

Getting a Handel on the truth: 'Alcina' in Vienna

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Art imitating life

One central purpose of journalism has always been a striving after something called truth. Yet, three centuries after the Enlightenment raised that rational ideal of objective, empirical verity, we are now mired in a confusion of relativism, mendacity, propaganda and pluralism. This is good.

The [Wiener Staatsoper production of Handel's rarely performed late opera 'Alcina'](#) is intellectual entertainment at its best and most beautiful. It reminds those of us who enjoy journalism's liberation through digital technologies that diversity and doubt are not entirely new creative conundrums.

'Alcina' is one of those gorgeously silly and yet serious operas with simply sumptuous music – played and sung superbly in

this particular production. It has a plot based on specious confections of cross-dressing, a sorceress, spells, and swordplay. Just to complicate things, in a deliciously political, yet tongue in cheek way, the British director Adrian Noble puts this allegorical and allusive three-act drama within a play by imagining it performed by the Duchess of Devonshire in an early-Georgian living room. Imagine Shakespeare's *Tempest* meets Sheridan's *School for Scandal*.

So what's this got to do with Web 2.0 journalism? I hear you cry. Well, obviously not much. But I enjoyed this opera in a packed theatre in Vienna at the end of an intensive [two-day conference on media and democracy](#). That had ended with a heated debate around the idea of truth and the obvious fact – born out by the diversity of the delegates – that truth is very relative to where you are and how much access you have to differing accounts. That doesn't mean you shouldn't continue seeking it, of course.

'Alcina' reminds us that there is more to the idea of truth than reported facts. Firstly, people lie. They distort for their own ends. They show things that aren't real. Sometimes for good reasons, as well as ignoble ones. This is not just about art.

The narrative endpoint is never in doubt. We know that this is a comedy where even the anti-heroine Alcina is going to be allowed a vaguely happy ending of reconciliation rather than destruction. Each aria signals familiar feelings of fear, loathing, anger, jealousy, love, lust and joy. Only together do they become complex. Only through a set of ideas shared with the audience does it become more than a fable. Alcina plays with metaphors that allow the audience to imagine, speculate and ponder different meanings. Sound familiar?

Perhaps this is how stories will work in future communications. We know the news instantly now because the Web will always tell us the core facts straight away. What matters are the different perspectives. To adapt the Bard, perhaps all the World Wide Web is a stage.

But this stage, or platform, is a place for truth and reason as much as greasepaint, costume and lighting. Even something as delightfully artificial as 'Alcina' has emotional and intellectual power to communicate ideas about individuals and community. So it is with the new journalism. Perhaps the popular concept of the 'curator model' of the networked journalist should be replaced with that of the journalist as director or simply actor?

Disclaimer:

I know very little about opera and this article is not supposed to be taken too seriously. Or is it?

You can read a proper review [here](#)

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