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Jun Kaneko's wild costumes invigorate 'The Magic Flute'

BY **SADIE DINGFELDER** May 1 at 11:40 am

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Jun Kaneko created 9-foot-tall "animal" costumes with Janus-like heads, reflecting the two-faced nature of many of the opera's characters. (Jun Kaneko Studio)

Sculptor Jun Kaneko has been screening his calls. Ever since the San Francisco Opera debuted the Japanese-American artist's whimsical sets and costumes for Mozart's "The Magic Flute" in 2012, directors have been clamoring for his designs. Kaneko, who worked on "The Magic Flute" full-time for three years, simply doesn't have the time.

"That was, I think, my last opera," he says. "I want to focus on my studio (art)."

Luckily, Kaneko's "Magic Flute" will probably be around for quite some time, says Washington National Opera costume director Marsha LeBoeuf. The production, which makes its D.C. debut at the Kennedy Center on Saturday, is unlike any she's seen before.

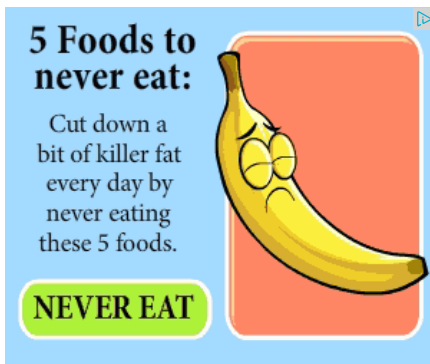
"Jun didn't study to be a costume designer. He's a sculptor," she says. "He's applying his sense of space and materials and shapes to these costumes, and that's why this production ends up being so unique."

The opera's story, on the other hand, is pretty boilerplate. A prince goes on a quest to save a princess with the assistance of a magic flute and a comic sidekick. Along the way, he finds that many of the people he assumed were good guys are, in fact, bad guys, and visa versa.

The theme of two-faced characters comes through most vividly in Kaneko's 9-foot-tall animal costumes, worn by silent performers who dance when they hear the sound of the prince's magic flute.

The creatures' oval-shaped bodies are reminiscent of the enormous sculptures Kaneko's best-known for — 1,000-pound monoliths of clay and glaze. Unlike the sculptures, the animals have heads with centrally located eyes and double snouts that seem to point in

opposite directions, giving them a Janus-like appearance.



If Kaneko's costumes are like moving sculptures, his backdrops are living paintings.

Instead of a traditional set with furniture and props, Kaneko drew more than 3,000 storyboards, which an Omaha, Neb.,-based company turned into digital animations. Flying stripes, advancing troops of polka dots and Mondrian-esque color fields dance across six moveable screens and two semi-transparent scrims. Hard-working projectionists keep the shapes moving in time to the opera, which speeds up or slows down depending on the singers' interpretation.

If this sounds like a lot to look at, you're right. Kaneko says that one of the hardest parts of designing the opera was to make sure the costumes and the backdrops work with the music, rather than compete with it. That's why it took him three years of concentrated effort to pull it all together.

"In opera, everything is always moving, moving, moving. Sculpture is much easier. Once you make it, it stays still," he says.

Kennedy Center, 2700 F St. NW; 202-467-4600, Sat.-May 18, \$25-\$305. (Foggy Bottom)

Outfitting a Queen of Night



(Jun Kaneko Studio)

A Las Vegas company that specializes in headdresses for showgirls made the foam base for the Queen of the Night's crown. "It's made of wire and fabric, so it's surprisingly light," LeBoeuf says.

All of the costumes in "The Magic Flute" were created with simple, solid fabrics with the exception of the queen's inner skirt, which is elaborately beaded. The quilting of her outer skirt was stitched by

hand.

The queen rises dramatically from a trap door in the center of the stage. Her original, round petticoat didn't fit through the San Francisco Opera's trap door, and had to be remade as an oval.

Comfort is as important as style for the Queen of the Night, who sings the opera's most difficult aria. The Act Two showstopper features passages two and a half octaves above middle C.

Opera in the Outfield

See "The Magic Flute" for free at Nationals Park on Saturday. The performance will be simulcast from the Kennedy Center at 7 p.m. Arrive as early as 5 p.m. for a good spot and free candy.

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