

All the World's a Stage

For internationally renowned set and costume designer **John Macfarlane**, fine art and theater design converge seamlessly.

BY Allison Malafronte



OPENING SET

The opera *Maria Stuarda* begins in the main residence of Queen Elizabeth I, the Palace of Whitehall—a seat of power signified by Macfarlane's soaring set.

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AGRIPPINA

Handel's *Agrippina* was originally set in ancient Rome, as referenced in Macfarlane's front-cloth design of a she-wolf (above), which legend says suckled Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus. The current production at the Met, however, sets this tale of intrigue in modern times, as reflected in Macfarlane's drop cloth for the bedroom of the much-desired Poppea (left).

you you're designing your first show, you quickly figure out how to get the job done," he says. "My training in fine art and textile design played a pivotal role in my understanding of set and costume design."

As the artist's skills grew, his bravura painting style and architectural understanding caught the attention of producers in several countries. He spent 15 years designing sets for London's Royal Ballet and Royal Opera House, among other companies, before channeling his talents to the opera stage, designing sets and costumes for the Paris Opera, the Vienna Opera, Maggio Musicale (Florence), and the Met Opera. His signature large-scale backdrops, painted on cloth, combined with his ability to make art and architecture sing from any sightline are his calling card.

MERGER OF TALENTS

While traveling the world, Macfarlane has always kept a studio at home for his personal fine art pursuits. "It's now

ENTER, STAGE LEFT

Macfarlane—a native of Scotland who currently resides in the countryside of Wales—knew from childhood that his artistic talent would find a home in theater. "I remember my father—who was a painter—cutting an opening in the front of a matchbox so we could make tiny theaters together," says Macfarlane. "And when I was about 11, my mother took me to see the Royal Ballet perform *Swan Lake*. It was a Leslie Hurry production and was rather gothic but very opulent. I remember thinking it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was at that moment that I realized this was what I wanted to do with my life."

Macfarlane attended the Glasgow School of Art, where he spent the first two years studying drawing, pastel and print-making before specializing in textile design and creating his first costumes. He furthered his textile studies in Italy and spent time as a resident designer at the Young Vic Theatre, in London. He did not, however, pursue a four-year degree in set design. He explains: "I simply thought, 'It's a box. There's a hole in the box. You need to fill the box in the most visually beautiful and dynamic way possible. What's the mystery?'"

Macfarlane figured out how to fill the box through experimentation, research and practice. "If you walk through the door of a theatre company and someone tells

Only in the greatest opera houses can the sights one sees on stage be as spectacular as the sounds one hears. That's certainly the case at the Metropolitan Opera (Met Opera) in New York City. This *mise-en-scène* artistry is fully evident in the work of John Macfarlane, an internationally recognized set and costume designer. His work is part of four major 2020 productions at the Met Opera: Handel's *Agrippina*, Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*), Puccini's *Tosca*, and Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. All of these productions will also be simulcast to a global audience through the Met Opera's *Live in HD* series.

obvious,” he says, “not only how the paintings influence the theater but also how the theater productions provide subjects for paintings. I can look at a finished opera stage and think, ‘If I cropped that there and added a little color or shape here, that would be a fantastic image.’” Theater life itself, especially backstage life viewed from the wings, also provides subject matter for the designer’s paintings, as it did for Degas, one of Macfarlane’s favorite artists.

Still life is another genre in Macfarlane’s fine-art repertoire. Sometimes a particular scene or impression from a ballet or opera can spark a series of paintings. “It’s exactly the same discipline to engineer a still life as it is to engineer the setup of objects within parameters on stage,” he says. “In both cases you’re directing the viewers’ eyes in a specific way and dictating how they should look at the subject while editing anything that inhibits that focus.”

IMMERSIVE PROCESS

In the same way that no two painters compose a painting in exactly the same manner, set designers each have a unique

approach to composing on stage. “Because I specialize in opera and ballet, says Macfarlane, “the structure of the music is instrumental and can inspire certain visuals, so my first step is listening to the score. The director then usually visits me in the undisturbed wilds where I live, and we begin our creative collaboration. Most directors have a specific idea of what they want. I have a 1-to-25 scale model box of the Met, and we begin by positioning and rearranging bits of cardboard around the mock stage, talking through ideas and possibilities.

“Once we have a skeleton of our vision, I like to be left alone to reportion and rework,” the artist continues. “I build all my own models, which takes time and focus. My sets tend to be a combination of very large painted images and architecture—*Agrippina* is a good example—and because of that I need to work straight into the box. This part of the process takes about two months. If there’s a big sky in the set, for instance, I’ll have to build that out separately. After the initial models are finished, the director returns and gives feedback, and I fine-tune from there. After all this I can start on the final model, and that can take up

to six months if it’s a large production, such as *Tosca*.”

Preparatory sketching and drawing are an integral part of the conceptual stages, and Macfarlane has filled nearly 80 volumes of sketchbooks to this purpose. In a sketchbook for *Der Fliegende Holländer*, for example, all of the individual elements that make up an entire scene had been carefully thought through with graphite and charcoal.



DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER

Macfarlane’s model of an Act 1 set for *Der Fliegende Holländer* (above) is scaled 1-to-25 to the Met Opera stage. With the help of a projected image, Macfarlane later painted the backcloth on site at the Met Opera (right).



MARIA STUARDA

Macfarlane’s set and costume designs for *Maria Stuarda* return for a second season in April 2020. At left is a costume sketch of full Gloriana finery worn by Elisabetta (Queen Elizabeth I) in the opera’s final act. The image below shows singer Elza van den Heever wearing the actual costume during the 2017–18 season. The front cloth behind her, also Macfarlane’s design, is based on the royal crest.



Once the design is approved, Macfarlane remains hands-on during its creation and installation, painting the stage drops himself, which can be as large as 60x67 feet. He edits each section of the painting based on how it’s reading from various vantage points, adding and subtracting colors and shapes, and adjusting levels of translucency and opacity until the entire scene is in sync with the light.

IMAGINATIVE REALISM

Macfarlane’s flexibility as a fine artist and his penchant for realism has been an asset to numerous productions, but perhaps none so apropos as the 2017 redesign of Puccini’s *Tosca*, which will appear in the Met’s 2019–20 season. Sir David McVicar and Macfarlane were hired as the dream-team director and designer. With a storyline based in 1800-era Rome and featuring a painter as one of the main characters, *Tosca* was a natural fit for Macfarlane. He did, however, have a new creative challenge: “I’d never done a site-specific opera before,” he says. “The opera’s three acts are each set in a specific and still existing location: the church Sant’Andrea della Valle, the Palazzo Farnese and the Castel Sant’Angelo. To prepare, I took some members of the production team to Rome. I created numerous sketches and studies on site to ensure I was creating the scenery with as much authenticity as possible.”

Authenticity on stage, however, doesn’t always mean exacting realism. The director and designer must create an environment that’s at once believable and otherworldly. “Realism in life doesn’t always translate to the stage,” Macfarlane admits. “Even when you gather site-specific information, if you replicated the scene exactly as it appears, it could look lifeless. Ultimately, you take the reality of what is there and enhance and edit it to achieve an even greater dynamic vision. For *Tosca*, we wanted to re-create the breathtaking monumental scale of the church’s architecture, so we raked and angled the stage to imitate the distance and height one experiences in real life. We also re-created the grand silhouettes of the sculptures against architecture. Ultimately we ended up with

TOSCA

The on-site drawings and studies Macfarlane created in Rome as preparation for the 2017 redesign of Puccini's *Tosca* enabled the artist to re-imagine historic structures in set designs that convey an authentic sense of grandeur and detail.

Preparatory drawing of Sant'Andrea della Valle



Preparatory drawing of Castel Sant'Angelo

Architectural study of Sant'Andrea della Valle



a glorious visual that honors the original while reading well in the proscenium.”

McVicar and Macfarlane’s artistic attention to detail is especially crucial for an opera that will be filmed for *Live in HD*. “In many respects I have been designing in HD [high definition] my whole life,” says Macfarlane, “so there were absolutely no adjustments needed to my creative process. I’ve always focused on and advocated for details on costumes and on sets—even when I was told a particular ornamentation or accent wouldn’t be visible from afar.”

STUDIO RESET

Macfarlane has had plenty of opportunities this season to see his two professions as a fine artist and designer intersect. *Tosca*’s opening act in Sant’Andrea della Valle features

a huge half-finished portrait of Mary Magdalene that the character Mario Cavaradossi rushes in mid-scene to finish. Macfarlane himself painted the picture. He also enjoyed creating Cavaradossi’s work table, with canvases, brushes, spilled paint and turpentine scattered about—a reminder of the studio Macfarlane eagerly awaits to return to after months of production. “If I don’t have at least four or five months straight of painting in between productions, it weakens me creatively as a designer,” he says. “Having uninterrupted solitude in my studio is the bedrock of my creative output. It’s what reenergizes and revitalizes me so that I can return to the stage with fresh vision and focus year after year.”

Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York City area.