

## ALAIN AMMAR'S ESCAPES From Verona to Venice

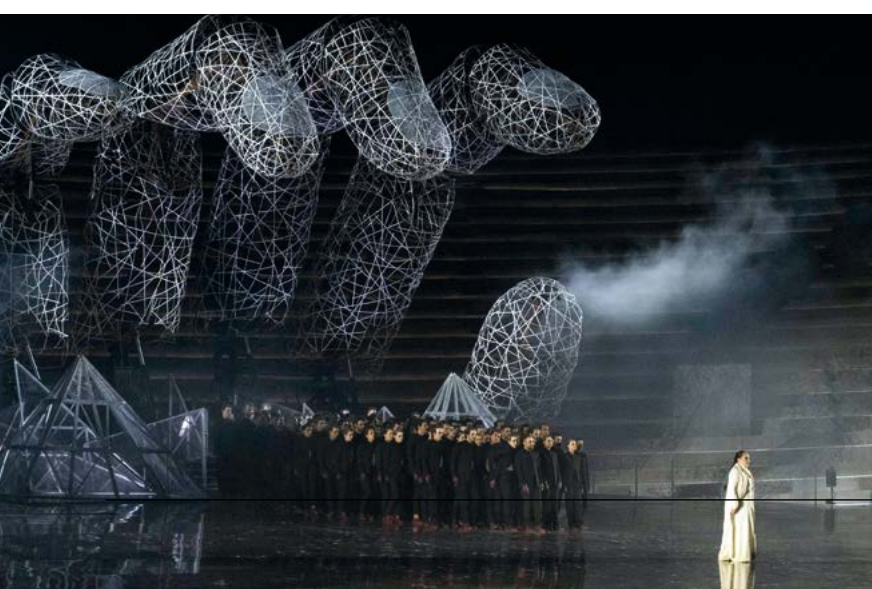
Photos Isaline Sibille

**Opposite:** Up to 12,000 people pack the Arena in Verona every evening for this annual festival.  
**Right page:** the operas "The Barber of Seville" and "Aida" are a triumph at every performance, especially when the sets and costumes, as every year, are extraordinarily creative.



The iridescent colours of this summer evening tint the stones of the Verona Arena a festive shade of parma pink, just a few hours away from Hugo de Ana's version of *The Barber of Seville*, which is set to sweep hearts away, as it has done at every performance since the beginning of this festival, which blew out the candles on its centenary last year. It's the only festival of its kind in the world, where the world's greatest tenors and singers come together every year to perform *Carmen*, the Barber, *Tosca* and *Aida*, as well as the entire classical opera repertoire, in sumptuous settings and costumes worthy of the seventh art. A few hours before they go on stage, the tension is palpable in the entresol of the arena: singers are warming up their voices, actors are putting on make-up, and outfits from their sheaths are waiting to shine in the sunlight. I here a Turandot mask, there a halberd, a sword, a toreador's costume, a deep-black velvet cape... All the works of Verdi, Puccini, Rossini... ready to leave their vaults to be brought to life. L The fantasies of a Zefirelli and the gaze of a Stefano Poda are there too, mingled and piled up, waiting to be reinvented and often sublimated. V This is the magic of this major event in world opera . An extraordinary programme, confirms Deputy Director Stefano Trespidi, whom we meet in his office and who, after the record-breaking 100th edition of the Festival, is once again setting the bar very high for the Fondazione Arena's cultural offering. A ith traditional offerings such as the revival of *Aida* in the historic staging by Gianfanco de Bosio, the first opera to be performed by the Festival, one hundred and eleven years ago to the day, or the presentation of *Tosca* with the greatest stars of the operatic world, as well as contemporary and avant-garde

projects such as the immersive *Viva Vivaldi* concert or the modern production of *Aida* created last year and performed again this summer, the programme for the 2024 season will satisfy all types of audience. 5 evenings, over 150 musicians, 500 artists, the greatest voices and 12,000 spectators at each performance. D A project in the making, the festival renews itself each season with a declared ambition, in particular the hope of one day convincing a major film director to conduct an opera in the Arena of Verona: Steven Spielberg is hoped for and other big names have been contacted. C he history of the Fondazione Arena di Verona is punctuated by prestigious shows and performances that are part of the history of twentieth-century musical theatre, featuring the names of the most famous opera performers. L hen, on the evening of 2 August 1947, a 23-year-old Greek singer appeared on the Arena stage in the role of *Gioconda* in Ponchielli's opera of the same name, no one would have thought that she was one of the greatest vocal interpreters of all time, the rising star Maria Callas. L From then on, the Verona Arena Opera Festival became a regular rendezvous for her. E le sang in productions of *Turandot* in 1948, *La Gioconda* and *La Traviata* in 1952, *Aida* and *Il trovatore* in 1953 and *Mefistofele* in 1954. C n addition to Callas, dozens of other singers, dancers, conductors, directors and set designers have had their names linked to the Arena Festival seasons: from the most famous to the most famous, from the most famous to the most famous, from the most famous to the most famous, from the most famous to the most famous, from the most famous to the most beautiful. s singers such as Renata Tebaldi, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Montserrat Caballé, Plácido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti, choreographers and directors such as Maurice Béjart,





**On the left:** a full-length statue of Dante in the centre of Verona, where he was lodged by the Scaligeri, the masters of the city.  
**On the right:** a view of the Arena, with medieval-style buildings underneath, and the Risorgimento bridge over the Adige.

Georg Pabst, Jean Vilar, Franco Zeffirelli, Werner Herzog and Pier Luigi Pizzi, composer Sylvano Bussotti, and conductors Lorin Maazel and Georges Prêtre.” It’s an impressive list, and to be part of it is a privilege in itself, ‘ says Clémentine Margaine, Carmen’s interpreter and that evening’s Amnérís in Aïda. I’m always happy to come back and join in the infectious enthusiasm of the singers and musicians for whom this festival remains a must-see event, perhaps even more so than the Bayreuth Festival founded by Wagner in 1873. I love the spirit, the creativity and even the madness of the Arena Festival in Verona, because there’s no place for amateurism here. As the lights go down, the spectators have returned to the stands, staring curiously at the immense, stylised fingers that dominate the stage. A grandiose, breathtaking contemporary setting for this Verdi opera conducted by Stefano Poda, which begins to vibrate before our very eyes. The music rises into a sky criss-crossed with incandescent lines, the tenors’ voices soar, and for almost three hours Aida will enthrall an audience transfixed by so much daring and talent. As the applause explodes, the bravos fly, once again this Verona Festival has kept its promise, and so it will be until the final performances. As the sun rises, Verona rediscovers the radiance of its medieval beauty. Around the arena, the cobbled streets wind their way to the Adige and its patrician houses. In the beating heart of this small city, where

every stone has been respected and every age has left its mark, from the marvellous Piazza dell’Erbe to Corso Sant’Anastasia, it is Juliet’s supposed home that still attracts the crowds, whose eyes and mobile phones are raised to the marble balcony where Romeo is said to have seduced his fair lady. A little further on, the Piazza dell’Erbe is the site of the most famous of the city’s monuments. A little further on, the Piazza dei Signori enchants us with the harmony of its palaces and its statue of Dante, who is said to have found refuge in Verona during the reign of the Scaligeri. It’s time to catch the train back to Venice. As we pass the Arena one last time, the shadow of Carmen’s sets indicates that in the coming evenings Bizet’s opera will once again shake the stones of the amphitheatre.

What can be said about Venice that hasn’t already been said or written? And yet its magic works every time. A Riveted at Santa Lucia station under a blazing sun, the Serenissima jumps out at us. The reflection of each palazzo in the lagoon, the wooden halberds streaked in red or black in front of the undulating Dorsoduro, the gondolas skimming past Rivas and vaporette, an unchanging scenery anchored in our memories that makes us relive Gustav Malher’s last hours or Alfred de Musset’s poem ‘... e the ancient palaces, and the serious porticoes, and the white staircases of the knights, and the bridges and the streets and the dreary statues and the moving gulf that trembles in the wind...’

Everyone has a memory or a secret about Venice, and those who discover it for the first time dream of returning even before they have known it. It’s not so much the Doge’s Palace or the Bridge of Sighs, the Rialto and its winged lion, that leave an impression on our minds, but rather this atmosphere beyond reality, the lake city’s poisonous softness, its insistent beauty and its resilience to time. It will still be there when we are no more, and even the waves and floods can do nothing against it. Venice is immortal, unsinkable like the arts it venerates and pays homage to. And so it is that people flock to it, like ants impatient to see everything, without seeing anything, because Venice only reveals itself to those who know how to court it without forcing it, to cherish



**ARISTIDE NAJEAN,  
A GLASS ARTIST IN MURANO**

The man is all curves and kindness. He has lived on this small island ten minutes from the City of the Doges for over thirty years, and is revolutionising the art of Venetian glass through his work, his designs, his inventiveness and his imagination. Working with a small team in a workshop in the middle of an untidy garden, Aristide has won the interest of some of the world’s greatest names, and the admiration of Philippe Starck, Alain Ducasse and other leading names in the world of

decoration and gastronomy. His sculptures are both mineral and powerful, his chandeliers exuberantly poetic and naturalistic, with their birds foraging on flowers and frozen waterfalls. A cien toréador, he excels in busts of toros and minotaurs, and never hesitates to push his art to the point of delirium - but always preserving aestheticism and beauty.” When you are sensitive to beauty,’ he explains you respect the world

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it in silence in the shadow of its museums and churches, which are its flags. Casanova still runs through its streets, but who knows? Vivaldi composed a fifth season on his harpsichord, but who can hear him? C The parish priests who opened their bays to deaf amateurs? Venice is the song of a world in apnoea that has not given up on adding new notes to its repertoire, which is why gallery owners, artists and patrons still flock there, why art dealers flourish as much as or even more than in New York or Paris. C It is also for this reason that the artist Jacques Martinez has installed some of his works at the Campo Santo Stefano in Venice, one of four exhibitions, along with the one in Milan, which links him to the place where he grew up in Algeria, Nice, which he has never really left, and Lugano, where the artist has lived since the death of his wife Marie Seznec and which, he says, gives him peace and protection. U his is an eclectic exhibition: free to create as he pleases, Martinez uses wood, plays with geometric figures in mirrors, makes furniture from building site pallets, a table, a sofa and consoles, mixing genres and figures, abstract painting and dreams in the making in the temporary studio of an 80-year-old artist who still wants to paint, draw and sculpt. Nothing could be further from the magniloquence and officialdom of the big Biennale exhibitions, ' he says, ' my home in Venice. L s four cardinal points of his art: landscape, the human figure, still life and abstraction'. With everything I want to do today and everything I'll want to do tomorrow. The days when Jacques Martinez had an affection for the work of Arman or Caesar are long gone. I He gives his style and his desires total freedom, making him an artist in a class of his own. Venice is one of those places where you don't choose your habits,' he warns. "You have to meet it by chance, leave it without knowing, without measuring time or looking at the lagoon, and just go..." Venice that Marie loved so much.

On the other side of the Accademia's wooden bridge, in the Dorsoduro, which looks deep into the future of art, Sophie



Negropones has just set up in the Palazzino Masieri, a sumptuous seventeenth-century building redesigned by designer Carlo Scarpa in 1970, a second gallery after the one in Paris on the main curve of the Grand Canal ". When I talked about opening a second gallery, everyone thought it would be in New York, but when I said it would be in Venice, they didn't believe me,' she confides. V Venice was a dream for me, a combination of the past and artistic innovation. C I'm a realist, but I'm also an idealist, and for me Venice is an ideal, and I have Italian, Greek and Romanian roots. D On the other hand, this city doesn't have the frenzy of the big American or European metropolises, and art lovers and collectors are more in tune with what's going on. D n the mineral sobriety of this new space, entirely redesigned and renovated as an art centre by Roberta Bartolomeo and Giulio Manganano, the gallery owner has moved towards the contemporary, imagining her first exhibition with visual artists, decorators and sculptors, as well as photographers, like her father, whose eye and creativity she has retained in order to widen the field of possibilities. Q She has been following eleven artists for several years, including Perrin et Perrin, who are presenting several works in glass, metal and wood. M The exhibition also features Romanian artist Mircea Cantor, in a nod to Brancusi, whom she admires, and whose photo opens the exhibition alongside a black marble piece by Mauro Mori. D s works that dialogue and respond to each other according to the taste of Sophie Negroponte, who points out that the aim is not simply to sell works, but also to pass on knowledge, a culture, and a view of the influence of art on humanity. □



**On the right:** a view of Venice from the Accademia bridge, with festival masks above the Giudecca campanile.

**On the left and above:** "objets d'art" on display at the new Negropones gallery in the Palazzo Masieri.

**On the left:** Jacques Martinez's creations for his Domani exhibition at Venice Art Factory.



**BETWEEN US**

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**Domani**

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