

## Tiefland ★★★★★

Gran Teatre del Liceu, 20 October 2008  
Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

Director Matthias Hartmann's mutation of Àngel Guimerà's 1897 Catalan class play, *Terra Baixa*, into a parable about genetic manipulation and cloning is deviously apt.

For starters, the Gran Teatre del Liceu was razed by fire and rebuilt in 1999 – a facsimile of its former self – and a Perejaume fresco featuring an army of red velvet seats that stretch and undulate like dunes without horizon now adorns the great dome.

*Tiefland* is set to a score by Scots-German composer Eugen d'Albert and tells of a naïve shepherd from the Pyrenean highlands who is manoeuvred into marrying the mistress of a wealthy landowner.

Hartmann's fashionable production opens with Sebastiano – an opportunistic magnate from the lowlands – selecting the pastoral Pedro from a laboratory line-up.

Next to a businessman, a religious leader, and a pornographically poised male model, Pedro appears to be the ideal specimen for the job: he will blindly wed Sebastiano's mistress, Marta, leaving Sebastiano free to marry an affluent heiress while continuing his affair.

During act one, videographer Sven Ortel illustrates the highlands ("the mountains where the meadows meet the glaciers") as idealistic projections reminiscent of early colour films.

His images are softened at the edges; hazy and dreamlike, with unblemished meadows and sheep that float on air.

In contrast, Volker Hintermeier's lowland set is a hermetic boardroom of wood veneer.

The cylindrical space contains a desk, a display cabinet, and a cog of perpetual rotation that operates a conveyor belt on which an infinite number of identical artefacts are paraded.

Hintermeier accommodates the chorus by temporarily breaching a row of wall panels to reveal an adjacent factory populated by uniformly white-garbed workers.

Peter Seiffert, Alan Titus and Petra Maria Schnitzer as Pedro, Sebastiano and Marta acclimatise to d'Albert's airy use of Andorran harp and flute in the prologue, and the quaking leitmotifs and base revelations of the final act.

Titus is the dominant force. His Sebastiano is impenitent to the end, with no qualms at enforcing the unconscionable terms of his manufactured relationships.

Even during her romantic capitulations, Schnitzer's Marta remains detached from her male companions. She is a boat caught between two unassailable currents.

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