

SEMMELWEIS

MUSIC BY RAYMOND J. LUSTIG
LIBRETTO BY MATTHEW DOHERTY

Edward Andrews

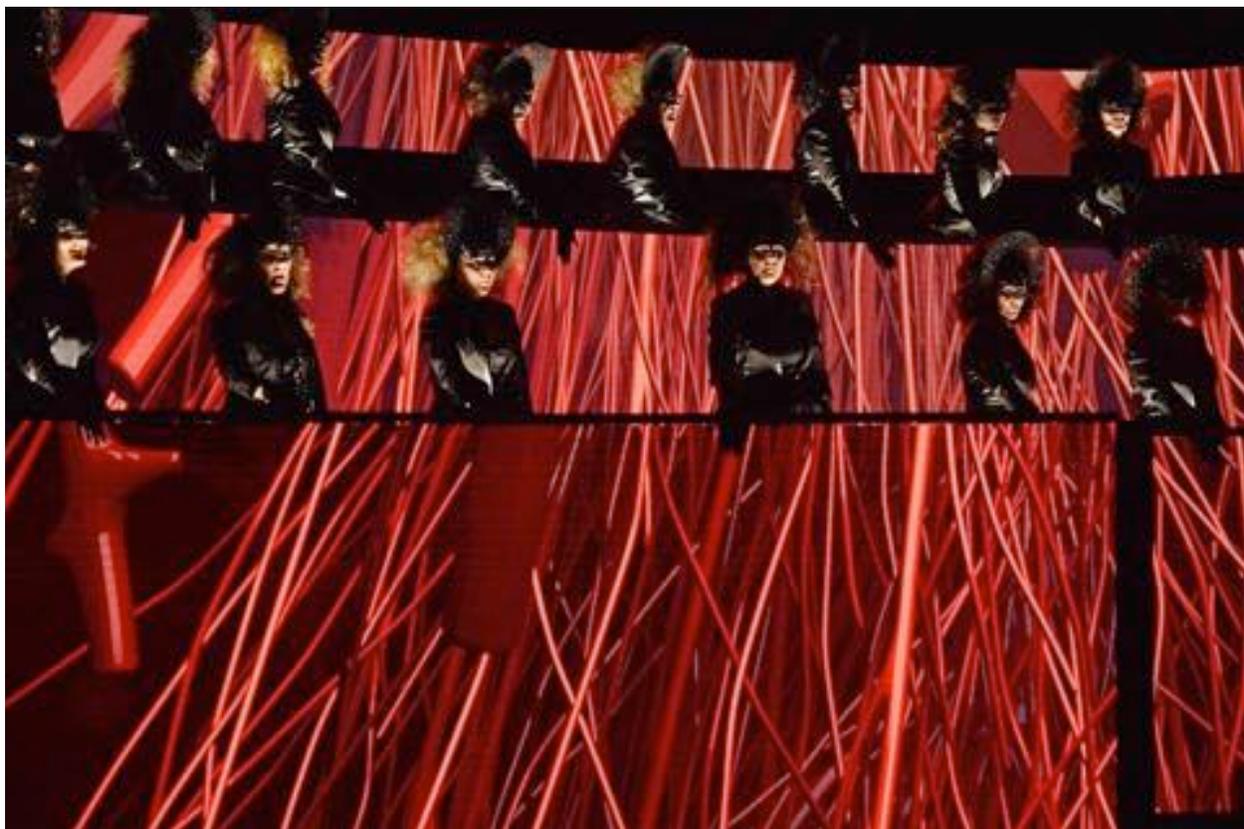
Phone: +1 646-764-8702

Email: <mailto:semmelweisopera@gmail.com>

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**New Opera SEMMELWEIS Budapest Premiere in Sold-Out
Seven-Performance Run at Budapest Operetta-Theater**

***A Co-Production of Budapest Operetta-Theater and Bartók Plusz Opera
Festival***





Budapest, HUNGARY, September 29, 2018

The much-anticipated premiere of Raymond J. Lustig and Matthew Doherty's new opera [SEMMEIWEIS](#), directed by Martin Boross, met with sold-out houses and broad critical acclaim (see collected press below). A co-production of [Budapest Operetta-Theater](#) and the [Bartók Plusz Opera Festival](#), it is hailed as "spectacular...a performance that provoked multiple catharses" and "a gripping and unique experience...one of the best theatrical productions of recent years" (Zsuzsanna Szekáry, "Soul-Anatomy with Catharsis, Magyar Idők).

Following the very well received June 9th world premiere performance at the Bartók Plusz Opera Festival in Miskolc, Hungary, the initial seven-performance run in September-October at Budapest Operetta quickly sold out, and new dates are being added to its 2018-19 season. More than a dozen touring performances are already scheduled, starting with [Ferenc Zenthe Theatre](#) in Salgótarján (3rd Nov), the [Chamber Opera Festival of Eger](#) (5th Nov), and two performances at the [Csokonai National Theater in Debrecen](#) (16-17 Jan).

The work was borne out of an international collaboration between American composer Raymond J. Lustig who is based in New York; American-Irish librettist Matthew Doherty, now based in Kiev, Ukraine; Hungary's Budapesti Operettszínház (Budapest Operetta-Theater); independent Hungarian director Martin Boross; and the Bartók Béla Chamber Chorus of Szolnok, Hungary.

[SEMMEIWEIS](#) imagines the inner psyche of one of medicine's most tragic heroes, obstetrician Ignaz Semmelweis (1818-1865), discoverer of the solution to one of history's most devastating epidemics of childbed fever: simple hand-washing by

doctors. It seems unimaginable to us now, but the idea was so revolutionary that Semmelweis' struggle to convince the world fell on deaf ears. Doctors could not accept an intolerable truth—that it was their own hands that carried deadly infection from the autopsy table to birthing mothers. Mocked and ostracized professionally and socially, Semmelweis raged in vain, lost his mind, and died alone in an asylum.

Lustig and Doherty's work explores a mind in turmoil as a man is haunted by the voices of the mothers he cannot save. The authors describe the piece as representing a single moment in Semmelweis' mind as he lays dying in the asylum. We see that moment from many angles. Doherty's libretto is a surreal and often dreamlike series of meditations, images, and symbols that cycle back upon each other, each time revealing new meanings.

The audience enters the theater space to the enveloping sounds of the sixteen-member all-female chorus singing hauntingly from high above in the surrounding balconies. Performed in the intimate Studio Theater of Budapest Operetta-Theater, the work creates a saturating experience that left the Budapest premiere audience members visibly moved.

The story is told symbolically on many levels at the same time, effectively reflecting Dr. Semmelweis's failing mind, while holding the audience in rapt attention throughout the seventy-five-minute work. The sixteen-member women's chorus intermixes fluidly onstage with four dancers and the four principals, and also play music boxes and tuned bells that are a part of the fabric of the richly multilayered score. The voices and constant movement of women surround and overwhelm Dr. Semmelweis, the only actual male onstage. Other male characters in the story are represented by women in chillingly exaggerated masks and doctors' coats (costumes by Jenny Horváth). With the male doctors' brusque and unsympathetic treatment of pregnant and dying women, often very young and of vulnerable circumstances, and concern more with their own status, many viewers noted a distinct resonance with contemporary #metoo movement issues. The work seems to ask us "What is that thing that we cannot see at all now that will soon be sickeningly obvious to us?" Dr. Semmelweis was the rare Hungarian to rise to the faculty level in Vienna's elite teaching hospital, and his story offers an urgent lesson on the power of outsiders' perspectives.

Szilveszter P. Szabó performs the single male title role of Ignaz Semmelweis, bringing to life a shattered man detached from his own world and time. Tünde Frankó, Veronika Nádas, and Enikő Lévai each embody different women in Semmelweis' experience, in songs spanning operatic aria, folksong, and music-theater. The Bartók Béla Chamber Choir of Szolnok, who are continually moving throughout the various levels of the stage and overhead balconies, create a haunting and other-worldly sense of ritual. The Chamber Orchestra of Budapest Operetta-Theater sounds with an array of onstage music boxes and handbells (played by female cast members). The complex performance is led by conductor Dániel Dinyés and assistant conductor Szabolcs Hermann.

The production uses a total of thirty-two performers: four soloists, the women's chorus, and a seven-member ensemble with a conductor, plus four dancers with movement (directed by choreographer Anna Biczók). The production's multi-leveled set design by András Juhász makes extensive use of video and live projection, realized by Dávid Maruscsák.

The project originated several years ago in a creative residency composer Lustig had at American Opera Projects in Brooklyn, NY, where they produced several of the early workshops with stage director Matt Gray, and music directors Charity Wicks, Mila Henry, and Kelly Horsted. A 2017 concert performance in New York was lead by conductor Ryan McAdams.

The composer Raymond J. Lustig is a graduate of The Juilliard School in New York where he now serves on the faculty. His works are performed worldwide.

The U.S. and Irish citizen currently based in Kiev, Ukraine, writer Matthew Doherty's work has appeared in The New York Times, The Atlantic Monthly, Poetry, and Glimmer Train.

Press from the Budapest premiere of SEMMELWEIS, September 28, 2018:

[Noémi Herczog, *Élet és Irodalom*, "I wash my hands," October 19, 2018](#)

"the strength of *Semmelweis* as a written piece is its music: the choir singing in countless parts and the acoustic sections reminiscent of Philip Glass, opposing these the musical-like arias"

"The current director, Lőrinczy György, on the other hand, is inviting and giving total freedom to a few makers who are not only not thinking within the operetta genre but not even within the constraints of pure genres."

"We have found that it is the rigid institution that devours the young director aspiring to renew it. Martin Boross's *Semmelweis* is possibly the first example in Hungary, where this happened the other way around."

"[articulated] through strong images and without pre-digested clichés turning the fable of hand-washing into a contemporary message"

"...tableaus, the gracefully proud movements of Julia Jakubowska. The choir appearing like Fates in a tragedy. "

"in the feminine reading of the director...we can be made to recall the #MeToo movement..."

[Zsuzsanna Szekáry, *Magyar Idők*, "Soul-anatomy with Catharses," September 29, 2018](#)

"Even the next day I find it hard to find the words for this work, described as an 'oratorical diagnosis,' as it was such a gripping and unique experience."

"Beyond the storyline itself, the play transmits impressions, images, and feelings: we look inside the soul of the self-defeating Semmelweis, who burns from his inner turmoil and the desire to act, and crumbles under the weight of guilt, shame, and self-accusation, conveyed onstage with profound empathy by Szilveszter P. Szabó."

"Similarly, towering was the performance of Veronika Nádasí who authentically brought to life the despair of the wife of a doctor balancing on the edge of insanity."

"The other protagonists of the production are the Bartók Béla Chamber Choir of Szolnok, who sang with astounding professionalism, often in eight parts, at times ethereal and other times dissonant and unpredictable, suitable to their haunting role, for which the Budapest Operetta Theater Chamber Orchestra provided live music using special instruments."

"spectacular...the choir, soloists, and contemporary dancers, all representing women who have died of childbed fever, come together to haunt

Semmelweis"

"a performance that provoked multiple catharses for me...one of the best theatrical productions of recent years"

[John Theater, *szinhazkritika.hu*, "Semmelweis \(Budapest Operetta Theater, Warehouse Theater, 2018\)," October 4, 2018](#)

"[Music director] Dániel Dinyes, who is also the conductor of the performance, played a great role in the music's interpretation... he is always a guarantee for an emotional, fierce, quality performance."

"... the 16-member women's choir (Bartók Béla Chamber Choir of Szolnok), mostly represent the spirits of the dead mothers who constantly haunt Semmelweis. They are already present as the audience enters, singing, which also helps to set the appropriate atmosphere, their introduction well-conceived..."

"...the video running on the walls of the stage only adds to the visual world. As do the ghosts (Anna Biczók, Júlia Hadi, Julia Jakubowska, Lili Raubinek) who appear on the scene at times as Semmelweis's doctor colleagues, and at times as mothers dying or giving birth, turning the work into a true movement-theatre piece, as if by magic.

"[in the] last third of the story... we gain an insight into their married life. In addition to Maria getting the most beautiful solo of the opera ... [Veronika] Nádasí once again proved that she is among the most powerful female actors within the Operetta Theater's company."

"[Semmelweis's] despair and struggle are particularly touching, as evidenced by the high number of [spectators'] handkerchiefs that appeared..."

"truly contemporary direction that is filled with great ideas."

"well worth seeing as it has so much to offer "

[Andrea Stub, *stubandrea.hu* "Napló," September 30, 2018](#)

"The visual world of the performance is almost astute, but still precisely poetic: three pulpits horizontally divided and above them the actors: mourning women in black, their golden gloves tracing white and bloody stripes flooding the walls - this impressive view is the start."

"considering that both an autopsy and a birth happen on stage, every action is theatrical and beautifully stylized"

Press from the Miskolc world premiere, June 9, 2018:

[Federica Fanizza, *Sipario, Italy*, "In search of the new opera," June 17, 2018](#)

"the term 'operetta' must not mislead from the seriousness of the musical argument...solid dramatic construct"

[David Toschi, *operaclick.com, Italy*, "Miskolc - Teatro Nazionale: Semmelweis"](#)

"No sentimental story in the romantic style, no concession to mythologies or stories of the supernatural, nothing like a hero story"

"... an opera quite distinct from the genre of operetta or musical, allowing for an effective investigation of the dramatic features of the main character presented by Szilveszter P Szabó, who delivers excellently in both acting and vocal interpretation..."

"The 'oratorical diagnostic report' is transformed into a work of contemporary music with a great many folkloric elements...a score both refined and primigenial, where the dialogical and rich singing of Szabó merges with the conspicuous and precise sound of the Chamber Orchestra of the Budapest Operetta Theater, and of the Bartók Béla Chamber Choir of Szolnok, well directed by the calm Dániel

Dinyés”

“...stunning performances that allowed the work to masterfully realize the universal sound world conceived for this work by a particularly inspired Ray Lustig.”

“The success of the show is certainly a good omen for the scheduled performances throughout the summer at Budapest Operetta-Theater.”

[Csaba Németh, Csillagpont Radio, Hungary, “Simmelweis Opera - Oratoric Disease, Hungary's premiere in Miskolc,” June 11, 2018](#)

“ethereal... mysterious... a colorful and rich musical composition”

[Zsófia Hózsá, Fidelio, Hungary, “The surreal Simmelweis operated in Miskolc,” June 10, 2018](#)

“unusual, convincing and imaginative work...floating...exciting and powerful”

Additional press from the New York concert showing, September 11, 2017:

- “powerfully resonant... gripping” – [New York Music Daily](#)
- “alternately austere and lustrous... otherworldly” – [Lucid Culture](#)
- “stunning continuous song cycle/opera from eight hauntingly beautiful female voices” – Kelly Troester, Worldwide Head of Editions, Phillips
- “On every level, last night's performance of Simmelweis was magnificent... I came away mesmerized. The music and singing was gorgeous and forgotten story an urgent one to tell” –Lawrence D. Poster, Asparagus Entertainment