

## Requiem for Schlingensief's *Parsifal*

*Paula M. Bortnichak and Edward A. Bortnichak offer an intriguing interpretation of the controversial production, now in its last year*

Evelyn Herlitzius (Kundry), Alfons Eberz (Parsifal), Jukka Rasilainen (Amfortas), Karsten Mewes (Klingsor), Robert Holl (Gurnemann), Artur Korn (Tituel), Clemens Bieber (First Grail Knight), Samuel Youn (Second Grail Knight), Julia Borchert (First Esquire), Atala Schöck (Second Esquire), Norbert Ernst (Third Esquire), Miljenko Turk (Fourth Esquire), Julia Borchert, Martina Rüping, Carola Guber, Anna Korondi, Jutta Maria Böhnert, Atala Schöck (Flowermaidens); Bayreuth Festival Chorus and Orchestra/Adam Fischer; Christoph Schlingensief (director), Daniel Angermayr, Thomas Goerge (designers), Tabea Braun (costumes). Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, 13 August 2007

The great music dramas are masterpieces that serve as mirrors to our lives, and as audiences change over time, so should the representation of these timeless reflections of our common humanity. Every now and then in the performance history of such works there comes a production that enables us to experience it as if for the first time. For *Parsifal*, the Wieland Wagner staging at Bayreuth in 1951 was such a defining moment. Christoph Schlingensief's Bayreuth production (2004–7) was another such, all-too-rare, landmark. Schlingensief may not be a traditional Wagnerite, but he is nonetheless a 'perfect' one: his respect for the inner spirit of the work, his remaining true to both text and music, and his willingness to engage tirelessly with the difficult questions they raise mark him as a Wagnerian of the front rank.<sup>1</sup>

Schlingensief's central contribution was to remove extraneous and distracting layers of Western religious symbolism to reveal the more elemental, Eastern (and Schopenhauerian) spiritual core of the drama, utilising Wagner's well-documented affinity to Buddhist thought to set the drama as a parable of Everyman's – and, indeed, every sentient being's (witness references to 'heilige Hunde' onstage in Act I) – journey toward Enlightenment. In writing about this production in 2005, we expounded at length on the Eastern spiritual tradition, specifically Tibetan Buddhism, that forms the basis for this staging. Interested readers are referred to that earlier commentary for more extensive background.<sup>2</sup> We recapitulate here the essentials of Buddhism necessary to appreciate Schlingensief's (and Wagner's) intent. First, it is important to recognise that the goal of all Buddhists is to achieve the state of nirvana, or 'oneness' with the universe, through renunciation of the ego (the 'self') and the acceptance of the interdependence of all life. This state of 'oneness' with all creation is marked by perfect compassion for and identification with the suffering of others. All animals and people have souls or spirits, and this essence of being persists after death. The Eastern terms for soul are 'astral body' or 'body double', and it is this latter term that literally describes

<sup>1</sup> The following is intended as an exegesis of the production as we understand it, not as a conventional review.

<sup>2</sup> *Wagner News*, no. 172 (Feb. 2006), 10–17.

how Schlingensiefel presents the souls of the departed, with identically clad actors doubling for the singers. Every soul has the potential to recycle in the cosmos through reincarnation (also referred to as metempsychosis or transmigration) in an effort to resolve residual conflicts that continue to trouble it and impede its progress towards the state of nirvana. The soul can undergo as many reincarnations as needed. The work of the soul is largely accomplished in transitional zones of heightened awareness known as 'bardo' states. The most important bardo is that of death: the interval between life and death and between death and reincarnation. The death bardo is vividly described in the classic Buddhist text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a highly energised place, filled with conflicting images, strong sensations and vibrant colours, in which the soul is literally bombarded with information. That is exactly the stage picture for much of this production: the stage itself represents the death bardo. Time and space in the bardo are interchangeable: hence Gurnemanz's famous lines at the start of the Act I Transformation Scene: 'Du siehst, mein Sohn, / zum Raum wird hier die Zeit' (You see, my son, / here time becomes space). Before the soul can complete its journey to nirvana, it must resolve conflicts remaining in every area of its former life. To accomplish this, it must navigate through all levels, or 'chakras', of human consciousness and functioning. These chakras correspond to anatomical regions of the physical body: the heart for love, the brain for intellectual life, the genitals for sexual passion, and so forth. Finally, it must be recognised that souls search for integration in the bardo in tandem with other souls that they were related to in life. The souls in these 'soul families' must find each other and work through issues they have in common before their journeys are complete.

A few stage conventions and properties are repeatedly used by Schlingensiefel to make his Eastern spiritual concept more tangible to the audience. For these physical 'markers' of concepts and states of being, the director has drawn on symbols from various philosophical and spiritual traditions, both ancient and modern, that are universally accepted and understood. Life is represented by both a vaguely formed animal-like sculpture figure and by the most universal symbol of all: blood. The outstretched hand, soaked in the blood of the primordial womb of the Earth Mother (representing the grail) signifies the community of all existence, living and dead. Death is always signified by funerals, and such ceremonies are marked by red floral tributes. Reincarnation is denoted by a lotus blossom, as this flower is a universal symbol of Eastern traditions for regenerated life. The grail, as mentioned, is present in its most ancient form as the ultimate cup of creation: the womb. Thus, a well-endowed female figure represents the grail in the temple scenes. The physical body is represented by the barbed wire of a prison compound – literally, the flesh as the mortal 'prison' of the soul. Finally, and most strikingly of all, hope is represented by a living rabbit.<sup>3</sup> One may recall that the rabbit is an ancient and universal symbol of fertility, and procreation the hope of all creation for the survival of the species. The rabbit's death and slow decay over the course of the evening represents the very different goal of the soul of all beings: the hope of achieving nirvana. The reduction of the rabbit's remains to its basic elements symbolises the great life–death cycle of all creation.

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<sup>3</sup> Schlingensiefel also photographed a rabbit in Namibia. Some observers believed the animal in question was a hare and saw it as an allusion to the iconic symbol of the German performance artist Joseph Beuys.



The Grail ceremony in Act I of Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Parsifal*, featuring esoteric symbols and representatives of all races and cultures. Photo Bayreuther Festspiele GmbH/Jochen Quast

In this production Schlingensiefel presents the drama from the perspective of Parsifal: all the 'characters' we see on the stage are actually souls of the dead at various stations within the bardo. As the work opens, Parsifal's soul (seen as a body double) has already begun its spiritual journey. His bardo guide in Act I, as he will be for us, is Gurnemanz. Gurnemanz organises the maze of images that confront the hero (and us), and will introduce him to the kinship of the dead as signified by the grail knights – whose costumes indicate that they are representatives of peoples and cultures from the whole of civilisation. Parsifal is in search of his soul family (his mother and father) as he attempts to integrate his former existence with theirs and find nirvana. His 'father', Amfortas, is an agitated soul at an early stage of its work in the bardo. His 'mother', Kundry, has long been dead, but her soul is also very restless as she is repeatedly reincarnated. Kundry first appears, heralded by a projected lotus blossom, in fanciful childlike dress; soon after, she reappears as a sophisticated, seductive figure. She never appears to her son in this act as a traditional 'maternal' figure, and that is a first hint of what Parsifal's principal work in the bardo will involve: his confused, ambivalent, feelings towards his mother. This is all in the text: he 'loves' Herzeleide but precipitately leaves her and is riddled by incapacitating guilt at any mention of her. What, then, is the nature of that love? We next meet Amfortas on the way to a representation of his own funeral. Amfortas appears as Parsifal either actually knew or imagined his father (the distinction makes no difference in the bardo, nor, often, in the conscious mind; perception can be our reality). Amfortas' wound is highly significant: it is death itself. He carries it over his side as a bouquet of red funeral flowers which he unsuccessfully attempts to

give away to every soul he meets onstage, thus signifying that he does not accept his own mortality. His soul is not at peace and it will wander long in the bardo, for it has much work to do. His great monologue in this Grail Temple Scene now makes complete sense if it is understood figuratively and not literally: his soul yearns for acceptance of death and the eternal rest of nirvana. The rabbit makes its first appearance during this scene, first alive, and then slowly disintegrating in death as Amfortas embarks on the next part of his spiritual journey. The Grail Temple Scene is a re-enactment of Amfortas' funeral, with the spirit of Parsifal observing, in awe, the horrifying torment of his father's troubled soul. The souls of the other dead present at this re-enactment (the grail brotherhood) welcome the new soul of Parsifal by ritualistically imprinting him with their bloodied hands, dipped in the eternal womb of creation of the grail/Earth Mother figure. Amfortas' soul cannot yet be thus welcomed into the brotherhood of death – he resists the kinship of these other souls who already are at peace. The Act ends with Gurnemanz pointing Parsifal on his way through the prison fence (the 'mortal coil') and into the next station of the bardo where he will confront the central conflict in his former earthly existence.

Act II introduces Klingsor as the bardo guide (a parallel to Gurnemanz) for the realm of the senses: the chakras pertaining to primitive functioning and to sexuality. Klingsor is neither good nor evil; rather he is, like sex itself, simply an attribute of our human state. Schlingensiefel again takes his cue directly from Wagner: Parsifal asks Gurnemanz who is good and who is bad. Parsifal's soul, throughout the drama, constantly tries to resolve the basic questions of all existence: what is right and wrong, who am I, what is the true nature of my parents, why do I exist? The bardo is not a concrete place, just as ours is not a concrete existence. Life and death, the conscious and the unconscious

Parsifal (Alfons Eberz), imprinted with bloodied hands, circles a 'maypole' with his 'soul family' Kundry (Evelyn Herlitzius) and Amfortas (Jukka Rasilainen). Gurnemanz (Robert Holl) rejoices at the return of the 'spear'. Photo Bayreuther Festspiele GmbH/Jochen Quast



are part of a single great continuum that embraces us all. Onstage graffiti include the inscription 'Erinnerung ist Vergessen' (Remembrance is forgetting) and this production drives that point home repeatedly and powerfully. Kundry awakens again from death and is reincarnated as a creature of the realm of the senses, with Klingsor as her bardo guide for this phase of her soul's progress. The ensuing Flowermaidens' Scene is the re-enacted funeral of Parsifal as presided over by Klingsor and is accompanied by the strewing of red flowers as the hero's white-shrouded shade is led through space. His great scene with the mother-figure Kundry is marked by body doubles behind the singers re-enacting the source of the guilt and pain of both: the physical abuse of the child by the mother and the subsequent act of incest between mother and son. The great drama of the Parsifal soul family is revealed as the most primal and profoundly disturbing of all: the Oedipal conflict. The pivotal 'kiss' sequence has Parsifal sitting up in his coffin and recoiling with horror after he kisses the seductress image of his 'mother'; his 'father', Amfortas, meanwhile, comes upon the scene and observes the act in great pain. Parsifal's subsequent outpouring of self-reproach is accompanied by his (unsuccessful) attempt to embrace his 'father' and to join the hands of his 'parents', as if to say 'Forgive me, father, for my childhood sin against you, and be reconciled with your wife!' Both Parsifal and Kundry try to anoint Amfortas with their outstretched, bloodied hands as a gesture of kinship and peace in death, but his soul will not yet accept the resolution. Never has this difficult scene made more sense to us, or been rendered more powerfully, on the stage. For Kundry's piercing cry of 'und lachte' (and [I] laughed), the stage turntable, which has been in constant movement, suddenly stops and isolates her entirely; she is alone in her pain and beyond the emotional reach of either 'son' or 'husband'. It is only at the conclusion of the act that Klingsor and Parsifal, together, touch her with bloodied hands, halting her agitated recycling through eternity, leaving her still and peaceful as the curtain falls. Act II is the fulcrum of the drama, and it has been the station of the bardo in which all three souls in the Parsifal soul family triad have done the most work to end their troubled search through time and space for reconciliation with each other.

In Act III, we encounter some of the most memorable images of all. Kundry is reincarnated, for the last time, as she enters this highest chakra station of the bardo (heart, mouth and brain images abound onstage). Both Gurnemanz and Klingsor serve as the bardo guides for this act, thereby symbolising that all the spheres of human expression and existence have been united and are now in harmony. Kundry's kiss of passion in the previous act is now replaced with the kiss of affection between 'mother' and 'son' in the Good Friday Meadow scene, and the peace which Parsifal's soul experiences is shown by his simple child's play at see-saw during Gurnemanz's narrative on the regeneration of life. Amfortas is reconciled at last with 'wife' and 'son' as the triad, all shrouded in white, circle in unison around a maypole in the spring meadow – a stroke of genius. The ritual of anointing the head and feet of Parsifal becomes the ancient purification rite of the body before burial and entry into the afterlife. Groups of soul families sit on steps at the gates of eternity and, presided over by Klingsor, ritualistically take turns anointing each other. All of humanity is consecrated; all is one in this magnificently moving scene. The final scene shows Amfortas' funeral once again re-enacted as his soul makes its final attempt to complete its resolution and find nirvana. Amfortas kneeling alone onstage, lit by an eerie bluish light, in front of his own open coffin, is one

of the most arresting images we have ever experienced in the theatre. At the end, the Parsifal–Amfortas–Kundry soul family is reunited by the son and redeemer as peace is granted to all, the projected image of the rabbit corpse disintegrates completely at last, and Parsifal, alone on an empty stage, walks into the eternal white light of nirvana. It is, indeed, redemption for Parsifal, the redeemer. It is further made clear to us, the audience, that his soul’s journey in the bardo will also someday be our own, as the light that envelops him at the fall of the curtain seems also to reach forward and enfold us.

In keeping with the tradition of the Bayreuth Festival as ‘workshop’, Schlingensiefel evolved and perfected his production over the four years of its run. We did not see it in its inaugural year, but we did attend performances in the subsequent three seasons. By 2005, when we first encountered it, we understand that it had already been considerably simplified. Certainly we witnessed significant changes between 2005 and 2007.

Although the basic concept held firm over these seasons, the plethora of film clips and image projections was steadily reduced. In addition, the audience was provided with more visual cues (such as the lotus and images of the Buddha) that the drama was conceived along Eastern spiritual lines. There was also less use of actors and body doubles, and the production became less reliant on the specifics of chakra references. The concept of soul families wandering together through the bardo was also made clearer over the years. Importantly, the original idea in 2005 of Parsifal being alone onstage at the end was reinstated in 2007. In 2006, we found the ending, in which several characters walk off into the light, less compelling. Schlingensiefel’s refining and sharpening of the focus between 2004 and 2007 served to make the production more powerful and more likely to be understood by any receptive, open-minded audience, even one that had very little knowledge of Eastern spiritual thought.

Thus, with the end of the 2007 season, the Christoph Schlingensiefel production of *Parsifal* passes into history and into Bayreuth legend. We would have wished it to remain on the stage far longer than four years, and we plead that any video recordings of it be made available for study by theatre professionals and for the enrichment of a larger audience. No production would be harder to capture adequately on film, but none would be more deserving. We are in Schlingensiefel’s debt for this *Parsifal* – the reference production for a New Age in the staging of Wagner’s music dramas.

