

## Sex-Laced Mozart Raises Scandal at Berlin Opera



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By James Mackenzie

BERLIN (Reuters) - An opera featuring rape, torture and masturbation, a nude bass singing an aria in the shower and a cross-dressing hero who rounds off the night by slaughtering a troupe of semi-naked prostitutes has caused a scandal in Berlin.

Mozart's "Die Entfuehrung aus dem Serail" (The Abduction from the Seraglio), one of the 18th century Austrian composer's most popular operas, is usually played as a sparkling comedy of relationships set in the grounds of a mythical Turkish palace.

The new production in Berlin's Komische Oper moves the action to a modern-day brothel where a brutal pimp keeps the women in his power through systematic rape and torture.

The opera's Catalan director, Calixto Bieito, who has seen previous productions greeted with leaflets proclaiming "Death to Bieito!" wanted to use the opera to cast a light on the plight of women exploited in the sex trade.

But the production has sparked outraged articles in the press and an initial threat from DaimlerChrysler, one of the main sponsors, to withdraw funding. Performances have been interrupted at various points by shouts from the floor as patrons have walked out in disgust.

"How filthy can theater be?" asked Germany's top selling daily newspaper Bild.

In between bouts of simulated sex with the prostitutes who lounge about the set, one of the characters urinates on stage and slashes a helpless woman as another looks on in terror.

The heroine Konstanza cowers in a cage as the villainous Selim Pasha sticks his hand down her pants and makes a series of repulsive threats in spoken asides inserted into the text.



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Meanwhile her beloved Belmonte arms himself with a handgun and, helped by his tattooed manservant, slides into high boots and a tight dress to infiltrate the brothel.

On opening night, a voice from the audience answered the explosion of gunfire as Belmonte slays first the prostitutes and then their keepers with the cry "Now for the director!"

But supporters point out that behind Mozart's dazzling score, the text of the opera is a very dark one laced with threats of beheading and impalement and the production makes a powerful point about violence, oppression and sex.

Performances have been well attended since the run opened last week and warmly applauded by those who did not walk out, with several people bringing along opera glasses to follow the action more closely.

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