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Cinematic Revolution in Theory of Flames

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Michel van der Aa's world premiere Theory of Flames, igniting the Opera Forward Festival, represents a seismic advance in operatic form—a film opera where live stage action and meticulously crafted cinematic sequences fuse into a seamless, disorienting tapestry. Co-commissioned by Dutch National Opera, the Norwegian National Opera, Bregenz Festival, and van der Aa's doubleA Foundation.

This 90-minute masterwork explores disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fractured realities through the lens of filmmaker Neola (Mary Bevan/Aphrodite Patoulidou), whose sci-fi project about a time-travel scientist spirals into personal unraveling. Under Elena Schwarz's incisive baton, the Residentie Orkest delivers van der Aa's luminous score—shimmering minimalist textures evoking both scientific precision and emotional entropy.

The production's genius lies in its innovative stage solutions, masterminded by van der Aa himself alongside set/lighting designer Theun Mosk. A massive, rotating proscenium frames live performers while projecting hyper-realistic film sequences, blurring boundaries between "here" and "screen." As Neola interviews her partner Marianne (Helen Charlston) about a mysterious lab fire, live dialogue fractures into pre-recorded echoes—Josh the cameraman (Roderick Williams) captures "reality" that morphs into manipulated footage before our eyes.

Mosk's lighting—strobing LEDs mimicking digital glitches, holographic flames licking set edges—creates a meta-theatrical laboratory where audiences question visual "truth." The Chorus of Dutch National Opera, appearing solely on film, haunts the stage like viral disinformation, their faces distorted across multiple projections. This is opera as quantum experiment: parallel realities colliding in real time.

What elevates Theory of Flames is its profound connection between science and arts. Van der Aa's libretto draws from real quantum physics and cognitive science: Neola's time-travel film mirrors Schrödinger's cat paradox, where observation collapses possibility into "fact." The scientist (Julia Bullock on film) embodies empirical rigor clashing with conspiracy—her lab inferno becomes metaphor for knowledge's combustibility. Dramaturges Madelon Kooijman and Niels Nuijten weave in actual declassified documents about Cold War lab accidents, grounding the fiction in verifiable history.

Schwarz's conducting mirrors this: Minkowski's arpeggios pulse like particle accelerators, swelling into

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dissonant "flame" clusters that evoke cognitive dissonance. Costume designer Judith de Zwart's metallic fabrics—shimmering under UV like quantum particles—visually encode scientific uncertainty. Vocally, the cast achieves miracles within van der Aa's stratospheric tessitura. Bevan's Neola radiates controlled hysteria, her coloratura unraveling like corrupted data streams; Charlston's Marianne counters with grounded mezzo warmth, their duets a heartbreaking tug-of-war between love and "alternative facts." Williams's Josh—everyman's voyeur—anchors the madness with baritonal clarity.

While Bullock's film scientist pierces from the void, her stratospheric lines defying spatial logic. The orchestra, liberated from pit conventions, converses directly with singers and screens—harp glissandi trigger visual distortions, woodwinds mimic digital beeps. Thematically, Theory of Flames interrogates our post-truth era: when does skepticism become paranoia? Neola's descent—projecting lab conspiracies onto her crumbling relationship—resonates chillingly amid AI deepfakes and viral hoaxes.

Yet van der Aa tempers despair with humanist glow: Marianne's unwavering love persists beyond "facts," suggesting empathy as ultimate reality check. The final image—Mosk's flames consuming stage and screen in synchronized inferno—leaves us suspended: was anything "real"?

This is contemporary opera at its most audacious: science illuminating art, technology expanding expression, human frailty anchoring both. Van der Aa's film opera doesn't merely reflect our fractured world—it enacts its dizzying contradictions, challenging viewers to discern signal from noise. A landmark for Dutch National Opera, Theory of Flames burns brighter than its predecessors, illuminating opera's limitless future.

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