

The Aldens - Twin leads of opera's ongoing revolution

David and Christopher Alden have both brought their challenging approach to ENO this autumn. Jessica Duchen sees double

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Joint production: opera directors and identical twins Christopher and David Alden

Some people find the Alden twins' opera productions disconcerting, but meeting them is even more so. It is like seeing double: they are even wearing identical glasses. David, though, is distinguishable by his teeth, which look almost as if he might have experienced an altercation with an irate conductor or an outraged punter.

He and Christopher have helped to change the face of British, indeed European, opera. They have long been in the vanguard of a controversial, revisionist, revolution and both seek, in different ways, to leave no comfort-zone un-churned.

Both have been with English National Opera (ENO) this autumn, Christopher heading *The Makropoulos Case* by Janacek, a revival, and David directing Handel's *Radamisto* in a co-production with Santa Fe Opera. It is rare to catch them in the same place; David is based in London, Christopher in New York, and both work for opera companies as far apart as Munich and Australia.

Now 61, the brothers were born into the theatre – notably Broadway. David says: "Our mother was a dancer and our father was an actor and a writer, so we were brought up in the New York theatrical milieu, but not in classical music. That was our own..." Christopher interrupts: "Rebellion. Pathetic rebellion!"

"But we were smart," David continues, with typically double-edged irony, "because we observed many people on Broadway in commercial theatre yet we weren't attracted to that world. We were drawn instead to a field where we could never make any money, and where somehow that's not the point. We got into opera in our early teens and we did standing-room at the Met three or four nights a week. We knew from the age of 15 what career we wanted." They have only attempted to work jointly once, on a mooted production of *Così fan tutte*. "We lasted one day," Christopher says.

During three decades in opera, the twins have seen seismic changes and wrought some more themselves. David is noted for updated political interpretations: his ENO staging of Janacek's *Jenufa* in 2006, set in a run-down Eastern Bloc village, won two Olivier Awards. His association with ENO goes back to the 1980s, when he was a key player in the company's "powerhouse" under the artistic direction of Peter Jonas. His efforts included Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa* with a chain-saw massacre, provoking near riots in the auditorium. When Jonas moved to the Bavarian State Opera, David remained one of his chosen directors.

Christopher used to work chiefly in the US. But his ditching of conventions in favour of drawing out characters' psychology sometimes led to clashes with that country's more conservative outlook. His *Rigoletto* for Chicago Lyric Opera, set in a gentlemen's club, was never revived. Now he is turning more to Europe. "There, opera companies want controversy and look for someone who produces it," he says. Recent productions have included a *Tosca* for Opera North, set in Berlusconi's Rome, that dispensed with the heroine's final plunge from the ramparts.

It's not only the works that the Aldens have re-thought; they have also been instrumental in altering the balance of power between director and conductor. The latter had been opera's unquestioned *supremo*. No longer. Today, singers "have to bow to two gods," as Christopher puts it.

The fur flew four years ago when Christopher first staged *The Makropoulos Case* for ENO. The conductor was Sir Charles Mackerras, who died earlier this year. "He was quite a traditionalist," Christopher says. "This production was created with my designers to be one that wouldn't upset him too much: it's set in the period the piece was written. But even so, maybe my approach is not literal or realistic. So there was a lot of electricity." David says: "He was an outspoken individual and he didn't like concept direction. At least he was honest about it."

But even the twins aren't happy with all aspects of opera's increased visual emphasis. "Thirty years ago, I never would have dreamed that singers might sometimes be hired based on the size of their waists," says Christopher.

And what of the trend for drafting in famous directors from film and theatre? "We're not saying it's a bad thing," Christopher says. "It can be stimulating, it can attract attention and bring newcomers to see opera, but..." David lets rip: "Opera direction is a difficult, complex, multi-tasking thing. It takes years of practice, trying things out and failing miserably. How do you think the team feel, confronted with someone who runs the whole thing yet has never done it before, however 'visionary' they may be?"

The Aldens can be pretty visionary themselves, David especially so in Handel. "I can never get over how witty, sarcastic, and intense he can be in the same piece," he says. His *Radamisto* started life two years ago in Santa Fe. "It's evolved," he says, "but it's lavish visually, colourful and weirdly pseudo-Oriental. Handel being Handel,

there's irony and submerged humour, with passion, violence and eroticism floating around."

Christopher's favourite repertoire involves operas from the baroque and the 20th century: "Operas by Berg, Britten, and Janacek are to me like a return to the idea of opera in Monteverdi's time: the music serves the text. The 19th-century aesthetic is heavier, more heart-on-sleeve, and the post-modern irony that I tend to bring in is maybe not so appropriate. The 18th-century sensibility, more detached, ironic, and intelligent, is perhaps closer to our outlook today."

Regarding the future of opera, the twins are unworried. Christopher says: "Opera is primal. It's the closest thing we have to ancient Greek theatre, reaching down into the deep psychological places, talking about societal issues through music and the voice. It's hard to imagine it won't always be there."

'Radamisto' is at the Coliseum, London WC2, to November 4 (0871 911 0200)