

OPERA COPRODUCTION

# PARSIFAL

SUSANNE KENNEDY &  
MARKUS SELG  
YI-CHEN LIN

*by Richard Wagner*



**FREE**  
**REPUBLIC OF**  
**VIENNA**  
**FESTIVAL**

15 – 22 June  
Halle E  
MuseumsQuartier

Richard Wagner's final composition leads us straight into the centre of the fellowship around the Holy Grail – a community in deep crisis. The Knights of the Grail are awaiting the 'fool enlightened by compassion' who is supposed to redeem them – and find him in young Parsifal. With a cast of over a hundred persons, Wagner's composition was intended as a 'festival play for the consecration of the stage' – he himself wanted it considered a sacred act. The German director Susanne Kennedy and the artist Markus Selg transport this intention into the present day and lead the audience into a world of both archaic and futuristic aesthetics, of religious symbols and AI-generated images. Inspired by Christian motifs, Buddhist teachings and Hindu thought, they create a ritual that seeks out spiritual planes beyond the veils of the digital and material world.

**Language**  
German

**Surtitles**  
German, English

**Duration**  
5 hrs 20 mins,  
incl. 2 intermissions

  
barrier-free access

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**Introduction**  
15 June, 5.15 pm  
19 June, 5.15 pm

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‘Susanne Kennedy  
and Markus Selg (...)  
take Richard Wagner’s  
“Parsifal” at its word as  
a ritual – in the service  
of a critique of religion.’

FAZ

Musical Direction——— Yi-Chen Lin  
Concept——— Susanne Kennedy & Markus Selg  
Direction——— Susanne Kennedy  
Set Design, Video——— Markus Selg  
Costume Design——— Andra Dumitrascu  
Lighting Design——— Sascha Zauner  
Choreography——— Dominic Santia  
Video Design Collaboration,  
Creative Technology——— Warja Rybakova  
Dramaturgy——— Tobias Staab  
Music Dramaturgy——— Piet De Volder

Parsifal——— Russell Thomas  
Kundry——— Dshamilja Kaiser  
Gurnemanz——— Albert Dohmen  
Amfortas——— Kartal Karagedik  
Klingsor——— Werner Van Mechelen  
Titirel——— Kurt Rydl

First Knight of the Grail——— Devin Eatmon  
Second Knight of the Grail——— Smelo Mahlangu\*  
First Squire / Fourth Flowermaiden——— Chelsea Guo\*  
Second Squire / Fifth Flowermaiden——— Camila Aguilera Yañez\*\*  
Third Squire——— Martin Piskorski  
Fourth Squire——— Timothy Veryser  
First Flowermaiden——— Maria Chabounia  
Second Flowermaiden——— Ondelwa Martins  
Third Flowermaiden——— Mira Alkhovik\*  
Sixth Flowermaiden——— Jessica Stakenburg  
Voice from Above——— Dshamilja Kaiser  
Performers——— Dominic Santia  
Ixchel Mendoza Hernández  
Melyn Chow  
Nazar Rakhmanov  
Martina De Dominicis  
Anna Maria Sturm

ORCHESTRA & STAGE MUSIC——— ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien  
CHOIR——— Arnold Schoenberg Chor  
Choirmaster: Erwin Ortner  
Chorus Preparation: Juan Sebastian Acosta  
Vocal Coaching: Viktor Mitrevski

CHILDREN'S CHOIR——— Gumpoldskirchner Spatzen  
Choir Direction: Katja Kalmar &  
Andelko Igree

**Revival Stage Manager** Clara Jansen **Musical Assistance & Répétiteur** Hartmut Keil **Assistance Lighting Design** Bjorn Hofman **Hair Design** Sara Mathiasson **Assistant Direction** Nikiforos Papadoudis **Technical Direction** OBV Bart Smekens **Head of Technical Department** OBV Maarten van Trigt **Stage Technology** OBV Tom Van Cauwenberge, Ken Janssens **Video Technology** OBV Stefan van den Eede **Lighting Technology** OBV Ruben Vueskens **Props** OBV Johan Brutsaert **Stage Management** OBV Hans Wils **Costume Supervision** OBV Silke De Greve **Make-up** OBV Carolien Wardenier **Translation** **Surtitles** Simen Van Mechelen **Surtitles** Suzy Löscher

**Production** Opera Ballet Vlaanderen **Coproduction** Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna **In cooperation with the** \*Opera Studio of the Volksoper Wien **Supported by the** Tax Shelter Programme of the Belgian government

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*Richard Wagner: Parsifal*

*Bühnenweihfestspiel in drei Akten*

*Edited according to the text of the Richard Wagner Complete Edition by Egon Voss und Martin Geck*

executed by the team of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

**World Premiere** September 2025, Opera Ballet Vlaanderen (Gent)



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# SYNOPSIS

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## ACT ONE

In a forest near the Grail Castle, the knight Gurnemanz prepares the bath for the ailing King Amfortas, who suffers from an unhealing wound. Kundry, a mysterious and witch-like woman who serves the knights, arrives with a balsam for the king. Gurnemanz reveals that Amfortas can only be healed by the Holy Spear that wounded him. He recounts a prophecy: only a 'pure fool, made wise through compassion' ('durch Mitleid wissend') can retrieve the spear.

Suddenly, a young boy, Parsifal, is caught after shooting a holy swan. He is naive, knowing nothing of his identity or his past. Kundry tells him of his parents' death, and Gurnemanz, hoping he is the prophesied fool, takes him to the Grail Castle. There, Parsifal witnesses the Grail ceremony, which intensifies Amfortas's pain, but nourishes the Grail knights and keeps his father Titurel

alive. Parsifal, however, remains uncomprehending. Disappointed, Gurnemanz casts him out, but a voice repeats the prophecy: 'The pure fool, made wise through compassion.'

## ACT TWO

Act Two is set in the magical castle and garden of Klingsor, a sorcerer who was rejected by the Grail Knights. He seeks revenge and uses Kundry, who is under his spell, as a tool to seduce the knights. In a former life, Kundry was a woman who mocked the suffering Christ. Since then she is cursed to wander through repeated reincarnations until she finds redemption. She was the one who, in a seductive form, led Amfortas to be wounded by Klingsor.

Klingsor now forces Kundry to tempt Parsifal. After Parsifal resists the enchanting Flowermaidens, Kundry calls him by name and tries to seduce him with a kiss.

In that moment, Parsifal experiences a sudden, profound understanding of Amfortas's pain and his own mission. He pushes Kundry away and offers her salvation. Klingsor appears and throws the Holy Spear at Parsifal, but it stops in mid-air. Parsifal catches it, makes the sign of the cross, and Klingsor's kingdom is instantly destroyed. As he leaves, Parsifal tells Kundry she knows where she can find him.

### ACT THREE

Years later, a long-wandering Parsifal returns to the forest. He finds Gurnemanz and a now submissive Kundry, who has been quietly serving. Gurnemanz recognizes Parsifal and the Holy Spear. He tells Parsifal that the Grail Knights are in decay; Amfortas, refusing to reveal the Grail, has caused the death of his father, Titurel.

Filled with guilt, Parsifal is anointed as the new Grail King by Gurnemanz and, in his first act, baptizes Kundry. They journey to the Grail Castle, where the knights are gathered. As Amfortas cries out for death, Parsifal enters and touches his wound with the spear, instantly healing him. Parsifal reveals the Grail, and a dove descends. As everyone celebrates, Kundry, finally redeemed, sinks to the ground, lifeless and at peace.

# Reflections

by Susanne Kennedy

## PARSIFAL'S QUESTS

A pilgrimage through the labyrinth as an initiation.  
A mediaeval acid trip.



## A NIGHTMARE

Parsifal is a nightmare in which entirely different worlds come together: existential philosophical questions, echoes of the bible and the orient, mystical depths next to dogmatic severity, traces of Catholic liturgy next to the age-old acts of heathen cults, invocation of the dead, sleepwalking and hypnotic conditions, the heritage of the ideals of mediaeval knighthood, religious rapture, self-flagellation, faithful fervour and longing for salvation, mysterious affinities between matter and the human soul – and, finally, love in its most raw and animalistic form next to love in its purest, most perfect transfiguration.

## FERTILITY RITUALS

The origins of mediaeval Grail verse can be traced back via Gnostic mystery religions to the fertility rituals and initiation ceremonies of ancient vegetation cults.

## 'THE WOUND! THE WOUND!'

The dying King represents an age-old principle. None but the unknowing innocent fool Parsifal can ask the redeeming question: Why are you suffering? 'The wound of Amfortas does not heal. Worse yet, the wound festers and produces pus that kills everything around it, turning the abundance and wealth of life into barren waste. The king's wound is the wound of his time and his country. Our wound also does not close, it does not heal. And its infection becomes chronic. Our hyperactive immune systems are on permanent alert in this, our new, old world.'

The wound is inevitable, though. It is also the premise of the opera. It is not the result of a regrettable accident, but part of our human condition. The opera takes off where the wound starts throbbing and calling to us. To follow its call is to follow the opera.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF SALVATION

Parsifal is the principle of salvation within ourselves. Something to heal the ailing king within us.

Amfortas is the most elevated and complete embodiment of the miserable creature that is the unredeemed human.

ENTER THE VOID



## COMPASSION

Parsifal's evolution from naive fool to Grail king, 'made wise by compassion', goes beyond showing one individual's journey into awareness. It is also the symbolic depiction of a collective development. Parsifal himself becomes a symbol and therefore an archetype of our time.

Compassion as the path to a radical expansion of awareness.  
COMPASSION AS THE PATH TO SALVATION

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# INVOKING THE GODS

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WITH *PARSIFAL* SUSANNE KENNEDY AND MARKUS SELG  
EMBARK ON A SPIRITUAL QUEST

What is real? Or, to ask a slightly smaller question: How can we recognize what is real? Since its beginnings, Western philosophy has been skeptical of the phenomena presented to our senses. Not only Plato, Kant, and Schopenhauer distrust the sensory excess that floods our perception and leaves us alone in a fragile coordinate system between the self, the world, and God. In Indian philosophy, particularly the Vedanta school of Hinduism, the illusory nature of the visible, material world is also asserted. Here, the veil of *Māyā* (Sanskrit for 'illusion, magic') covers the true, absolute reality (Brahman), which always bears a mystical and transcendent dimension. Today, we know for a fact – since at least the visual turn of AI technologies – that the images that flicker across our digital devices every day cannot be trusted. But how can we discern the true reality we suspect lies behind the mirages, simulations, and deepfakes? What secret awaits us if we climb out of the cave and take a look at the back of the matrix? And what physical or spiritual practices would be able to give us access to this reality?

## PERCEPTION PUT TO THE TEST

The artist couple Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg creates spaces in which one can lose oneself. Their artificial worlds exist somewhere between theatrical performance, collective ritual, and video installation, and in them, perception is constantly put to the test. This starts with the stage architecture, which is completely covered with projections, making it impossible to know for sure whether the spaces that open up are real or virtual.

It extends to the performers, who seem strangely detached and almost uncanny, moved by forces that don't come from within themselves. At first glance, this thoroughly artificial world presents itself as a future vision of a multi-sensory overkill, where the real disappears and only another phantasm hides behind every illusion.

Susanne Kennedy once described her aesthetic as an attempt at a total theater. By referring to Erwin Piscator's famous term, she not only alludes to the theater as a place where different art forms and

media come together – body and space, light and video, music, speech, and song, stage machinery and the auditorium. Kennedy also describes an approach that is meant to have a total effect: a theater that bundles all expressive means to achieve an immediate and overwhelming impact. A theater that connects with the bodies of the audience, absorbs them, and takes them along.

The aesthetic of Kennedy & Selg's work places their theater in a post-digital present where the lines between virtual and analog reality have become blurred. Even more so, it's a present that has given up on distinguishing between simulation and reality. The resulting aesthetic, in which multiple levels of reality always exist simultaneously, which overwhelms and irritates, and which connects so astonishingly effortlessly with our current lived reality, has had a lasting influence on European theater in recent years and inspired an entire generation of young theater makers.

It was only a matter of time before Kennedy & Selg would venture into the opera. They made their debut in 2022

with Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, an opera installation where visitors could choose whether to watch the events from the audience or to venture directly onto the stage to experience the opera among the singers and performers. A ritual-like movement vocabulary combined with Glass's repetitively pulsating composition created an immersive pull that produced an almost psychedelic effect.

## ARCHETYPAL IMAGES

With *Parsifal*, the artist duo now takes on its second opera project, Richard Wagner's final composition, which he appropriately labeled a 'Bühnenweihfestspiel'. This term is more than just a genre designation. It's an artistic and spiritual program that leaves traditional opera dramaturgy behind and elevates the stage event to the status of a sacred act. The combination of 'stage', 'consecration' and 'festival play' points to a holy, celebratory act that takes place within a specific framework and is intended to bring about an inner transformation in everyone present.

Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg take this framing very seriously. The medieval verse novels by Chretien de Troyes and, above all, Wolfram von Eschenbach, which lay out the Parsifal myth as an adventurous hero's journey, are already distilled to their essence by Richard Wagner. In the opera they become an inner journey for Parsifal. The stations and encounters manifest themselves in archetypal images that anticipate concepts of the unconscious as later described by Carl Gustav Jung, in particular. They appear more as stages in a hero's spiritual maturation process, who, over a lifetime, must forge a relationship with the world, with God, and not least, with himself.

## SPIRITUAL INSIGHT

In doing so, Wagner underscores his universal claim by presenting a remix of different religious and philosophical approaches. In Parsifal's world, the cycle of Samsara – the Hindu concept of death and rebirth – and the Christian promise of salvation seem to coexist effortlessly. Parsifal's character seems to be shaped equally by elements of both Jesus and Buddha. Wagner drew

inspiration from the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, one of the first Western thinkers to engage with Eastern philosophies. Schopenhauer connects the 'veil of Maya' described with the 'principium individuationis', which makes the world appear to us as separate individuals and objects in space and time, and in it, he identifies the primal cause of suffering. However, while Schopenhauer derives his notorious pessimism from this, Wagner, at the end of his life, searches for a perspective that affirms life and shows a way out of the existential dilemma. His Parsifal, by 'knowing through compassion', finds a way to overcome the fragmentation of being. World, God, and the self fall into one and become a divine unity. Instead of a moral catharsis, Richard Wagner introduces a spiritual insight.

'The first theater was the temple', Wagner states in his text *Kunst und Religion*, and it is this realization that connects with a search movement that has defined the core of Kennedy and Selg's work for several years. It is a search for the origins of theater, for rituals that connect with the religious roots of the art form, and for practices that are capable of creating

community. They find inspiration in religious liturgies, tribal initiation rituals, and also in the pre-Christian mystery plays of Greek and Egyptian antiquity, in which cultic and theatrical elements interpenetrate with each other.

‘To start from religion is to start from a social cultural system in which there is communication with the gods’, writes Jean-Luc Nancy in an essay on the event of theater. ‘As soon as this connection dissolves, all that remains is drama, which means “action”. Action is precisely what happens far from the cult. (...) The cultic gestures bring about effects from which one desires salvation.’

In *Parsifal*, too, the ‘salvation’, which aims at the spiritual perfection of humanity, cannot be achieved through the renewal of external circumstances in the world. It occurs through a change in an inner disposition that affects not only the character but includes everyone present. The total theater of Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg is much closer to such a direct invocation of the gods than to the idea of a psychological theater that

is committed to representation, and thus, to action. Their *Parsifal* is a search for the archaic and spiritual ground on which the myth could thrive. In their theater, the audience becomes part of a collective that embarks together on a ritual path. And when, at the end of the opera, Wagner’s music leaves behind everything that words could express – when the Grail motif rises through virtual veils and past AI-generated illusions into a vertical stream that resonates in the bodies of everyone present – it becomes clear that the true powers of theater are hidden there, in its religious roots.



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# BIOGRAPHIES

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**Yi-Chen Lin** comes from a family of musicians in Taipei and grew up in Vienna, where she initially trained as a violinist and pianist before turning to conducting. She received significant inspiration from Zubin Mehta and Bernard Haitink, among others. From 2020 to 2023, she was Kapellmeister at the Deutsche Oper Berlin. She has conducted renowned orchestras such as the Staatskapelle Dresden and the Orchestre National de France, and made her debut at venues including Lyric Opera Chicago and the Oslo Opera.

**Susanne Kennedy** is a German theatre and opera director. She studied theatre in Mainz, Paris and Amsterdam, and directing at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. In 2021, she founded *Ultraworld Productions* with Markus Selg. In her work, she blurs the boundaries between human and machine, draws on posthumanist theories, and often combines mythical motifs with themes such as identity, rebirth and transcendence.

The multidisciplinary artist **Markus Selg** studied at the Isotrop Academy in Hamburg and works as a multimedia artist, musician, filmmaker and publisher. In his work, he explores the connection between archaic myths and digital technology. His scenographic installations combine film, sculpture, performance and music to create immersive spaces. He has been working closely with Susanne Kennedy since 2016.

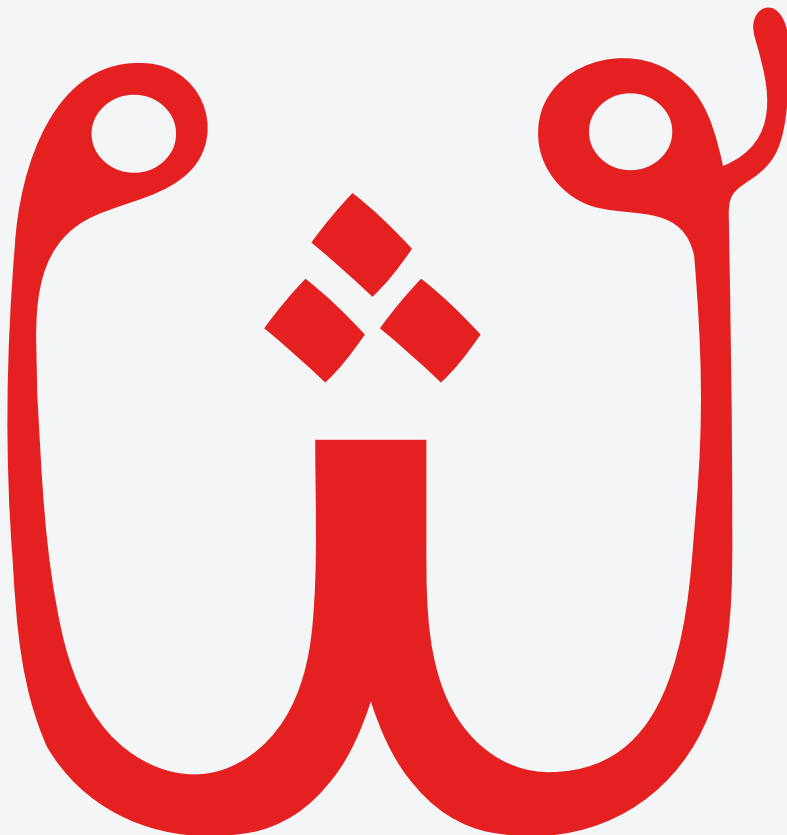
Following *Angela (a strange loop)* (2023), *Einstein on the Beach* (2022) and *The Virgin Suicides* (2018), Kennedy and Selg return to the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) for the fourth time.

## PUBLICATION DETAILS

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