

DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE

GLYNDEBOURNE FESTIVAL 2019

**STAGING, SETS, COSTUMES, DRAMATURGY : BARBE & DOUCET
PUPPETS : PATRICK MARTEL / LIGHTS : GUY SIMARD**



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DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

Andre Barbe & Renaud Doucet

Embracing Flute

Alexandra Coghlan caught up with opera's dynamic duo Barbe & Doucet to find out why they have finally taken on the challenge of *Die Zauberflöte*.

'I don't understand people who dismiss fairy tales,' says Renaud Doucet. 'After all, what is a fairy tale? It's a story that teaches people how to live, it's about initiation, adventure, self-discovery.'

Since they joined forces in 2000, Franco-Canadian director-designer duo André Barbe and Renaud Doucet have become synonymous with a certain kind of production. 'Quirky', 'colourful' and 'larger than life' are descriptions that come up again and again in reviews. 'It's as though we've been put in a box labelled "fairy tales and grand spectacles",' Doucet explains with a shrug, 'but there's so much more to these pieces than that.'

Looking through the team's back-catalogue it's easy to see how it happened. *La Cenerentola*, *Cendrillon*, *Rusalka*, *Die Feen*, *The Sound of Music* and a now cult production of *Turandot* – the list is dominated by fantasies and fairy tales, stories that, if they don't always end happily ever after, all share an element of 'Once upon a time...'

One opera that is notably absent – or has been, until now – is Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, a work they have turned down on three separate occasions over the past 20 years. 'It's an opera that has been offered to us since the very start,' says Doucet. 'Everyone kept telling us that it was the perfect piece for us, but much as we love the music we found

the libretto deeply problematic – sexist and racist. There are well-established difficulties with the text and often, instead of facing them, directors just take them out, but then it's not *Die Zauberflöte*. We felt strongly that we either had to find a way to justify and embrace everything, to be truthful to both the music and the text, or not to stage the piece at all.'

So what changed? Research into the work's Viennese origins led the directors to the city's famous Hotel Sacher and its pioneering young proprietor Anna Sacher. 'After her husband's death everyone expected and tried to persuade her to give up the hotel, but she didn't,' explains Barbe. 'Despite everyone telling her that a woman could never do the job she did it, and better than any of her male rivals.'

Rosa Lewis – owner and cook of London's Cavendish Hotel, mistress of Edward VII and inspiration for the BBC series *The Duchess of Duke Street* – was another model for a hotel-based production whose starting point is not the plucky young lovers Tamino and Pamina, but the more ambiguous figure of the Queen of the Night.

'The problem,' says Doucet, 'is that she is always portrayed as a bitch, and that's simply not interesting. If somebody acts violently or cruelly you want to understand why – what has happened to trigger



Anna Sacher

art images / imagine

that behaviour?' 'When we were reading about Sacher and Lewis,' adds Barbe, 'we developed a real fondness for these women who were fighters and survivors in an era where everyone told them their dreams were impossible. It took a lot of courage to fight back, and that led us to feel a real sympathy for the Queen of the Night, which we didn't want to lose. In our production we connect her story to the broader theme of women's rights, and to the suffrage movement that was spreading across the world at this point in history.'

'It's an important time to be exploring these ideas. I was in Lewes for last year's Bonfire Night parade. There were women dressed up as suffragettes carrying placards that read "Nothing has changed since 1919". I think we all realise that there's still a lot of work to be done. There are many passages and lines in *Die Zauberflöte* that are usually cut, but we kept all we could because sexism is an important counterpoint within the piece. It's the reason why the women fight for power. We wanted to keep those contrasts. Theatre is about reaction; you need to have something to kick against.'

The setting for the directors' *Flöte* may be domestic, but in true Barbe and Doucet style there's nothing everyday about the visuals. 'We had to find a way to ignite the energy of the piece,' says designer Barbe. '*Die Zauberflöte* is a big, Broadway musical, it has to have a "wow" quality, an impact. You never want your audience to stop being amazed. But it's a challenge to achieve. There are 11 different sets – how do you manage that, especially for a show that has to tour?'

The duo found the answer in the work's original staging at Vienna's suburban Theater auf der Wieden – a venue for popular drama and dance as well as opera, and well known for visual spectacle and sensation. 'We felt that the only way we could do so many set changes was with painted drops [cloths]. There's a long tradition of these in opera, from Mozart's day right up to David Hockney, and it felt like the right moment to revisit the idea.'

The result is a series of intricate black and white scene paintings, meticulously hand-drawn by Barbe himself – monochrome backdrops that will support rather than rival the opera's colourful cast of characters, and nod to the Masonic symbolism that is so central to Mozart's score. 'All the opera's original symbols are there if you want to look

for them,' says Doucet. 'But we didn't want the production just to be about Freemasonry. If all you do as a director is underline the symbols then it becomes just a thesis. Our production has many layers; you can just sit back and enjoy the spectacle and sensation, or you can look more closely and find many more ideas.'

Barbe and Doucet, who are life partners as well as professional ones, have worked exclusively together now for almost two decades. It's an unusual and completely collaborative set-up – Doucet takes the lead on direction and choreography, while Barbe drives the design – and one they credit with their success. 'We are very demanding of each other,' says Barbe. 'The process never gets any easier because we each know

exactly what the other is capable of, and always push one another to equal or exceed that level.'

'It's never about finding an artistic compromise,' Doucet insists. 'Compromise is always lose-lose. A good concept is one you don't have to compromise on, don't have to force. Our goal is to create a bridge between the audience and the stage, to invite them into the drama and give them a moment completely outside their normal life and experience.' @

Alexandra Coghlan is a music journalist and critic. She has written for publications including *The Independent* and *1 Paper*, *The Spectator*, *Prospect*, *Opera* and *Gramophone* magazines. She is *Glyndebourne's Opera Content Consultant*.



Rosa Lewis

on the cover: www.barbedoucet.com

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THE GUARDIAN : *A visual feast of eccentricity*

Glyndebourne's irreverent, entertaining, sometimes magical new production, the UK debut from the design and direction team of Barbe & Doucet, follows its own fairytale logic. (...) Visually, it's a theatrical feast of eccentricity. Every room, from the conservatory to the wine cellar to the all-important kitchen, is created from André Barbe's pen-and-ink flats. Things light up magically; the dumb waiter "speaks"; a pile of vegetables stands up, stretches and becomes the vegetable man in the famous Arcimboldo painting. The Armed Men are giant puppets made from bits of the hotel heating system, and we know the Queen of the Night is coming because of the whirr and clank of ancient machinery – nothing good ever came out of an onstage lift.

EXPRESS : *In general, I disapprove of radically innovative or avant-garde productions of established operas. (...) I hugely enjoyed the sheer lunacy of this production by the French-Canadian director-designer duo André Barbe and Renaud Doucet. With a good deal of puppetry, including the transformation of bedroom pillows into pecking birds on the entry of the birdcatcher Papageno, and the action moving rapidly between rooms portrayed by pen-and-ink drawn backdrops, and the Masonic testing ordeal turned into a sort of Masterchef and Master-washer-up ritual, the humour is original and unrestrained.*

OPERA TODAY : *André Barbe and Renaud Doucet, whose new production of Die Zauberflöte has opened at Glyndebourne, avow a real sympathy for the Queen of the Night whose story they connect to the broader theme of women's rights. (...) Barbe's beautiful pen-and-ink cloth-drops create a singular locale (...) the designs produce neat trompe l'œil effects, and evoke at times a picture-book fairy tale, as cardboard cut-out figures arrive in the lobby or canoodle in the corners of the conservatory.*

THE STANDARD : *Glyndebourne show spikes sexist perceptions*

Countless modern directors have subverted the stereotypical views of an earlier age, and Barbe & Doucet find their own ingenious solutions. The oracular pronouncements about women needing a wise man's guidance are held up for ridicule, while the face of the villain Monostatos is blackened by soot from a furnace rather than by race. (...) Acknowledging the tradition of the original production at the suburban Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden, the sets are painted drops, all meticulously hand-drawn by Barbe.

PLATEA MAGAZINE : *Oh, Isis Y Osiris, ¡Que Delicia!*

*La clave del éxito de esta deliciosa producción radica en dos elementos: no precipitarla al barro de lo cotidiano, mimando sus elementos simbólicos y fantásticos; y tomarse la producción muy en serio, aunque esto signifique revestirla sin complejos de inspiradísimos elementos de humor. La propuesta del dúo **Barbe&Doucet** nos traslada a un escenario inusual, una mezcla con aires de cómic de la pompa chiflada de El Gran Hotel Budapest y las viñetas imposibles de Delicatessen. Lo gastronómico se convierte en el hilo conductor de una trama en la que los protagonistas deambulan por cocinas, bodegas y despensas, bajo la protectora presencia Arcimboldo que, para el que se le haya escapado, nos recuerda que hasta con sencillas hortalizas se puede hacer buen arte. La realización de los decorados es sencillamente magnífica. No se han ahorrado medios creativos para los succulentos y numerosísimos cambios de escena que sorprenden una y otra vez, reivindicando la clase y dignidad que puede tener el cartón piedra, cuando no se le disfraza ni se intenta esconder su naturaleza. Si en las óperas cómicas, con suerte, el público emite algunas risitas de complicidad, en esta producción las carcajadas plenas invadieron la sala en numerosas ocasiones. Dos días después de la representación no se puede evitar la sonrisa recordando momentos como la doma de los pájaros almohada, la irrupción de las sufragistas, las pruebas finales en los fogones y fregaderos y, sobre todo, el desternillante parto múltiple de Papagena.*

THE SPECTATOR : *Each scene features some new feat of puppetry or trompe l'oeil. It astonishes, it charms; at every turn, it defies you not to be delighted.*

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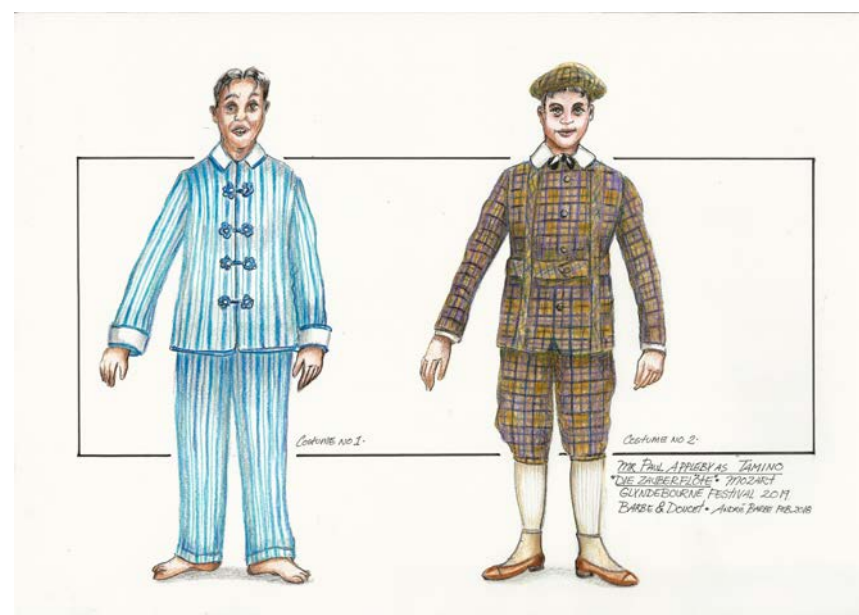
Show curtain (Front Gauze) Model Picture



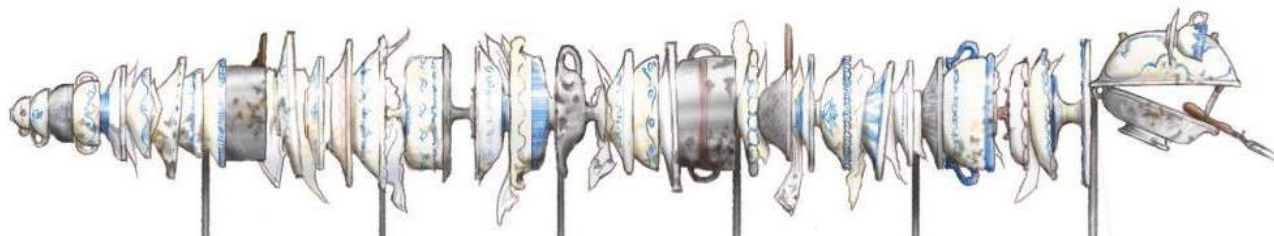
Ouverture / Model Picture



ACT I.1 – Hotel Lobby / Model Picture



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Barbe & Doucet

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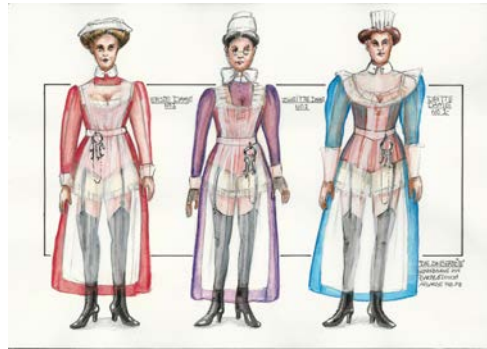


ACT I.1 to Act I.8 – **Hotel Lobby** / Model Picture

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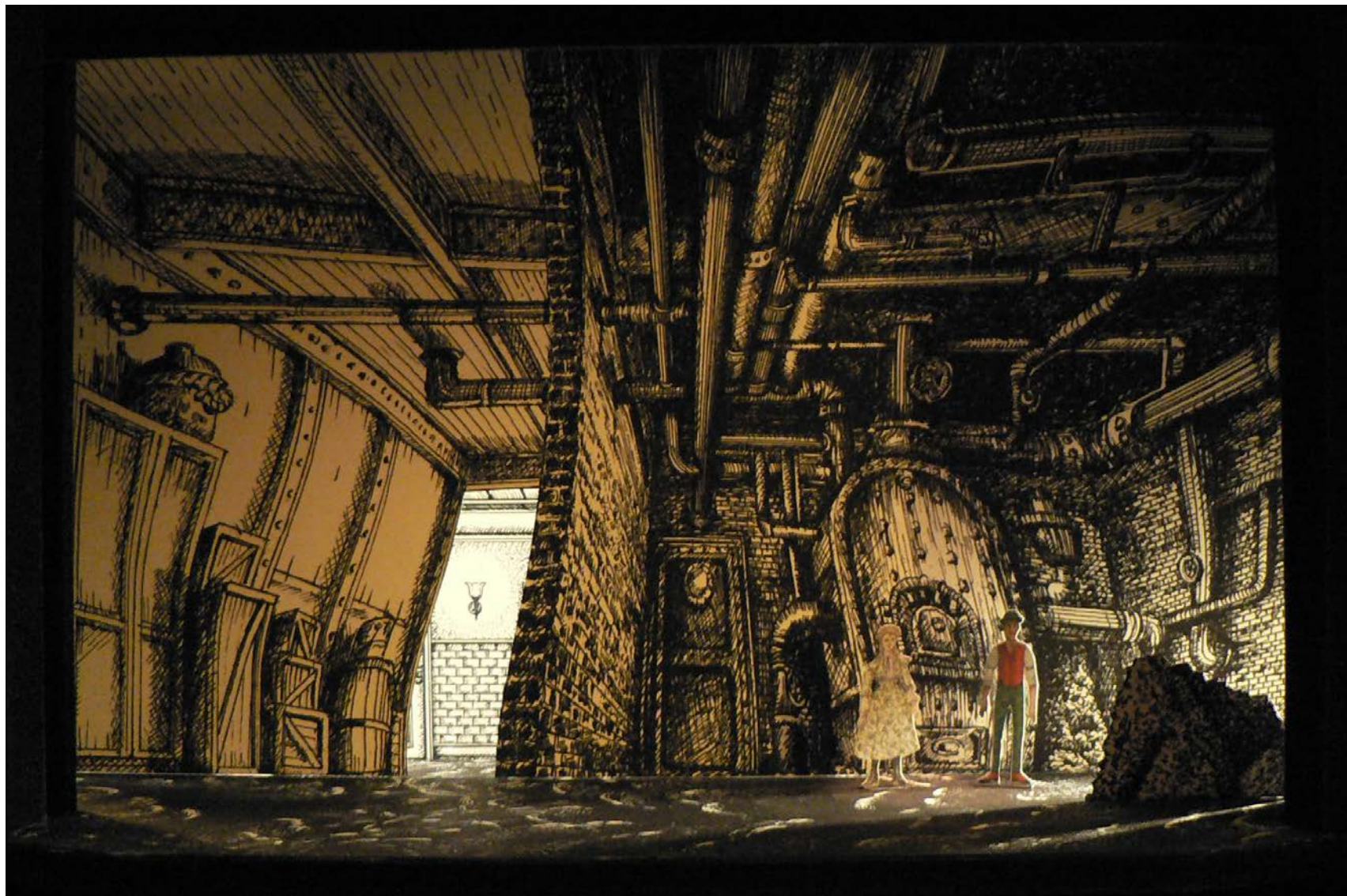
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ACT I. 9 to I.14 – **Furnace Room & Corridor** / Model Picture

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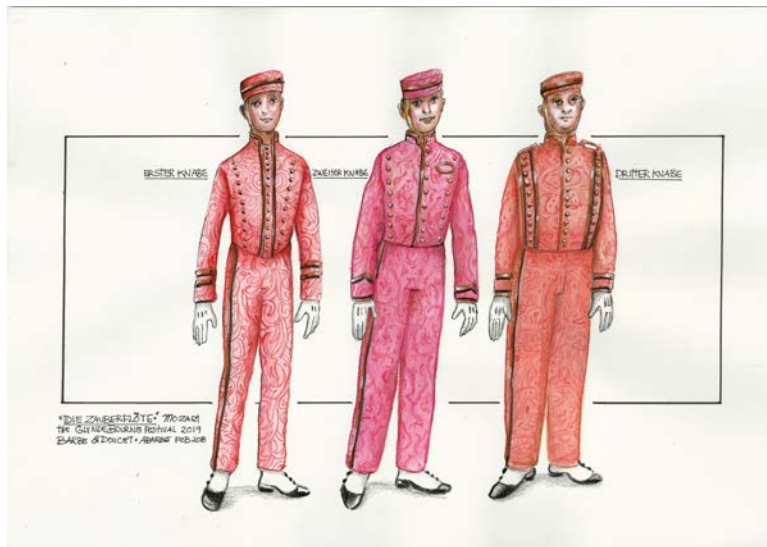
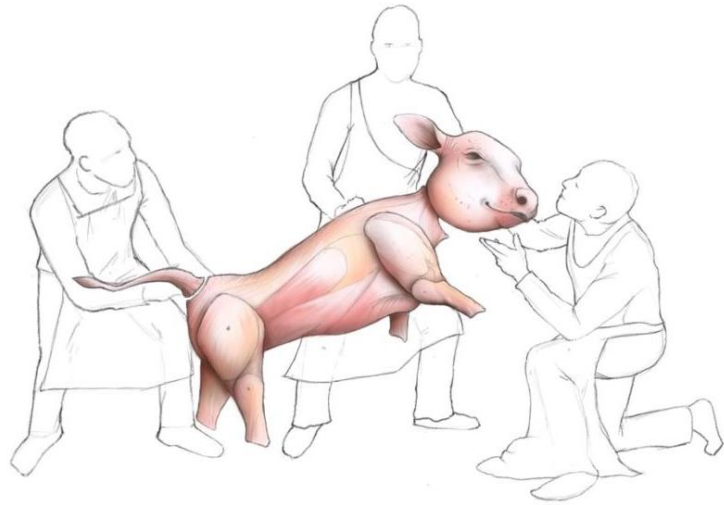


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ACT I.15 to Act I.19 – Pantry / Model Picture

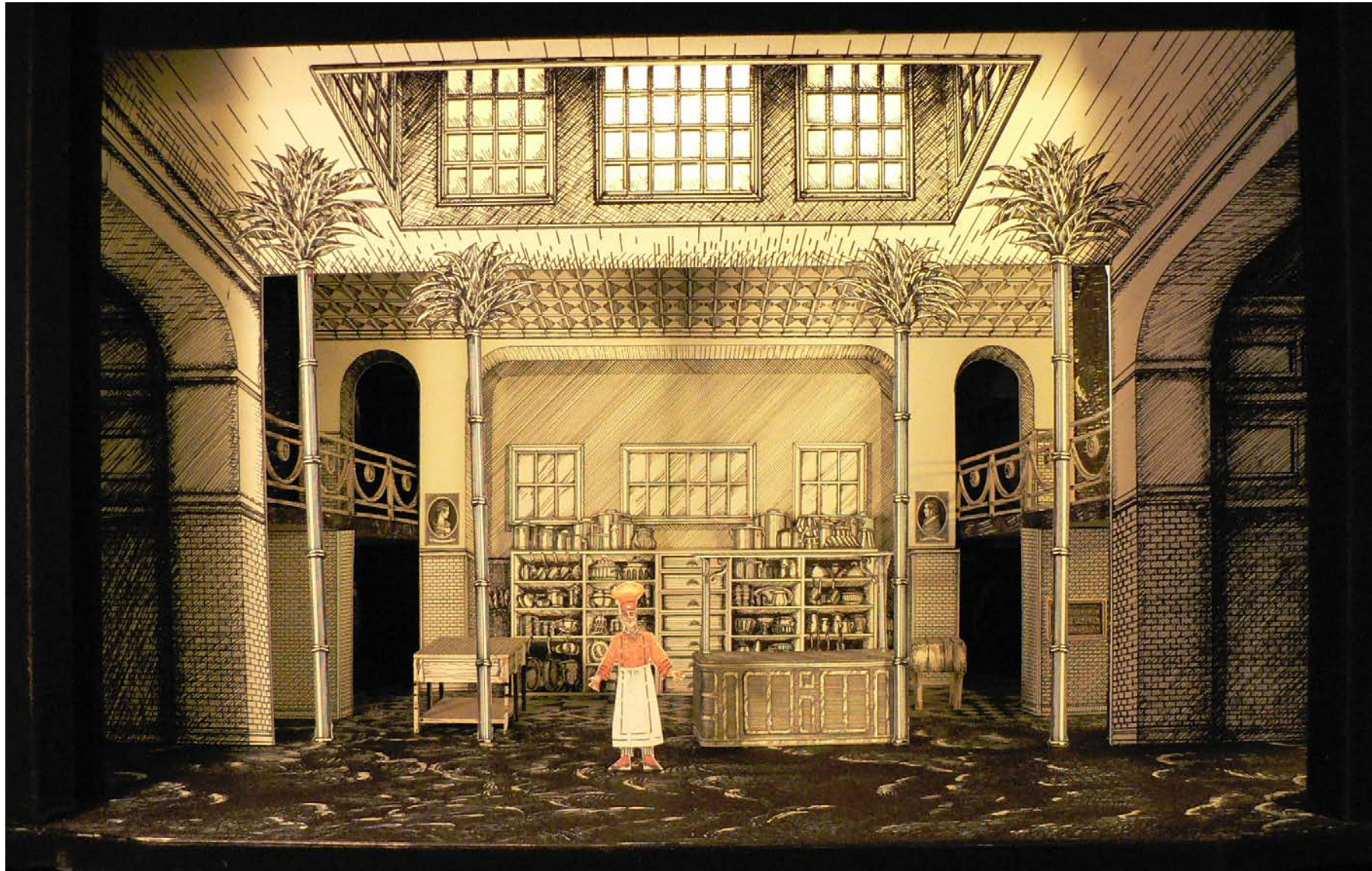
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ACT II.1 – Kitchen / Model Picture

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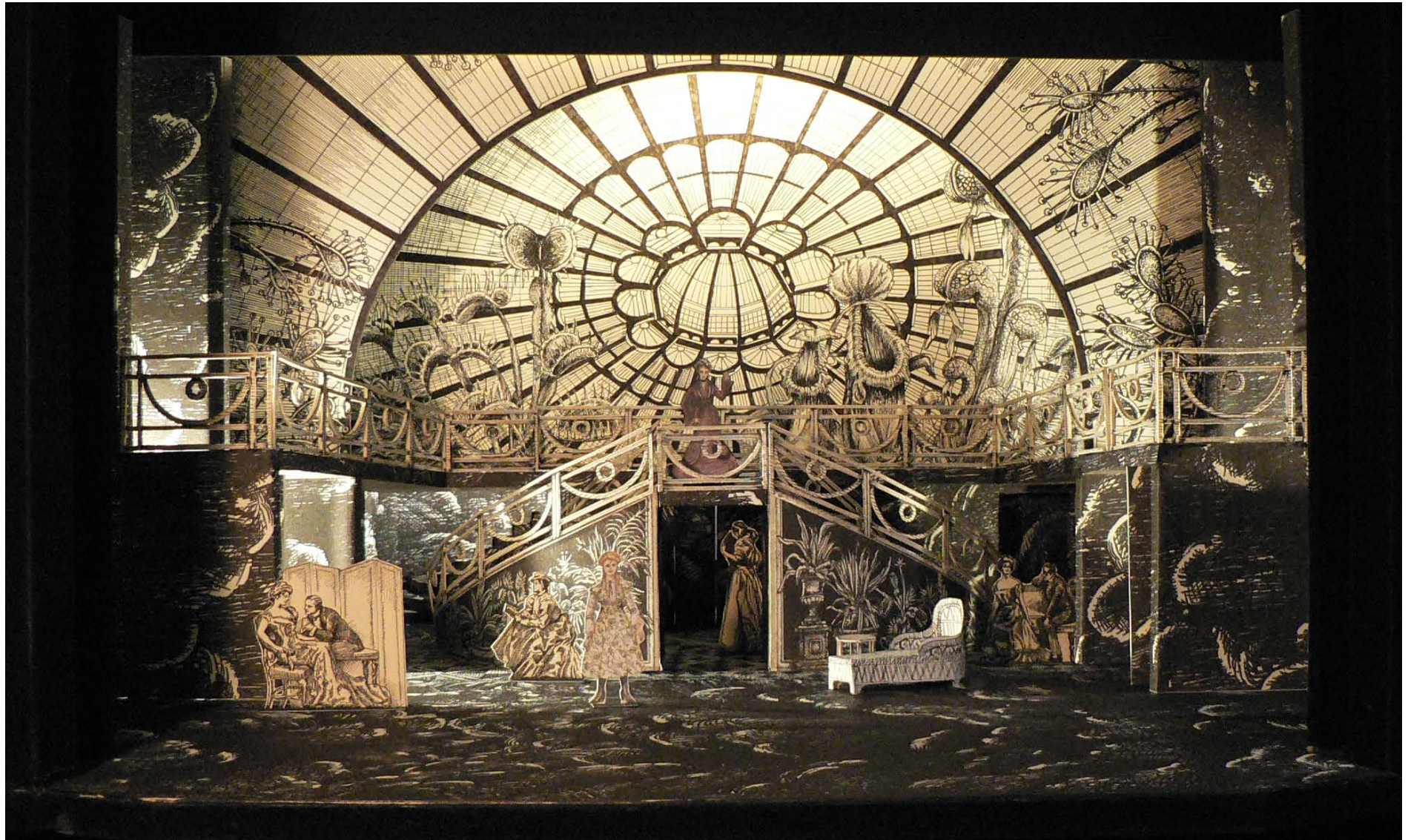


ACT II .2 to II.5 – **Wine Cellar** / Model Picture

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ACT II.7 to II.12 – **Conservatory** - Flower room / Model Picture

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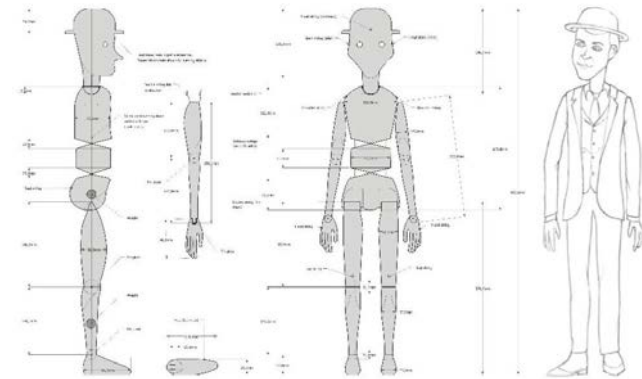
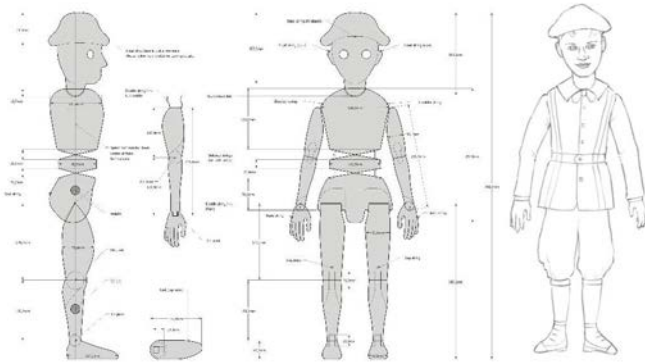
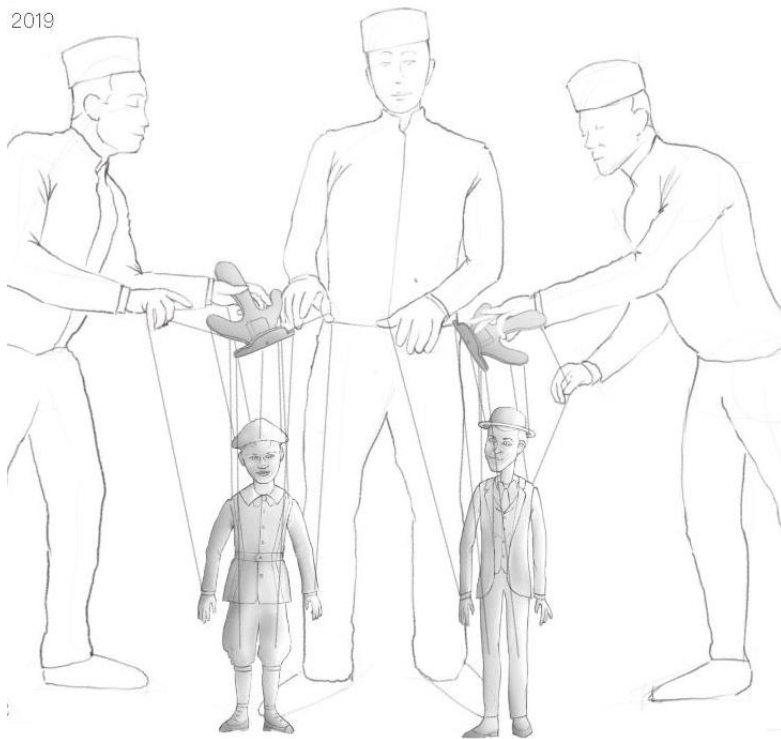
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ACT II.13 to II. 19 – **Silver Room** opened / Model Picture

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ACT II.16 : Tamino / Papageno / 3 Boys – Preliminary Puppet drawings

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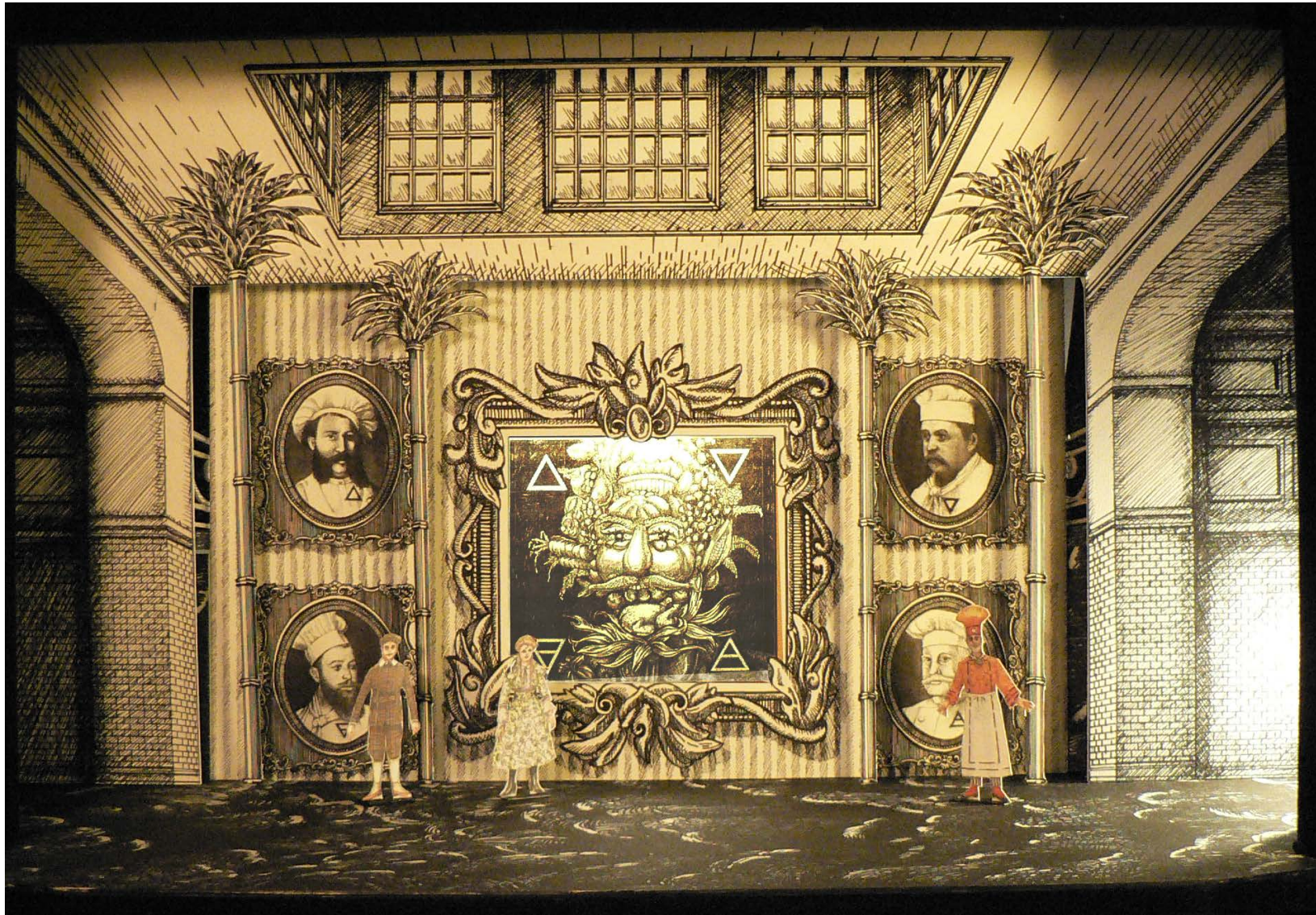


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ACT II.20 to II.27 – Kitchen

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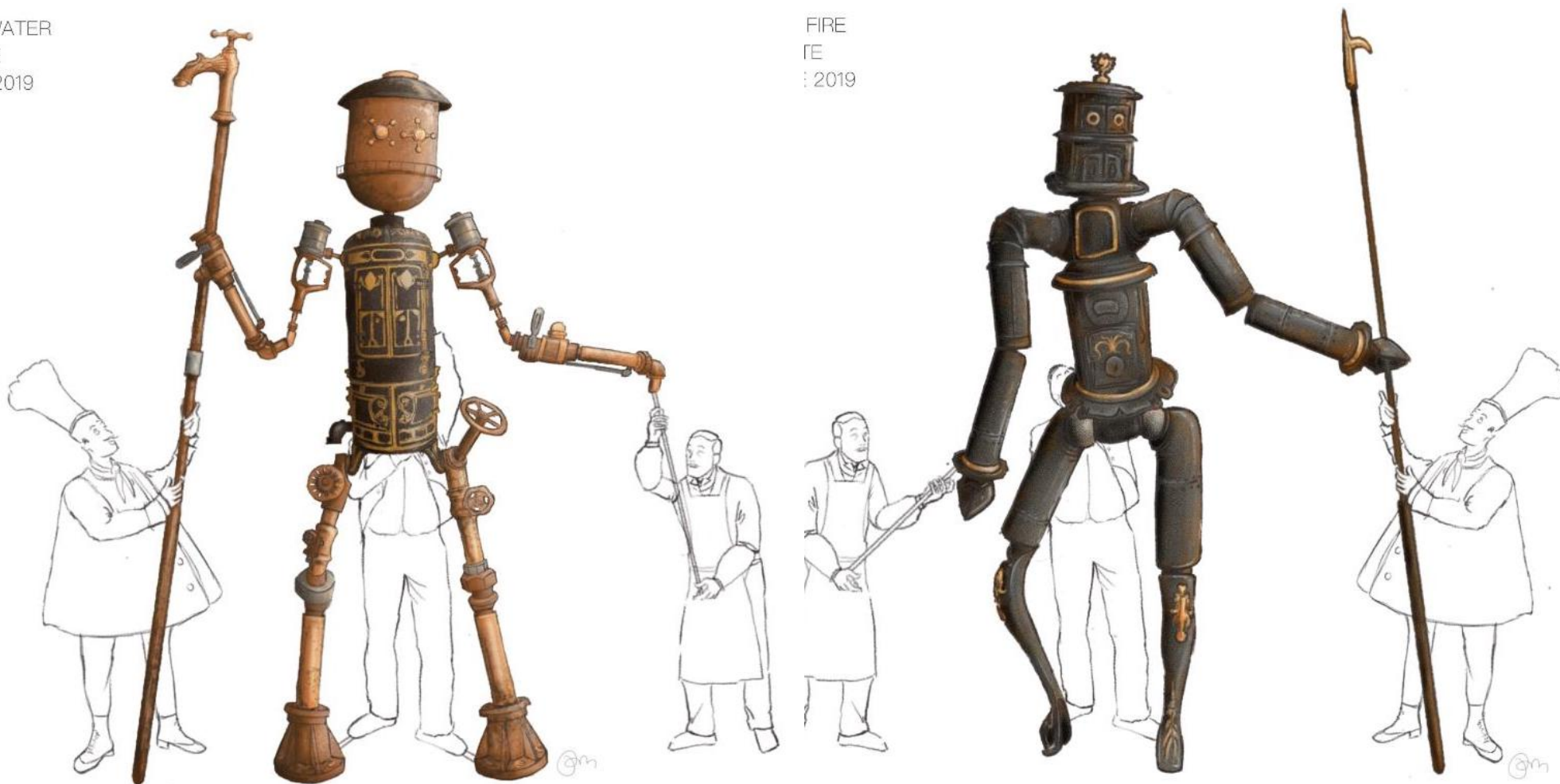


ACT II.28 – Wall of Challenges / Model Picture

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WATER
TE
2019

FIRE
TE
2019



ACT II.28 : 2 Armor Men -Puppet drawings

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ACT II.28 : Fire Challenge



ACT II.28 : Water Challenge

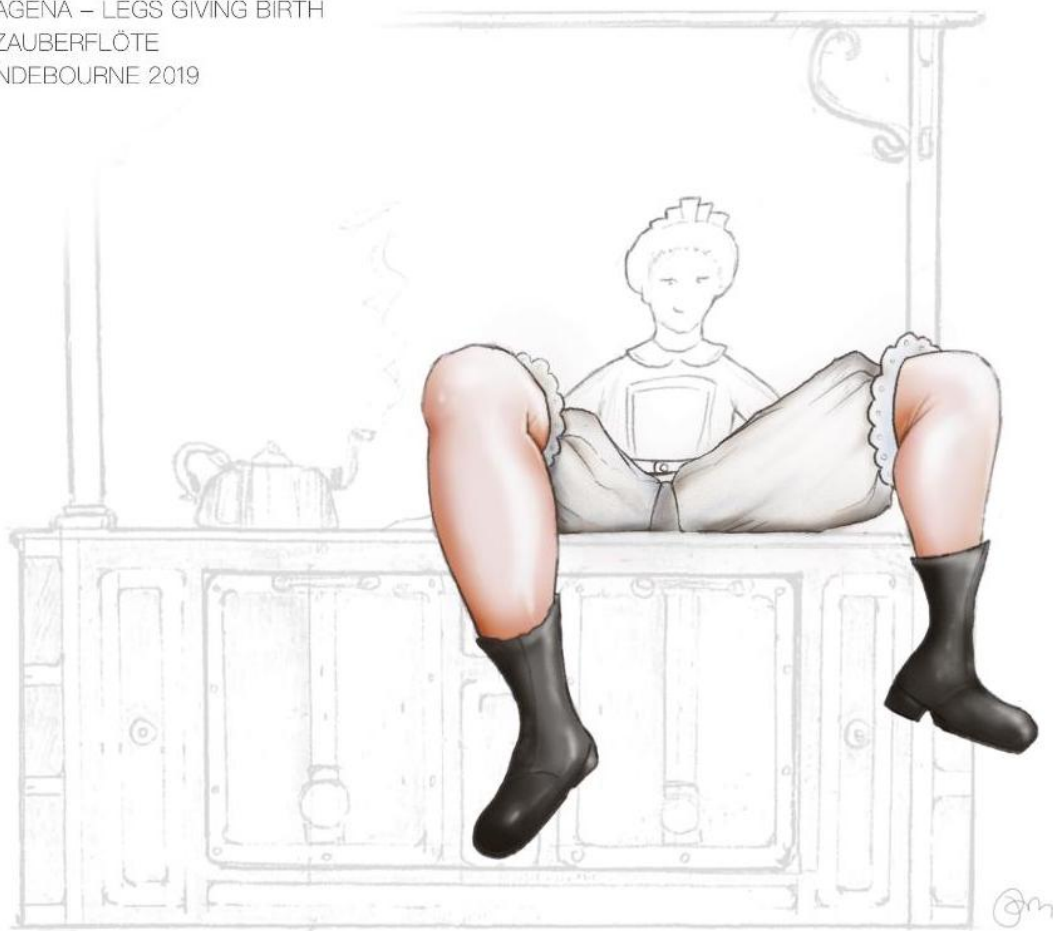


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PAPAGENA – LEGS GIVING BIRTH
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ACT II .30 (start) – **Wine Cellar** / Model Picture

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