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For City Opera Costumes, Lofty New Roles

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

E. V. Day's sculptures made from vintage costumes from the New York City Opera's warehouse, now suspended in the promenade of the David H. Koch Theater.

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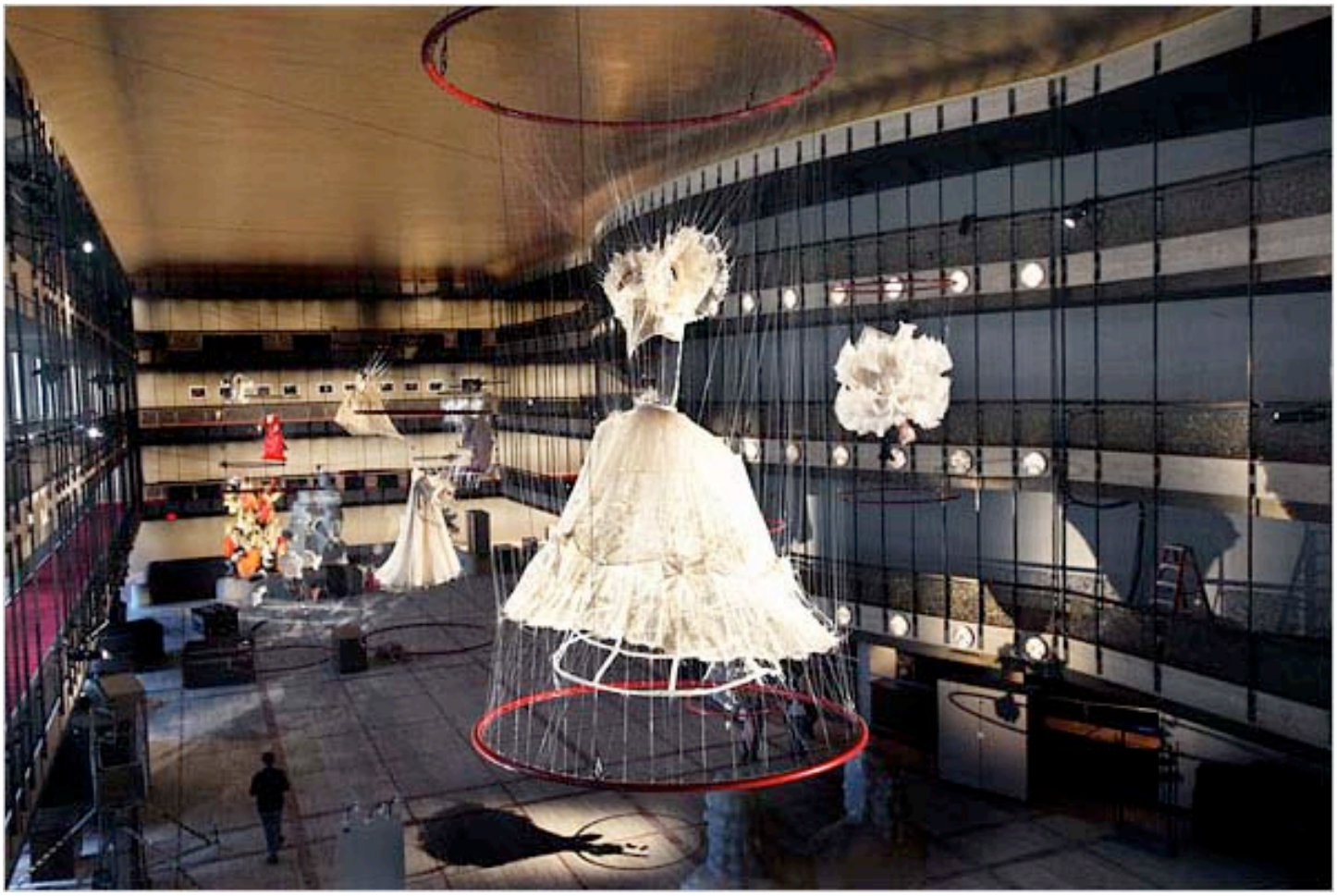
NORTH BERGEN, N.J. — In deepest urban New Jersey, just off the hellish Routes 1 and 9, past the Lincoln Tunnel Motel and the Hoboken cemetery, sits an unlikely place that might be thought of as opera heaven. Or maybe opera purgatory, a cavernous building where hundreds of pieces of faux-ormolu-encrusted furniture, brass goblets, rubber plants and costumes — rack after elegant rack — end up when not in use in productions by New York City Opera, or past their prime, the wait is in vain, their requiems sung. And that is where E. V. Day comes in.

Over the last several months, while the opera has been preparing to begin its new season after extensive renovations to its home at Lincoln Center, the David H. Koch Theater, Ms. Day has been given free rein to rummage through its considerable closets. An artist best known for transforming clothing into sculpture material — deconstructed dresses arrested in the act of exploding, frighteningly dissected wetsuits, G-strings arrayed in fighter-jet formations — Ms. Day, 42, has described her work as "futurist abstract paintings in three dimensions," and as a means of examining social constructs, particularly the roles that clothes can impose on women.



But when George Steel, the opera's new general manager and artistic director, told Ms. Day that he was interested in commissioning her to create a temporary installation for the theater's grand promenade space, she was quickly plunged into a world of grand fiction and high tradition in which clothes don't just impose roles but also practically define them.

"I would be going through all these beautiful dresses that looked very similar initially, and I'd say to the costume people, 'Who might wear this one?' " Ms. Day recalled recently inside the opera's costume repository, where she has been working on the project since late August. "And without missing a beat they'd say, 'Oh that's

Violetta from ‘La Traviata.’ ”

The clothing that Ms. Day has transformed in her work for the opera — 13 pieces in all, which will go on view to the public on Nov. 6 and remain in place through the fall and spring seasons, suspended among the promenade’s catwalks — is a veritable opera traditionalist’s cast of characters. There is Don Giovanni, represented by his black gloves, one flying up a cloud of a crinoline skirt like a hawk attacking a flock of doves. There is Mimi from “La Bohème,” represented by a stark-red velvet dress that is, like all of Ms. Day’s work, suspended using dozens of pieces of fishing line attached to the cloth with fishing-tackle connectors called swivel snaps; in this case the dress looks as if an elegant form of rigor mortis had set in after tuberculosis claimed its owner. There is the lacy, ethereal shell of Manon’s dress, a copy of one worn by Beverly Sills during a performance as the character in Massenet’s opera. And Cio-Cio-San’s kimono from “Madama Butterfly” is shown ascending in a kind of triumphant flight from her tragic fate.

No one was more surprised by the classical nature of the choices than Ms. Day. “I came into this knowing very little about opera,” she said. “And when I started, they gave me carte blanche. I could pick whatever I wanted. I was just looking for some kind of organizing principle.”

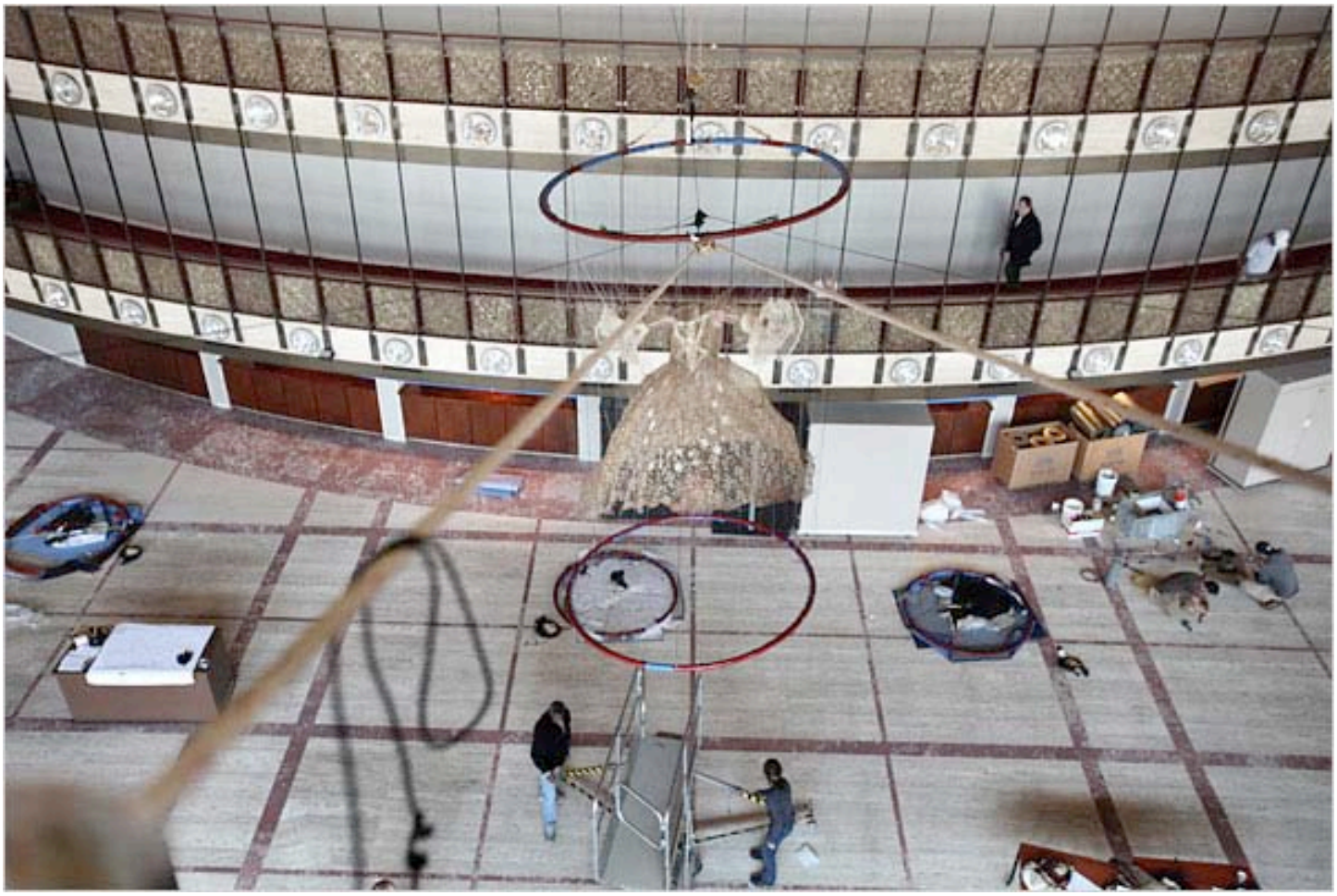
She considered hundreds of costumes that the opera's wardrobe department showed her. But as she began to listen to more opera ("We immediately equipped her with a huge mountain of CDs," Mr. Steel said) and to read more about it, she found herself drawn to the more timeless stories. "I started to get very involved," she said. "I got so revved up by these characters."

Mr. Steel, under whose leadership the opera has also mounted a show of the work of contemporary photographers like Ryan McGinley and Elinor Carucci in the promenade, said he had always felt strongly that opera should forge stronger connections with the contemporary art world. "This is not just an add-on," he said. "We're interested in a very central connection to the art that's being made today."

On a recent visit to the costume repository, Ms. Day took a reporter on a tour of what seemed like miles of racks, organized with labels like "choir, monk, robes, liturgical" and "matador" and "shepherdess" and "peasant, colorful" and "peasant, distressed." ("Distressed peasant" became a comic catchphrase for Ms. Day and everyone working with her over the last two months in New Jersey. "You'd ask somebody how they felt," she said. "And if it was a bad day, they'd say, 'Distressed peasant.' ")

As they worked, eventually using 22 miles of fishing line to create the sculptures, she and her helpers would often listen to opera — Maria Callas's "Habanera" from "Carmen," for example — but also to other operatically powerful women like Wendy O. Williams and Diamanda Galás.

For a sculptor whose raw material is clothing, Ms. Day said there were days, even in the dark and sometimes frigid costume building, when she felt as if she were in heaven. "This is couture," she said, pointing out the intricate, tiny beadwork on a dress, details that would probably be lost even to operagoers in the first row. "There are no glue guns with these clothes, no Bedazzlers. These are all hand-stitched. It's an art form." Partly because of this, many of the costumes have remained more or less intact, unlike, say, the exploded replica of Marilyn Monroe's famous white halter dress in "Bombshell," Ms. Day's piece in the 2000 Whitney Biennial.



In an essay she wrote to accompany this exhibition, she says that "what helped me in imagining new forms for these costumes was all the evidence of life that I found inside them: multiple alterations, perspiration stains, dirt from dragging frilly petticoats across the stage so many miles, makeup smudged around the collars and layers of tags sewn inside showing their provenance: the characters, the productions, the stages they'd played."

“I wanted to reanimate those lives,” she added, “and give them a future form in the promenade.”

Besides the pieces based on costumes of particular characters, she also created one that showcased only hats, another for women’s outlandish undergarments like hoops and panniers and another for men’s accouterments like tricorn hats, codpieces and dickeys. “The guys are such peacocks in so many of the productions,” Ms. Day said.

Walking around the Koch Theater’s promenade last week as riggers hoisted her creations into the air, she passed beneath the Don Giovanni sculpture, and a visitor remarked on the crotchless pink bloomers visible under the crinoline skirt.

“I asked about bloomers, and the costume people said that if they were worn, they’d be like that, so that the wearer of all this complicated clothing could sit on the chamber pot without getting completely undressed,” she said, smiling. “I just wanted to be as authentic as possible.”

“For my next pieces,” she added, “I’d really like to do something just about all the underwear. It’s so amazing.”