Salome’s Stage History

*Salome* has truly withstood the test of time in terms of its ability to captivate and shock. A look at the opera’s stage history offers insights into how *Salome* established itself as an operatic *tour de force*.

The Beginnings: Dresden (1905) and Graz (1906)

Strauss’s choice for the starring role in the opera’s premiere, 37-year old Marie Wittich, protested both the ‘unsingable’ quality of the music and the opera’s inappropriate psychosexual subtext. She refused to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils or kiss the severed head of Jokanaan. ‘I won’t do it’, she objected. ‘I’m a decent woman’. ¹ Other such clashes between Strauss and his original cast caused delays, and the composer threatened to hold the premiere elsewhere.

When the premiere finally went ahead at the Semper Opernhaus in Dresden on 9ᵗʰ December 1905, it received 38 curtain calls. In the weeks that followed, the opera had been accepted at ten theatres, and within two years, it had been given in fifty other opera houses. So began the journey of Strauss’s *succès de scandale*, which, as the composer himself famously remarked enabled him to finance his villa in Garmisch.

By all accounts, Gustav Mahler was amongst several Viennese composers who were captivated by *Salome*, yet, at the same time, bewildered by its great success. He tried to mount the opera in Vienna, but came up against strict censorship, and *Salome* was not performed at the Vienna State Opera until 1918.

Meanwhile, the opera received its Austrian premiere in Graz on 16th May 1906. The heretofore struggling opera house increased its admission fees substantially after the performance was secured, and now attracted swathes of the artistic elite. Crowds gathered in front of the theatre to see the arrival of the audience, which included Giacomo Puccini, Gustav and Alma Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Alexander Zemlinsky, Alban Berg, and even a young Adolf Hitler.

**Censorship and Sensation: New York (1907) and London (1910)**

The following year, *Salome* received its American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House. The Wagnerian Soprano Olive Fremstad played the starring role, substituted by Bianca Froelich for the dance scene. Puccini returned to hear the ‘terribly cacophonous thing’ again.
Two days after the sold-out performance, the New York Times published a letter in which the work was described as ‘a detailed and explicit exposition of the most horrible, disgusting, revolting, and unmentionable features of degeneracy’. The author bemoaned ‘having conspicuously sat through the most revolting spectacle of my life that has ever been presented to my hearing and my sight’.

Salome also proved too much for the Met’s financiers, who closed the show (which included cancelling three sold-out upcoming performances) after its opening night on the grounds of indecency and shocked sensibilities. Salome did not return to the venue’s repertoire until 1934.

Censorship also plagued attempts to stage the work in London. After several failed applications to have the British Salome censor removed by the Lord Chamberlin’s office, Thomas Beecham was able to secure a performance at Covent Garden in 1910, on the

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3 Ibid.
condition that certain alterations were made to the libretto. The censor was lifted just one week before the opening, and tickets sold out almost immediately. This was owed in part to the amount of publicity Beecham’s dealings with the Lord Chamberlains Office (which he referred to as a ‘joyous piece of nonsense’) had received.4

The action of the opera was to be moved from Judea to Greece, with the Five Jews replaced by ‘Five Learned Men’. Jokanaan was now to be known as ‘the Prophet’ and all Biblical allusions were to be set aside. Salome’s sexual motivations were to be replaced by a desire for ‘spiritual guidance’, and there was to be no head on a silver platter – a bloodstained sword was thought to suffice.

These censored elements fell by the wayside in certain parts of the production, as Beecham wryly recollected in his autobiography:

Gradually I sensed [...] a growing restlessness and excitement of which the first manifestation was a slip on the part of Salome, who forgot two or three sentences of the bowdlerised version and lapsed into the viciousness of the lawful text. The infection spread among the other performers, and by the time the second half of the work was well under way they were all giving in and shamelessly restoring it to its integrity, as if no such things existed as British respectability and its legal custodians.5

The production was a great success, and critics noted with enthusiasm that, contrary to the now-established practice elsewhere on European opera stages, the Finnish soprano Aino Ackté performed the Dance of the Seven Veils herself. Strauss lauded her the ‘one and only Salome’.


Given the composer’s praise for Ackté, he would surely have been impressed by some of our contemporary Salome’s. In 1970, the American Mezzo Grace Bumbry caused a sensation at the Royal Opera House with her performance as the biblical princess. She recalled stripping during the Dance of the Seven Veils for Ebony magazine in 1973:

Let me tell you, that first night was an absolute sensation. And the dance, in which I wore a flesh-colored bikini covered with jewels, had more people looking through opera glasses than ever before. Covent gardens had never rented so many opera glasses.6

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5 Ibid., 169-70.
The Royal Opera House’s most recent staging of the opera was a revival of David McVicar’s provocative production. This was its third outing, this time with the Swedish soprano Malin Byström in the title role. The dance was somewhat more restrained, yet its Freudian undercurrents were undeniable: as Salome leads Herod through a series of rooms, he dresses her up like a doll, and the implication of sexual abuse looms large. Notwithstanding this scene, McVicar’s interpretation is noted for its nudity and bloodiness, which updates the sensation and scandal of Strauss’s original for a modern audience.
Opera North carries on the tradition of memorable *Salome* productions with one of the company’s acclaimed concert stagings. Recentered around Strauss’s uncompromising score, and with exemplary singing and acting from the cast, it sits deservedly alongside some of the most remarkable *Salome* productions since the opera’s premiere.

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