



## **ACA Inspiration Day - Catch The Wave** **The Egg, Bath Theatre Royal** **April 19<sup>th</sup> 2010**

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### **Summary**

'Catch the Wave' was an interesting and inspiring day, which explored the current landscape in Britain of opera for young people both as performers and audience-members. The day was attended by 40 delegates from diverse practice backgrounds ranging from composers and librettists to makers of theatre for young audiences.

In the morning, a number of speakers discussed their practices and processes, followed by short round table discussions. After lunch the delegates enjoyed a performance of the WNO's *A Real Princess*, followed by a talk from the director and composer. The day concluded with small discussion groups that reflected upon a number of 'provocations' on this art form.

### **Introductions**

#### **David Wood – Chair of ACA**

- A general welcome to all - pleased to welcome Peter Duncan, the first children's arts champion for ACA;
- Due to the volcano in Iceland grounding flights some speakers have been unable to attend and so the plan for the day is altered slightly;
- ACA is an organisation for people to share their experiences of working for and with children - it's a forum to celebrate this work and improve its profile and status;
- A strength of the day are the number of experts present, a real wealth of experience.

#### **Rhian Hutchins – Director of WNO Max**

- Explained the new format of the day - three speakers followed by more in-depth discussions in smaller, round table, groups.

## Julian Philips – composer discusses how he got into Opera in Education

- Written 6 operas, 4 for young people - all of which have involved the challenge of working with young people as both performers and audience. Where there are young performers, the audience will be younger than a normal opera audience with friends and siblings attending;
- Just premiered his new opera for young performers at Glyndebourne - *Knight Crew* – will use the Inspiration Day to share some of his experience and ideas with opera for young audiences;
- Opera is a difficult and challenging art form, Julian paid credit to the country's opera companies for their work in education and outreach;

### *Land Sea Sky*

- Julian's first opportunity came through WNO Max for whom he subsequently worked on a number of projects. The first opera was for the *Land Sea Sky* trilogy. This was a piece for a chorus of primary school children, a couple of singers from the WNO and some musicians. It was a 40 minute piece that could tour in the back of the van;
- Having never worked in opera before, Julian's first experience involved the challenge of the art form as well as the challenge of working with young people. He interrogated the form and the process – music, words and the theatre excited him, becoming tangled in his mind;
- The two pieces he wrote were *Dolphin* and *Wild Cat*, both with the same structure and brief - the children singing were at the heart of the narrative;
- Learning to write for children to sing was the same as learning how to write a piece for trumpet - some things work really well, and other things don't work at all;

### *Glyndebourne and Knight Crew*

- Following a successful application to Glyndebourne to be composer in residence he started on a 3 year relationship - working inside the company at a grass roots level;
- His first two projects had a tangential relationship to opera in education - although not directly about working with young people, ideas were formed through developing young choristers as part of the Jerwood chorus development scheme;
- The residency helped Julian to shape an emerging sense of his own aesthetic. Realising that an opera can be an infinite number of things and that everyone has their own sense of the art form, depending on the pieces that shape and nurture us, both as practitioners and opera lovers;
- Julian suggests that his proposition is not an absolute - just that opera involves music, words and theatre;
- He is passionate that there is no difference in his approach whether he's writing for 4 professional musicians or for 50 children - it's simply a question of resources and art forms;
- *Knight Crew* - a main stage, full length opera for Glyndebourne. A cast of 65 young people, a chorus of amateur mothers, 6 principles and a 70-strong orchestra - and the production support of the whole company;

- Due to the schedule of Glyndebourne there is a slot in March where a piece of this kind can be staged - many years of painstaking planning and the extraordinary support of the education department meant that an incredibly complicated rehearsal schedule could take place;
- The audiences were fantastically diverse and Julian paid credit to the story for helping to hold their attention - a gangland version of the King Arthur story;
- The piece was serious and stylistically demanding. Early anxieties as to whether it was achievable were transformed into fantastic excitement in the way the young people grabbed it in a generous and committed way;
- Julian ended his talk by playing some of the music from scene one and showing a selection of images.

## **My Mother Told Me Not To Stare**

### **Miranda Thain – Producer, Theatre Hullabaloo**

- Miranda explained that she comes from a different perspective from Julian as her company makes theatre for young audiences. *My Mother Told Me Not To Stare* was the first professional opera they have made for young audiences and was an experiment in making a hybrid form;
- The show has been touring across the UK for the last 7 weeks;
- The show came about following a synopsis of an idea from the playwright Finegan Kruckemeyer. The gothic story captured the team's imaginations and they thought the story would sit well with opera form;
- The story was that of a society where, when children break the rules deliberately, badness is boiled out of them and then they are redistributed with a tabula rasa - and then, one day, 6 children all disappear at once;
- Finegan was commissioned to turn the synopsis into a play and then, collaboratively it was turned into a libretto before Martyn wrote music;
- Miranda commented that casting was a massive issue - performers had to be skilled in singing, puppetry, and story telling, as well as be able to play live music;
- Miranda then showed a video trailer for the show.

### **Nina Hajjiyanni – Director, Action Transport**

- Animation and puppetry form part of the performance;
- Dealing with provocative issues made Nina swing from feeling that she never wanted to do opera again to only working on opera for the rest of her life;
- The piece was performed in small primary schools, theatre venues and everything in between. Tested in a number of different contexts;
- One of the things that has been fascinating is the way that adults have engaged with it as well as children - sometimes engaging with it and sometimes wrestling with it. They discovered that it's definitely a matter of taste - not everyone will love the music. However the production appeals to everyone in different ways and levels - the music is complex, surprising, changing;
- For the first 10 minutes of the opera people were spending a lot of time looking around at each other. Checking. "Is this what it's going to be like?" Then it changes. This is the thrilling aspect of the work - the music is so

rich and the quality of musicianship is rare, especially within the children's theatre world;

- Compromises had to be made - 8 or 9 rounds of auditions trying to find the right people. Difference between what the composer and director are looking for. Needed massively skilled musicians as well as great vocal skills which was one of the biggest offers for the audience

### **Martyn Harry – Composer**

- Martyn's background fell outside the normal path of a British composer. An early interest in theatre saw a diverse training including as a music animateur and in workshop training for children in education settings;
- Early work included writing for ensemble musicians and actors, with whom he created 6 shows in different schools - this experience reoriented the way he wrote music - finding approaches that made music communicative;
- He interrogated whether opera really communicates with normal people who don't understand opera;
- Through his music he was always trying to find new intensity and a new way of communicating with child audiences;
- Later in his career he studied expressive theatre in Germany and found himself in an educational complex in a very avant-garde environment;
- Most important impact on his practice is this collaboration with Theatre Hullabaloo and CTC. It is his first commission for children aged 3+;
- Martyn talked about his experience of working with Paul Harman who presented him with a 'feely bag' from which he created 10 theatrical miniatures all based on a different feel/texture;
- With *My Mother Told Me Not To Stare* Martyn's aim was to excite children with every element of the show and not do anything that allowed them to settle;
- At the start of the show there is an initial contact between the performer and the audience, and then, when the music starts, he sings in a high falsetto - a peculiar experience to see a grown man singing in a high voice;
- Martyn talked about the huge influences of everyday experience of classical music such as Star Wars, Dr Who, and other TV music, even pop music features in this piece;
- He enjoyed the challenge of communicating in a direct way without the paraphernalia of opera, writing for an audience with no knowledge of history or sense of irony;
- The director's notes were to make the first five seconds of every piece persuasive - they are the essential moments to establish and pace the rest of the piece;
- Martyn aimed to capture the feel and sensation of the story as well as a range of different musicalities and theatricalities, as well as through spoken text;
- One potential problem in writing opera is the notion of a proscenium arch, that it is "wellmade theatre" and too far away from the audience;
- Worked with Hullabaloo and students at Durham University - using elements of devised theatre - starting from physicality - a way of bringing

- people in. Singers playing the piano, then being a tree, then playing a tree, then playing a harp, then being a bear - an ensemble of possibilities;
- This was then translated into a professional context, finding singer/musicians to make the piece closer to theatre than opera;
  - The cast was 5 performers doing everything - using different aspects of their practice to communicate the physicality and feel of the music.

## **Skitterbang Island**

### **Jonathan Lloyd – Artistic Director, Polka Theatre**

- When I started at Polka I knew I wanted to do an opera for children - however, I struggled with the 'why' of doing one;
- The form and content have to be equally important and memorable;
- Polka has a strong loyal audience for early years work, so we thought of doing an opera for early years in the summer slot - which is used for commissioning original work for an early years audience and is a good chance to experiment;
- The architecture of the space of the Adventure Theatre in Polka presents its own challenge and question - putting an opera singer in a tiny room - what would happen? At the heart of the commission was to create something epic yet intimate;
- Playwright Phil Porter has worked with composer Martin Lord - together they have lots of experience of writing for young people. Phil came up with the following idea for an opera - the origin of which was from a friend;
- Idea: a ship is wrecked on snowy beach, various items are scattered around the wreck, a Yeti beast is picking through debris, he takes food and a gramophone, meanwhile a little girl is cold and lost, the beast makes the gramophone play, and teaches himself how to sing, the girl crawls into beast's cave and sleeps, we find out that the beast is friendly and looks after the little girl, in the distance the girl's uncle – the singer on the gramophone record - is looking for her in the snow;
- The excitement of the story helped Jonathan to decide on both the 'what' and the 'why' of making an early years opera - the piece would have voices with different textures, big emotions and be both epic and intimate;
- The emotional context seems vital to opera - singing is the only way to express the emotion;
- There seemed to be an element missing and through conversations with Peter Glanville of Little Angel and Jo Belloli, Early Years expert, puppets were chosen as a way into the story;
- A meeting was set up between Peter and the writer and composer which went very well and led to a week of research and development with two puppeteers and two opera singers.

### **Peter Glanville – Artistic Director, Little Angel Theatre**

- The first meeting between Peter, the writer and composer was when he was working at an RSC workshop, playing with *the Tempest* and cardboard and exploring using classical instruments for the people marooned. It was an interesting way to meet - seeing the process, working on something rather than just sitting round and discussing things;

- In the week's research and development they clarified the story and discovered which musical motifs they were exploring they also played with different scales;
- After the R+D they auditioned for the puppeteer, and kept the singers;
- Before rehearsals began they had 2 more days R+D days, which included mocking up puppets to be worked with;
- The central question was how to work with two opera singers and a puppeteer. Peter tried to see as much opera with puppets as possible, which made him realise how every movement says so much. The tension, the speed, the puppet's relationship to gravity. How much you do or don't do to leave space for imagination to bring it to life and then bringing it together with music and singing;
- The aim was to really enjoy and be consumed by the wonderful music and voices and to give that more weight than with a theatre piece where everything is woven together in a slightly different way;
- Peter struggled with bringing all the different elements together and getting the right balance between first and third person narratives. A more personal voice and a focused picture in terms of the puppetry. When narrating action the singers are more disparate;
- The piece is working on 3 scales - epic quality - small tabletop scale for larger bird eye view, mid scale for seeing Skitterbang - the yeti/collector, and then the whole space for the cave. The more intimate the story, the larger the performing area that is used;
- One of the big questions was how not to scare the children in the audience with the big voices of the performers in a tiny space - so they started toning everything down;
- Important not to lose the sense of intimacy involved with the world;
- The core music provides a sense of security against the feeling of loss and insecurity, allowing the children to feel that they are in a secure enough space to be able to explore difficult emotions - loss, meeting new people, etc.;
- Very exciting to mix opera and puppetry, moving away from working in a naturalistic way so that the form will be emotional and sensory;
- The non-naturalistic, stylized movement of puppets is not something children have a problem with at all;
- The auditions proved a challenge - how to bring these characters to life through puppetry? Singers are going to have to be able to operate puppets - feet or arms and feel confident about moving;
- They auditioned 12 puppeteers - looking for one with a strong singing voice. Didn't choose the best puppeteer in the end but she had a responsiveness to the music that was fantastic. As important as the singer responding to the puppets.

## **ROUND TABLE**

### **LUNCH**

After lunch the delegates saw the WNO Max production of *A Little Princess*. Following this, there was a Q+A with the writer and composer.

## **A Little Princess**

### **Rhian**

We're going to talk a little bit about *A Little Princess*.

Commissioning process - I did exactly what John talked about - speed dated Helen and Sarah. Helen has done a lot of work with St David's Hall - Tiddly Proms. And Sarah works a lot with Theatr Iolo.

I wanted to make a piece for young people, primarily for reception classes. We'd done a lot of work with year 5 and 6 classes but not a lot for early years. I wanted to interrogate how we go about making a show for them.

This time it was much more problematic. We became aware of the importance of preparing people to see this. The workshop element kept us in touch with that. Audiences needed to explore the piece before they came and watched it.

### **Sarah**

Process - I didn't have a passion beforehand. But I had created a lot of plays for 3,4,5 year olds and most of those had included a lot of live music - working with actor/musicians.

Rhian had seen them and felt there was a sensitivity there. I'd always liked the story of the princess and the pea. But felt the story was too slight to fill out a 45 min play. For opera you don't need as much story as for a play - a little goes a long way.

Initially I thought we'd improvise along with the singers and that they'd spin libretto out of the air. But then I realised that the improvisatory, playful part of the process was Helen and I working together as the devising process was difficult for chorus members. What we did end up doing was giving Helen a list of words of the type of princess that a prince would reject.

### **Helen**

We took some musical ideas to our first day with volunteers from the chorus who said they'd like to come and play for a few days. Eight on the first day and five on the second day.

Took the idea of the different qualities of the characters and how we could show that through the way they'd sing. How physically she could make herself two different people.

Journey to write a piece - context of wanting there to be a performance for children to watch - also working with a specific company. Taking chorus members and members of the orchestra and saying come on a journey with us. Not many had done that much education work.

### **Rhian**

The constraint of the process: huge schedule for the main-scale production that we had to fit within. Sarah's main rehearsal was in December and then it opened in

February with a weekend here and there in between. It's not ideal. But that's how it had to work.

### **Sarah**

Only having one week of rehearsal was terrifying for me - to condense it all into a fragmented process. But on the plus side we've been devising it for a year and a half - so there was some continuity of personnel which has allowed the work to develop in different ways.

From our initial pool of volunteers we did another weekend - to see if there was anyone else to work with. Two baritones and five or six sopranos auditioned, from whom we selected those who are now touring the piece.

Jettisoned normal working method (devising from no text) - developed ideas but there was a feeling that they needed the musical notes before they could start to move and inhabit their characters. Lots of playing but on day one of actual rehearsal period they needed the text and music. Because of the short rehearsal period I worked out a lot of moves in advance - something I'd never do with a theatre piece. And the singers really needed that.

I couldn't believe the sound that came out of the singers' mouths. That level of skill singing at you was so exhilarating. For the singers and musicians to really try and communicate with the children was a huge departure and showed real bravery.

### **Helen**

I wanted it to be able to tell a story musically, so that, just by listening, you could sense the story and mood. Didn't want to give a confusing message so there is sad music when he's sad.

Initial ideas may have got lost along the way but the vein of the idea remains. First ideas were that the wrong princesses didn't have to be ugly or vain just that she might not be right for him and so would be singing in a different key from the music of the ball.

A lot of things that I've written have been for 4 year olds and younger, but I'm not writing for them to sing it. Instead I'm taking them on a journey. Made the introduction gentle, bringing one instrument in at a time. In a workshop setting they would hear all the instruments separately so in a performance setting I wanted to allow some time and space to hear those different instruments.

First time she sings high and loud is a chance for the singer to test how much she can push it, and how sensitive the audiences' ears are.

**Q** Were you forced to change your methodology? What did that stop you from being able to achieve? Did it give you anything new?

### **Sarah**

Much less sense of ownership for the performers. Loss of unquantifiable moments when stuff just happens. No time for experimenting - especially with emotional qualities.



**Q** Length of rehearsal period? Performers?

**Sarah**

Combination of both. And, as choristers - singers not used to having individual attention of a director. They don't normally get that kind of focus. It took them a while to work out how it was working for them. They also learned that making stage pictures on a small stage is a very different skill from being on a massive stage in a huge crowd. A few inches alter the picture.

**Q** Chorus members used? Plan? Financial? Couldn't look beyond?

**Rhian**

Try to use choristers as much as I can. Especially as this piece was conceived to go on tour with the main production to the same places. There were lots of constraints that I put on the process.

**Sarah**

Making direct eye-contact with audience really improved. Huge learning curve.

**Q** Singers coming from a different tradition from actors. Seductive qualities of their voices. Can we forget it's an opera? Can we forget it's for children? Bringing certain preconceptions into the room? Technical constraints? Old habits.?

**Sarah**

And there were times they were really frustrated with me because I wasn't giving them the kind of direction they're used to. Personalities involved. The soprano singer likes certainty.

**Q** Text - what's on the written page? Suddenly there's a score. Lose playfulness.

**Helen**

Three different characters. Curator. Princess. Queen. Two different parts of her voice. In opera singing world - the curator was very similar to the princess. Certain words that she was going for in the singing - but couldn't hear the word, 'palace' - because of the way she was singing it there were certain things that weren't quite in her enough. Right notes. Then she started singing like Lily Allen which is why we have the Essex curator because it solved the problem - different personalities, different way of delivering the music.

**Q** Curious about audience. Reaction. Difference between girls and boys in the way they reacted to the opera?

**Sarah**

Yes - 10 year old boys were very well behaved but you really felt for them. At 4 and 5 on the whole there was no gender difference. A little bit older and boys aren't as engaged. The little girls spot the dress from the start, 'when's she going to put the dress on?' Conscious decision not to make the dress pink and not for the princess to say 'yes' straight away.

**Q** Rejecting people because they were clever? And not getting a comeuppance?

## **Helen**

'Clever' is one of the people he does dance with - does dance with Clever, Dutiful and Quick. Positive qualities but still not right for each other - can be heard in the discordance of the music at those points

**Q** How do the children in the audience react to actors playing more than one character?

## **Helen**

Last October we worked with a group of children and we took elements in to see if they would understand that the bassoon was the King and if they could tell when the Princess was being one part or the other. The children laughed and said, 'it's pretty obvious'. There hasn't been any point along the way that has seemed to be a problem. They just get on with it.

## **END OF Q+A**

## **TEA**

## **Paul – Royal Opera House**

- Today has been about the bringing together of two different worlds - opera world and children's theatre, as well as people with a foot in both camps. We have been teasing out differences and similarities;
- For the final part of today we're going to split into 6 groups and come up with a series of provocations for pushing the work forward;
- The three areas are – creative and artistic process; marketing and audience development; the word 'opera' how do you sell this kind of work, what do you say? Inclusion - how do you widen inclusion - do those people want to be included? Collaboration and dialogue?
- It's a very young genre with the giant opera companies only making work for younger audiences in the last 10-15 years. Learning what it is to make it work for children.

## **Provocations**

### **Group 1**

The challenge of creating opera for young people is a balance of different timescales and processes acknowledging music's journey into theatre and supporting artist development.

### **Group 2**

In children's theatre we try to create something which is intimate and engaging. Perhaps opera does the opposite of this - it alienates and creates a space between the audience and the action. A space which is fantastic and heightened and rich but perhaps gets in the way of empathizing and losing oneself in a character the way theatre does.

Does someone singing an aria have subtext?

Opera offers different kinds of levels - human emotion is a different kind of emotion expressed through the music.

### **Group 3**

We need to break down barriers, say hello and goodbye to the audience when they are in the theatre. Is opera a good term or a bad term, or not an important term?

### **Group 4**

Our first statement: Don't apologise for the word opera - if we don't define the word opera then other people will. Open the buildings up; provide cheap tickets – it is important for people to have ownership of the building.

Getting people involved in opera is important - let the form market itself

### **Group 5**

Don't just go and see but go and play. Spend time to play with each other and then change will happen – how do we facilitate this? Tension and conflict is the essence of performance.

### **Group 6**

You can't force it, it's all organic – it can confirm and broaden expectations.

How do we widen the audience, and support artistic development?

**David Wood** wrapped up the day, thanking all the speakers and organisers and impressing the importance of 'Story' on all the work and conversations.

Knight Crew:

<https://www.glyndebourne.com/opera-archive/explore-our-operas/explore-knight-crew/knight-crew-about-the-project/>

My Mother Told Me Not To Stare: <https://mymothertoldmenottostare.wordpress.com/>

Skitterbang Island:

<https://littleangeltheatre.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Skitterbang-Island-The-Education-Pack.pdf>