

Houston Philosophical Society

631<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting

Cohen House

September 17, 2009

Under the leadership of President Evelyn Keyes, the Society gathered for a reception and dinner meeting. President Keyes reminded the group of the next speaker, Dr. Larry Faulkner of the Houston Endowment was originally scheduled for the meeting last September that was cancelled because of Hurricane Ike. She also reminded the group of the need for new member nomination before the October meeting of the Executive Committee if they are to be elected at the November meeting.

Following dinner Vice President Herb Ward facilitated the introduction of guests as well as new members attending for the first time since their election.

President Keyes then called upon former President Bill Guest to introduce the speaker of the evening, Mr. Anthony Freud the Houston Grand Opera General Director and CEO. Mr. Guest noted that Mr. Freud who arrived in July, 2005, was the third General Director and the first CEO of the Opera. He came from his native British Isles where he was the General Director of the Welsh National Opera.

Mr. Freud chose a quotation from Oscar Wilde to establish the thesis of his address. Wilde wrote "art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood...it is superbly sterile." He then addressed the question of whether opera is "just an extravagant, exotic distraction for canary fanciers, or does it have a more substantive role to play in our diverse, divided, dysfunctional world?"

From his arrival three and a half years ago Freud has taken on the role of guardian of the company and of opera in general through his service as the Chair of the Board of Opera America. His London upbringing prepared him for this role where he was able to see performing arts live and at costs appropriate to his state in life. Following his training as an attorney, he chose to convert his passion for the arts to a vocation. His twenty five years in opera include years a practicing fan of the art as well as his service in Wales and his current appointment.

He stated his awareness that the majority are not interested in performing arts at this time. Why is there an emphasis on great performances? Why are the arts indispensable? This is a critical problem at the time when the future of the arts and the future of society are both at risk?

Freud cited Peter Conrad's work *A Song of Love and Death* where the author spoke of the conversion process to build acolytes and partisans where Opera portrays the alliance of love and death. The performers sing what they feel, words are given up and the music takes over. The theater becomes an emotional engine where the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts.

He articulated his belief that interpreters are significant in the success of Opera, they are not neutral, and great productions do not necessarily cross decades. They can be true to the purpose of the piece and yet take a dynamic approach were the original energy and enthusiasm are amplified. This doesn't mean that operas must be updated and set locally, but his task is to gain for a four hundred year old art form an audience in a Twenty-first century city.

He recounted his 2003 experience in Wales with the presentation of Handel's oratorio "Jeptha" as an opera with theatrical validity. Jeptha was a judge who had to expend some political effort for political gain. The critical question was whether Jeptha's daughter should be killed to satisfy the god who had provided the victory. It was set in a 1950's war torn Central European country at a time when Prime Minister Blair decided to enter the Iraqi war. The timing enabled the company to be true to Handel but also to have contemporary relevance.

Conrad's work on opera opined that tradition is the enemy of opera especially when it becomes the nostalgic custodian of memories. When revelation takes place the obscuring varnish is removed and then it was possible to stimulate and execute and to think, question, and engage with the work. The audience becomes an active participant in the process.

Freud turned next to the operas of Wagner which speak so much to the human condition, but express Wagner's rabid anti-Semitism. He believes that Hitler ruined Wagner for the world, at least from Freud's perspective as the son of a holocaust survivor. He has attended many performances at the Bayreuth Festival near Nuremberg established by Wagner and carried on by his descendants.

There is now openness to the Nazi era there where they attempt to excoriate the past through self examination. "Parsifal" and "Der Meistersinger" were the operas Freud cited. A Parsifal production in 1871 included the Hall of the Holy Grail and it was similarly stated in a 1950's version, in the immediate post-Nazi era. "Der Meistersinger" was radical and less good theatrically and has the closest Nazi associations. The poet who is the central character extols the holiness of German art and xenophobic nationalism demonstrated this holiness.

Katerine Wagner (Wagner's great-granddaughter) in a production of "Der Meistersinger," alluded to the Nazi notion that the Jewish conservative conformity was opposed by creative imagination, but the joyous triumph led to a triumph of mediocrity and the nationalism of the Nazis and the Nuremberg rallies. This bold and shocking reinterpretation was an inversion of the normal performance tradition. It placed demands on the audience because it was topic, radical, and thought provoking.

Freud said that he was now more keenly aware of the differences of the European and American cultures, but both are in challenging times. There is pessimism in Europe regarding the future which finds a similar reaction in the United States.

He cited George Steiner's *Grammars of Creation* as a study of the impact of time on consciousness. For Freud the arts in general, and opera in particular, provide a forum for an argument, when memory drives functioning imagination. Opera provides a forum for debate, discussion, and understanding of us and our society. The Los Angeles Times reported on an Opera Cafe in the Colonia Libertad of Tijuana

where a lovesong produces an exorcism. The New York Times, discussed the Lacquilla earthquake in Italy where local treasures were destroyed with a major impact on art for those living in the home of their history.

Freud concluded with the latest project of Houston Grand Opera (described as HGOCCO) where a poet and a composer were brought together with seven different immigrant communities in Houston to discover the extraordinary life voyage there. The communities included sub-continent Indians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Central Asian, Central African, Central American, and Soviet/Jewish. This was an exercise of art versus entertainment and provided a distraction from reality. The product entitled "The Refuge: Song of Houston." It was taken out to the community and then back into the Wortham.

Freud delivered his extraordinary address to a large, and interested audience.