

# Les Pigeons d'Argile

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## TOULOUSE

### Théâtre du Capitole

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Santoni, Arquez and Lefèvre in *Les Pigeons d'Argile* in Toulouse

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A possible cultural trickle-down effect of the popularity of reality television is the creation of operas based on contemporary figures or events. Latest in the vein was Philippe Hurel's *Pigeons d'Argile* (The Clay Pigeons), with a libretto by Tanguy Viel, which opened to enthusiastic applause at the Théâtre du Capitole in Toulouse on April 15. The subject of the opera was inspired by the 1974 kidnapping of American heiress Patricia Campbell ("Patty") Hearst, the granddaughter of William Randolph Hearst, the publishing magnate whose life inspired the Orson Welles film *Citizen Kane*. The world premiere of the new opera was conducted by Tito Ceccherini and produced by Mariame Clément.

The opera's title is drawn from a scene early on in the story, in which Patricia Baer and her millionaire father, Bernard Baer, are at a clay-pigeon shoot, and the daughter displays her skills as a markswoman. These two central figures are joined in the libretto by the terrorist Toni; his girlfriend, Charlie; Toni's father, Pietro; and the head of the police. The opera treats the subject like an American action movie, opening with a prologue showing the final car heist, before treating the plot in flashback. Viel's libretto is written in colloquial French with few literary aspirations, in short repetitive phrases that underline the violence of the story. There is little treatment of the Stockholm syndrome, which might have explained why Baer/Hearst joined forces with her kidnappers. Here the plot concentrates on a simpler human explanation: Charlie's constant assertion that she did not "confuse love with the revolution" was delusional, and her devotion to Toni was clearly based on infatuation. Her jealousy motivates her mendacity in her recounting of the final denouement. In turn, it was Patricia's attraction to the terrorist that led her to naïvely embrace his revolutionary cause.

Hurel's score, consisting of a prologue and three acts, was performed without an interval over 100 minutes. Despite his work at IRCAM, Hurel used no electronics for his first opera, and it was thrilling to hear the Toulouse chorus attacking the contemporary score with precise energy under the fluent baton of Ceccherini. The composer allowed himself one anecdotal operatic reference: Patricia is practicing "Ach, ich fühl's," from Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, at the moment of her abduction. This quotation is skillfully woven into Hurel's avant-garde musical language, which is at its most explosive and dissonant when orchestrally punctuating vocal lines that, while exploiting the extremes of the voices, are free of complication and easily comprehensible, allowing for some thrilling vocal climaxes.

Clément matched the work's kaleidoscopic cinematic energy with some cleverly integrated video shots and expert direction of the cast on the adaptable open set. The cast was more than ready to follow "article one" of the revolutionary charter — "to throw your body into the battle" — as the composer worked his singers hard both rhythmically and vocally.

The soaring soprano of Vannina Santoni sounded well in the role of the initially buttoned-up daddy's girl Patricia. Exceptional young baritone Aimery Lefèvre's sappy upper register was constantly exploited, and he was dramatically convincing as the mesmerizing terrorist, who, in the words of his father, Pietro, had "marble in the place of a brain." Gaëlle Arquez, as Charlie, fielded strong mezzo tone and the blind passion of the revolutionary moll, whose values are challenged by the arrival of Patricia. Tenor Gilles Ragon, as Pietro, who here worked for the millionaire, had one of the most difficult roles vocally, but he proved again his aptitude for dealing with high declamatory lines. Pietro was an old man torn between being "a village socialist" and father to a boy who has committed a crime, which he fatally reveals to baritone Vincent Le Texier's smooth talking Baer and mezzo Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo's Chief of Police, who powerfully tossed out her hammering investigative lines, but who somehow made an unlikely American police officer. □

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