodiment in singers, see Erin Heisel, “Empathy as a Tool for Embodiment Processes in Vocal Performance,” *Empirical Music Review* 10 (1–2) (2015): 80–95.

My job in *Todd and the Vampire* is to supply a voice, disembodied from the physical processes that form the basis of singing technique and role portrayal. But the part of empathic embodiment that facilitates communication with an audience is not just cut off here, as it would be in a CD recording. Instead, Shai plays with expectation and disembodiment in the animation. His work experiments with notions of the real and unreal by rarely offering direct representations of the characters. The effect produced is disorienting and subverts traditional opera and animation processes. In email correspondence with Shai, he writes about “creating an atmosphere” where “strange-fake” is more than the “real deal,” with “music played by musicians, but without them hearing each-other” and “visual elements interacting with each other while almost avoiding footage of realistic movement, or footage at all for that matter.”¹¹ The animation makes the human body like a caricature of itself, creating a disconcerting universality to the characters. For example, Todd, in a clip where he is walking his dog, is without defining characteristics and could be any little boy with almost any dog. Likewise, the vampire, behind her colourful mask or with her contorted body shapes and movements, could be anyone. Disembodiment in the animation plays with place and space by taking the opera that exists in the virtual world and placing it, in a sense, anywhere. In this way, the quirky animation functions as a symbol of this totally new artistic process, where musicians do play “without hearing each other” and animators who have never seen the musicians create visual representations of them. The piece, which exists by and through media technology, is opera, itself disembodied.

The Virtual and Public Workspace of *Todd and the Vampire*

Unencumbered by geographic distance separating its performers, *Todd and the Vampire* creates its own space in a way that facilitates its production while developing new production processes that expand the potential of artistic creation in the media age. In this way, the project sets itself apart from traditional operatic notions of space and exploits the potential of media in making its production processes public.

While the rehearsal and workspaces of *Todd and the Vampire* are disparate, private, or virtual, the process itself is, at the same time, largely open. Shai typically posts several variations of sound mixes on his SoundCloud page while he is working with them. Different versions of animation, with or without sound, were available on YouTube at different stages of the work, while entire scenes were

11. Shai, e-mail correspondence, 6 July 2014.

published in various formats as they were completed and before Shai decided on the final versions. Shai writes that part of the project's philosophy is the desire to work with "people online and show progress in real time."¹² Anyone following the project could watch the scenes in various stages of completion; the space for experimentation throughout the production was open for observation on a very large scale in the virtual world.

There are also interesting implications for audiences in terms of space and *Todd and the Vampire*. As with other operatic experiences released for home enjoyment, Shai's piece enabled a different type of audience engagement, one that is paradoxically both passive and empowering. Out of the theatre but localized in a laptop or on DVD, a person could passively watch the piece while petting the dog or eating a sandwich, yet was empowered to stop, rewind, skip ahead, review favourite parts, or, in the case of this project and because scenes were released individually, even create an entirely new order of events. Although other video opera examples can also be manipulated in this way, Shai's open production process was, in part, designed for this kind of viewing. *Todd and the Vampire* was conceived as a project whose release allowed for and encouraged a new kind of audience engagement.

New Perspectives of Musical Space through *Todd and the Vampire*

Henricks posits that in play activities, "space is claimed and then reorganized."¹³ What is remarkable about this piece is that virtual space is not only claimed, it is created and developed for the specific purpose of facilitating this project. Traditional boundary lines of physical spaces for opera production and performance become irrelevant when the process is lifted into the virtual world.

As a singer involved in this process, I am acutely aware of the simultaneous contraction to extreme local space and expansion into the virtual world. Stublely writes, "indeed, I frequently sense an open and expanding space before me and feel somehow larger than life, as if I am two I's at the same time, me and a significant other."¹⁴ This is exactly the feeling of being part of *Todd and the Vampire*. As the vampire, I am both situated in the local experience of doing the work yet also engaged in the global space of the exchange that enables its existence. Disembodied yet fully human, I am myself, an idea of a vampire, and a sound, the sound of her voice that travels at the speed of media production.

12. Shai, e-mail correspondence, 6 July 2014.

13. Henricks, *Play Reconsidered*, 190.

14. Stublely, "Being in the Body, Being in the Sound," 99.

To enter the world of *Todd and the Vampire* as an artist is to accept new understandings of the artistic process as related to space and artistic relationships. Shai writes, “this piece is a collaboration in two ways (so far), one is the traditional collaboration of composer with performers, but in a totally new way for them and for me.”¹⁵ *Todd and the Vampire* opens up a new kind of dialogue for collaborative production processes by utilizing the potential of media technology to create new spaces for artistic endeavours. The piece crosses genres, explores and challenges notions of identity, autonomy, and embodiment, and renders geographic distance irrelevant. It is also truly remarkable.

15. Shai, e-mail correspondence, 6 July 2014.