

Sacramento Opera takes note of increase in computer animated sets

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Many opera companies are using computer animation as a powerful tool to intensify the drama of its productions while helping to cut costs.

The Sacramento Opera is taking notice, weighing the future use of computer-generated images for some set pieces.

"We're just now starting to get numbers and bids from animation companies," said Timm Rolek, artistic director of the Sacramento Opera.

"It certainly gives us the option of having a more visually compelling picture to look at," said Rolek. "Now, with sets, you light them and the only way you can change them is by changing the lighting."

Rolek said that if the opera company had used projected animation for last season's production of Verdi's "Otello," it could have put a more dramatic product on stage.

"'Otello' opens with a thunderstorm, and we simulated it with flashes of light," he said. "Had we had the technology available to use animation, we could have staged the biggest thunderstorm you've ever heard."

Animated projected images have been an economic boon to cash-strapped regional opera companies like the Miami-based Florida Grand Opera, which boldly jumped into the digital world recently by using animation for a season's worth of productions.

The company enlisted a Miami-based animation firm to devise computer-animated images to be thrown on a 22-by-40-foot rear screen. Those images serve the dramatic aims of the Florida Grand Opera's current production of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville." That production is believed to have the most extensive use of computer animation by any U.S. opera company to date.

The Florida opera was forced to think creatively for its 2010-11 season after having to trim its annual budget by nearly \$6 million and its mainstage productions from six to four.

Using computer animation as a replacement for set pieces may prove economically fruitful for the Sacramento Opera, said Rod Gideons, the opera's executive director.

"We're exploring that option," said Gideons. "It does not replace hard scenery, but it's an enhancement to it."

Renting sets for productions is costly. The company's recent production of "La Traviata" required that it pay \$7,000 in round-trip transportation costs for set delivery from the Utah

Opera. That cost, when added to set rental costs, a set designer royalties and installation costs, comes out to \$30,000. The total cost of producing "La Traviata" was \$350,000, Gideons said.

The company is looking to trim set rental costs by as much as 30 percent for its 2010-11 season, and using animation may be a key, he said.

"Using animation could save us about 30 percent from the total cost of rental, supervision and transportation," said Rolek.

Other opera companies have experimented with the use of animation. In 2006, the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy, used animation in director Wayne McGregor's production of Purcell's opera "Dido and Aeneas."

The animated sequence of a horse moving among a fog bank was used to show the passage of time in the opera. And the Metropolitan and San Francisco opera companies have also used animation to great success, although sparingly.

Here's a video showing the animation used by the Florida Grand Opera (in Doral, Fla.) in its production of "The Barber of Seville."

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