
By Per Nørgård

Having completed my opera Gilgamesh (1971-72), I contemplated a kind of ‘sequel’, though on a different level. Gilgamesh, as I saw him, was a person lacking in self-control, who nevertheless acquired it through experiencing loss — thereby breaking through to a new level of consciousness, that of brotherly love. Now, almost waggish, my question was “How in fact would a ‘self-controlled person’ act — and what would that person’s reaction be to the experience of loss?” Eventually a couple of figures came to my mind: Jesus and — no, not Buddha, but that Prince Siddharta, who only achieved the state of ‘Buddha-ness’ after the trials and tribulations of many years. With the figure of Jesus it was especially His tremendous loneliness during the last night in the Garden of Gethsemane that interested me. There, on the eve of His approaching death, not even His nearest and dearest could support Him during the agonising period of waiting — before the arrest, torture and terrible execution.

I visited the Danish poet Ole Sarvig (1921-81) at his home in Glumsø in the south of Zealand (Sjælland) and told him of my interest in the loneliness-theme associated with the figure of Jesus. With that idea in mind, to whom else could I turn than to the originator of the unique book “Evangeliernes Billeder belyst af denne tid” (Images of the Gospel Illuminated by Our Time)? I explained to him that his mythical poetic sounding-board would obviously appeal very strongly to me in connection with precisely the figure of Jesus, but so would his “Krisens Billedbog” (“Picture Book of the Crisis”), with its metaphysical, sleuth-like eavesdropping on this century’s gradual, almost exhibitionist self-unveiling — spiritual ‘strip-tease’ right through to the marrow.

Sarvig listened — his head characteristically bent and slightly on the slant — as he smiled amiably and archly into his comforting teddy-bear beard. But he instantly found the Jesus-idea too difficult — and therefore a bad one. The danger of the “emblematic” was more than imminent, he said, and I soon came to realise that he was right.

I had in a letter murmured something about Siddharta though, and now Ole suddenly brought up the idea himself with warmth and interest. A Seven-year collaboration had begun. I added the Jesus-idea to my list of shipwrecked works and thereafter concentrated entirely on the Siddharta-theme.

Siddharta’s great despair and horror on learning the truth probably on a par with that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane — and his feeling of having been let down by his entire surroundings must even have exceeded what Jesus felt? The creation of the libretto for “Siddharta – Play for the Expected One” took place on my terms, which Ole generously accepted. This was not to be yet another ‘author’s opera’ (my words) which the composer merely ‘sets to music’ according to the author’s forms — recitatives, arias and chorus — but an opera composition, in which the words may well be essential but also closely integrated with and subordinate to the music-drama. In short, having mapped out the theme (for which Ole produced an astonishing ‘collection of elements’, or details regarding the background story), we proceeded to outline the acts. And from a few crucial sentences, or ‘modules’, arose the scenes and acts that followed upon the composition of the music/word-pictures.

Unfortunately Ole came thereby to produce rather more verbal material (in “module form”, as we had agreed) than the composer in me could absorb — and reproduce in music. At lunch in a provincial cafe where I happened to let most of the contents of a hors d’oeuvre platter return to the kitchen, he could not help sarcastically comparing his own plentiful proposals with the untouched dishes that now left the table. In addition (‘carried away by the process’, as Ole kindly yet euphemistically put it) I had begun to find sentences
myself, since now and again snatches of song in combination with the contents of a scene, suddenly ‘heard’ and thereupon composed, prompted me to concretise the dramatic picture also in words, even though Ole might not yet have managed to provide ‘module texts’ for that particular place.

However, Ole received these young verbal cuckoos in a fatherly fashion, preened their feathers with his poet’s breath, so that they slipped in among Ole’s original contributions relatively unnoticed. Moreover, as a by-product of this quite special collaboration, Ole insisted on being merely credited for his ‘assistance’. Nevertheless, I feel that throughout this not always easy process some good strong Sarvig-lines have appeared in Siddharta — lines that arouse that special feeling of a ‘mythical flow’ which is associated with Sarvig’s oeuvre. Both Ole and I regarded this approximately 2500 year-old Siddharta story as both timeless and, in several respects, of burning current interest. Without directly adhering to any conspiracy theory as concerns ‘the international military, financial and political demonism’, nowadays everyone must be able to perceive the efforts to repress — to scour off life’s raw edges, to beautify the horrific with comforting manners of speech — which reduce, as in a universal mass media-trance, both life and death into a kind of non-stop, harmless-grotesque, Evelyn Waugh-style ‘American funeral’.

Even Siddharta’s unwavering resolution to leave the very palace and the very structure that had for so long deceived him touches on a current problem. How many young people (and old) have not felt the absence of this Siddharta-like resoluteness when yet another of the numerous present day infamies has come to light?

What happened, for example, to the political cleaning up process following Khrushchev’s disclosure of Stalin’s reign of terror at the 1956 Party Congress? How could people go on living with an organisation that had made such perverse monstrosities possible? How can today’s telling figures concerning the cancer risk incurred by daily exposure to radioactivity in uranium mines and nuclearpower stations fail to put a stopper to this long-drawn-out cannibalism?

Such and similar questions in our time — with the rearmament-craze, pollution and inequality in the centre — appeal to all those who don’t obediently say “yes, my father!” to the ever more demented consequences of traditional power political measures to adopt this uncompromising attitude. Siddharta’s ‘no!’ would at first glance appear insignificant — as helpless in its protest as ‘Women’s fight for freedom’ — but people must say no, and people must fight, however impotently, until sufficiently many fighters find a common tempo.

Notes


Texts by Nørgård on the opera consists of Play for the Expected One – The opera “Siddharta” and Its Music (1983) – also in this archive – the present text, and (with Lars Runsten) a Introduction and synopsis, printed below.

It should be mentioned that all these texts (written between 1981-3) refers to the first (“Stockholm”-)version of the opera. In 1984, having experienced the works of the schizophrenic artist Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) Nørgård changed and enlarged Siddharta’s central “Farewell-aria” in act 3, using words by Wölfli. The relation between the operas Siddharta (1972-79/1984) and the “Wölfli-opera” The Divine Circus (1982) is described in the articles, in Danish, At handle eller ikke at

INTRODUCTION AND SYNOPSIS

The drama deals with the birth and youth of Siddharta — the prince who, later, after much suffering and privation, became Buddha. The opera’s three acts move gradually from a ‘mythical passage of time’ in the first act to a purely naturalistic rendering in the third act. You could compare to the landing of an aircraft: From high up the overall view is the greatest though the details be obscure, while on ground level the overall view is lost though the details become visible, scented and audible. The main theme of the legend, as enacted here, is the sheer loneliness and despair that Siddharta feels when the successful deception of his father and everyone around him — carried out with the best of intentions — is revealed. And how he rejects a manipulated existence based on a lie.

ACT I – “MORNING”

Night at the palace of Kapilavastu. Dancing and ceremonies in honour of King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. But Queen Maya is lonely and sad. She feels that she will soon leave this earth. King Suddhodana prays to heaven for a son. The ceremonies are repeated and time passes. Maya’s sister Prajapati plays a singing game with some children about “grief, which strikes at random”. Three itinerant beggars join in the children’s singing game. They witness how Maya emerges from her solitude to dance for an unborn child. Suddhodana goes to her.

At daybreak Maya goes out into the garden to give birth. The sun rises and a messenger proclaims the joyful news about the newborn child, Prince Siddharta, to whom Maya has given birth. He tells of the remarkable boy who was “immediately able to stand up and walk seven steps towards all four points of the compass”. The wise astrologist Asita interprets these signs: “The child shall attain life’s zenith and be given the flower of life on earth, but he shall leave his father’s kingdom.”

Suddhodana and all his counsellors are worried. Is the newborn child to leave the palace and renounce his inheritance? No, his spirit shall remain dormant, he must be protected from the courtiers and all the people are convinced of this, all except the doubting Asita. The prince is to grow up in a realm of bliss, his spirit bound with the fetters of beauty and pleasure; sickness, old age and death must never be mentioned. Thus the sick, the old and the ugly are to be hidden away. In a violent outburst of mass hysteria all that bears these ‘visible signs of life’ are seized and thrown into the dungeons. The first victim is the happy, yet lame, messenger.

A procession with the dead Maya’s body interrupts the mass hysteria. Prajapati, who, like Asita, has taken exception to the violence, condemns it openly, but all are bound by the king’s great plan. The work of building the sheltered pleasure-garden now begins, and the people start preparing themselves for the new ‘dolce vita’.

ACT II – “NOON”

Suddhodana regards his work contentedly. Everything has succeeded. Beautiful young people dance in the pleasure garden, among them Siddharta. Prajapati warns: “Under each bloom, see — root and earth and night-black kingdom of worms. Don’t lie to the prince!” Prajapati has also noticed the strange absent-mindedness that sometimes comes over the prince when “he gazes around as in wonder”. Suddhodana turns a deaf ear to Prajapati’s doubts. The prince must find himself a wife.

Suddhodana arranges a game in which Suddhodana is to offer a gold ring to three princesses, Tara, Kamara and Yasodhara, who regard each other anxiously. The wise and lovely Yasodhara resolutely takes the ring and Siddharta fails head over heels in love with her. Yasodhara is the boldest of them all; she knows that life is a dance. The other princesses are seized with anger and despair. Kamala breaks down from her unrequited love, and Siddharta, for whom everything is a game, admires what he believes to be her acting for his pleasure. Yasodhara has second thoughts. Can she love someone who is ‘blind’? She
puts Siddharta to the test. Having defeated the other princes in a merry contest he must immediately pick out the veiled Yasodhara. Siddharta is victorious and finds Yasodhara. The wedding festivities begin. Sudhodana and the court are triumphant. The prince is now “caught up in life” — caught in the meshes they themselves have spun. But Asita is still doubtful. In the middle of the merry feast Siddharta notices his father’s and the counsellors’ almost brutal triumph and Asita’s doubts. At times the festivities seem like a nightmare, but he cannot understand why. When the wedding guests depart Prajapati is left alone with her uneasiness and her anxiety.

ACT III — “EVENING”
Yasodhara has borne her husband a son. Late one afternoon she and Siddharta are sitting with some friends in the garden. They beg the dancing-girl Amra to entertain them as the enchantress “Mragatrasana”. Amra dances while her sister Gandarva relates an old love story about the boy who loved Kairia, who turned out to be the princess Schirma. Siddharta and Yasodhara themselves take part in the story and Siddharta wonders at the ambiguous spectacle Kairia who is Schirma played by Mragatrasana played by Amra! But who is playing Amra? What if everyone around him is always acting parts...? Anxious thoughts are aroused and the play proceeds with increasing agitation. The story takes a dramatic turn and the word ‘grief’ revives vague memories in the prince. Something he once overheard. Amra, who is ill, can no longer hide the fact and collapses from her dancing. Her distracted sister Gandarva cries out that everything is now lost and that they must flee, “down into hell”. At first Siddharta cannot, or perhaps will not, understand. He stares at the sick Amra. Then the truth strikes him. In “three visions” he sees sickness, old age and death. He sees his father’s aging face, and sees the sick Amra die and be dragged away. Prajapati enters and realises that the moment of truth she has both dreaded and hoped for has arrived. She takes the half-crazed prince’s head in her hands and tells him everything — about his mother Maya’s death and the deception his father has staged in order to protect him from life. She unlocks the dungeons and Siddharta sees all the victims of the realm of bliss that has been created for his sake. But the mechanism of violence functions yet again and the poor wretches are driven back into their holes. Siddharta makes as if to leave, but Sudhodana and the court beg him to stay nevertheless, and to carry on the heritage of his forefathers. Yasodhara implores him to take her with him, but Siddharta refuses. With melancholy irony he takes leave of his father and of all those who have deceived him. He removes his princely garments and, as the sun sets, he turns his back on his childhood home and leaves the Palace.