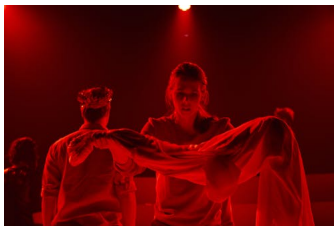


The Rape of Lucretia: a deconstructed tale of civic and personal virtue

Written by Oliver Watts, Honorary associate, Sydney College of Arts, University of Sydney

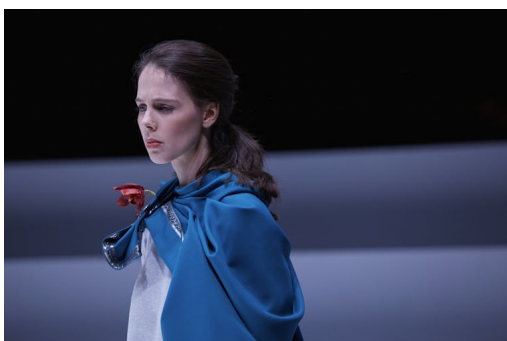


Anna Dowsley in *The Rape of Lucretia*: the story is originally recounted in Livy and has been used since as an allegory of civic virtue and Republican zeal. Zan Wimberley

The Rape of Lucretia by Benjamin Britten and librettist Ronald Duncan is an avant-garde piece of modernism. In this production, the Sydney Chamber Orchestra and Victoria Opera take this abstract and fragmented work and break it further.

Under the direction of Kip Williams, the opera is made to resonate in a different way, moving from ancient Roman allegory to contemporary hip hop styling. What makes the staging contemporary is an equivocation between insisting on the opera's allegorical meaning (of civic virtue) and the nagging contemporary doubt that real statescraft and civic sacrifice are at all possible.

The opera is written to be austere and crystalline and to follow the neatness and efficiency of modernist design. Britten and Duncan agreed on a cast of eight and an orchestra of 12, in a form they dubbed "chamber opera." It tells the story of Lucretia, a Roman noblewoman who is married to Collatinus, and opens with the men away in camp, including the Prince Tarquinius. All their wives have been tested and found wanting and only Lucretia is found to be chaste. Tarquinius decides to find the famed Lucretia while her husband is away and rapes her. Collatinus returns to a shameful Lucretia who kills herself in an act of self-sacrifice and redemption. So outraged is everyone that they vow to overthrow the kings for good.



Anna Dowsley as Lucretia in the Sydney production of *The Rape of Lucretia*: entirely believable as a beautiful and chaste vision. Zan Wimberley

The story is originally recounted in Livy and has been used since as an allegory of civic virtue and Republican zeal. Titian, Rembrandt and Artemesia Gentileschi all famously painted the myth of the saintly Lucretia. In Britten and Duncan's 1946 version, the traditional meaning of the

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allegory is used to help assuage and give hope after the slaughter of innocents seen in WWII but they also moved the meaning towards psychological depth (a common literary move in an existentialist and Freudian postwar world).

Duncan saw in the myth a particular intertwining of life and death, the Spirit and Fate; Lucretia represents the former, Tarquinius the latter. But the allegory of pure chastity and beauty becomes a more erotic and psychological battle. When Tarquinius climactically enters her chamber in Act II, Lucretia lets slip, "In the forest of my dreams/You have always been the Tiger."

If there is hope in this work it comes from an overlaying of Christian iconography and sound types: chorales, hymns and lullaby. Duncan adds a female and male chorus that, over the drama, highlights Jesus's suffering as the way to grace and rebirth. The music adds to the Christian overtones by using sacred forms, especially for the chorus's interludes, some of the most beautiful music in the opera.

In Britten's original work, there is some level of ambivalence. The music assists in asserting the true virtue and love of Lucretia and Collitanus. Sung beautifully and with considerable power and dynamism by Anna Dowsley, in the Sydney production, Lucretia was entirely believable as a beautiful and chaste vision.

However Kip William's direction amplified the crystalline abstraction of the original, even further. In a bold deconstruction, for much of the opera each character was played by another actor (of the opposite sex).

So, for example, Tarquinius was sung by baritone Nathan Lay in a violently charged and forceful voice - but, like a ventriloquist, he stood or shadowed Jessica O'Donoghue who drag kinged the prince's part (and who also played Bianca).

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