

Go, Jerry! Go, Jerry!

Jerry Springer – The Opera is coming to London's National Theatre.

Antonia Couling caught up with the show's creative team

Until the 1960s, when there was still only one television channel in Britain, families would gather round the set of an evening and if a Verdi opera was on that night, then that is what they would watch. In recent years, with the fragmentation of TV via its many dedicated channels, the arts have been steadily removed from mainstream TV and divided and pigeon-holed, so that they will now only be accessed by those who are already informed of their existence. For an opera to enter a family living room uninvited (yet accepted), may never happen again.

Accessibility to opera has been in crisis for a number of years now. Programmes like *Operatunity!* (the

competitive nationwide search for opera singers which so grabbed Britain's attention), may have done more for the genre than the makers ever envisaged, but unless we build upon that kind of solid and truly democratic ground, a last-chance opportunity may be lost to fully open the doors of the opera world to the public once and for all.

Fortuitously (for Britain at least) following hard upon the heels of *Operatunity!* comes *Jerry Springer – The Opera*. It's a bizarre about-face for the medium that has contributed more than any other to sucking the life out of so many areas of culture. And the infamous chat show that requires people to reveal

their deepest secrets to their nearest and dearest on national TV and invariably ends up in violent brawls with more bleeps than a phonepad just might help to fuel a renaissance in popularity for the operatic form.

Cries of dismay are no doubt echoing in certain quarters along the lines of 'Really!' and 'Has it come to this!' But composer Richard Thomas is keen to emphasise that his choice for subject matter was in no way a dumbing down of the genre or a cynical attempt to pull in the crowds: 'I think it's just an absolute gift for an opera: eight people screaming at each other at the same time in a very heightened, extreme way. You can obviously just put those in harmonies and then you've got the audience baying for blood, which is a gift for a chorus. It just struck me one evening when I was watching it. I used to watch tonnes of it and then there was one day when the whole thing was bleeped out and I was just getting annoyed from a kind of censorship point of view and thinking, well we *know* they're swearing at each other... and I thought imagine what that would be like if you heard it anyway. And because opera is so good at taking any extreme I thought it would be perfect.'

The idea first came to life in the form of a 'Jerry Springer Night' in 2001, with Thomas performing an embryonic and incomplete first half of the work at the Battersea Arts Centre, alone at a piano to an audience of seven (who gave it a standing ovation). After each night that followed the audience was invited to give feedback and from there Thomas was offered the opportunity to continue development of the work at the BAC. Further workshop performances followed, with director and co-writer Stewart Lee coming on board, and culminating in a run at the BAC in February 2002 and then a concert performance at the Edinburgh Festival last summer. Along the way, the writers have refused several offers of West End and Broadway runs, preferring instead to continue the opera's development. So for the last few months Lee and Thomas have been honing and rewriting the piece.

Not all the singers will be opera singers, as soprano Loré Lixenberg, who has been a cast member ('and guinea pig') since the work's inception, says: 'There's a real mixture. There are about four opera singers but then two of them are crossover and there are quite a lot of jazz singers in the ensemble – it reflects on their character. I think the point about the music is that whatever style it uses for that particular nanosecond, it's always very dramatic. The libretto is also so amazing and a lot of librettos aren't. It's great to have a libretto where every sentence is either funny or dramatic and relevant. There's no fat on it.'

'When I was writing it,' chips in Thomas, 'I consciously wrote the principal roles for opera singers and the chorus to be more music theatre because the music flips in style from one thing to the other – between the chamber orchestra on one side of the stage and the big band on the other.'

Director Stewart Lee comments: 'The music supports the words and the words tell a story, and you know where you are. It doesn't seem to require interpretation as a director. This show puts the ball in the

Diaper Man, one of the 'guests' in Jerry Springer – The Opera



audience's court – you allow them to make the judgements. And it's a happy accident that you are completely able to sidestep the contrivance of narrative in opera or musical theatre, because the first half of this is just a *Jerry Springer Show*, and so people just step forward and tell their story, whereas when people do that in an opera or a musical I always still think – why are they doing that?! Then you've softened up sceptics watching who are not used to the opera genre and by the time it gets to the second half which is much more like a narrative, they are completely ready to go with it.'

I saw the show at the BAC in 2002 and it certainly works. It's well-written, well-crafted, extremely witty and (God forbid!) it's entertaining. Thomas has also achieved the expression of character through the music – something that is often missing in modern opera. Lee points out that this may also be due to 'the lack of ego in what he's written. You have the feeling that Richard is servicing the story and the characters rather than putting forward *bis* sound and what *be's* like.' But Thomas himself modestly insists it's because 'I also absolutely love the human voice. I'm obsessed by it. Speaking, singing ... Language is music and you can reduce everything to rhythm, tempi changes and word rhythms.' He is also clearly a theatre animal: 'I knew I wanted to write shows. I saw *Guys and Dolls* here when I was 17, and that was the best thing I think I'd ever seen. I queued up every night for £2 tickets. Every song was encored three or four times. It was the most alive night out I've ever had, and so I think my whole life has just been about trying to recreate that evening! And this is as close as I've got so far.'

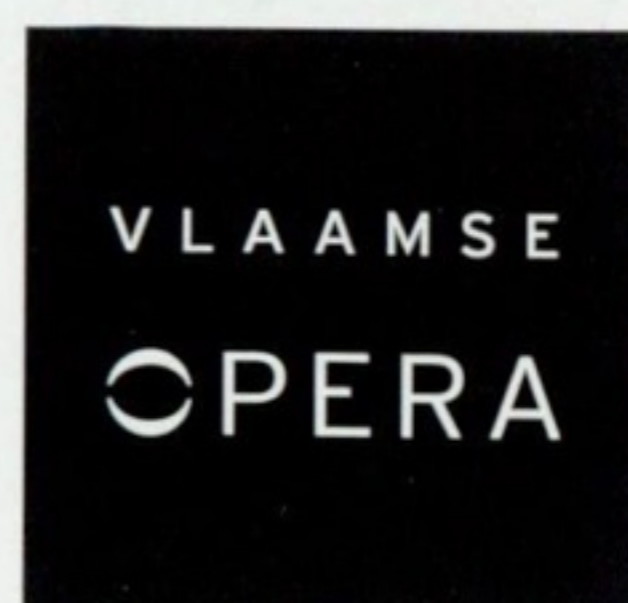
Despite the opera's undisputed success so far, people have raised the question of whether it is in fact an opera. Loré Lixenberg says: 'I've had a LOT of that. People who came to Battersea and said "But it's not really a proper opera, is it?". It's to do with this definition of opera. It's a political thing, because opera is done in an opera house with certain production values and so on, with a certain style of singing and a certain style of music that is consistent all the way through. If you define opera purely by vocal style, which a lot of people do, then it's not an opera, but if you define it by the dramatic nature, then it is.'

And 'Jerry Springer – The Musical' would definitely not work. It is precisely with this kind of biting subject matter that opera comes into its own. A musical would render it too sentimental and even if you made it a heavy rock musical, the bite would not be sustained. And there's the social commentary aspect as well as its subversiveness – let's not forget the stir that Da Ponte's *Nozze di Figaro* caused. Jerry Springer himself, who has seen the show, has pointed out the some interesting aspects of the work, as Lee relates: 'He said that in high culture the themes of operas are about family disloyalty and incest and families falling apart and they're all for very high stakes, and he said that the same things unfold on his show, but because they are about working class people they don't have the same sort of grandeur, although the actual human issues are the same.'

'And that was evident the first time I saw what Richard had done. It wasn't the funny stuff that struck you, what surprised me was that he had managed to make bits of it emotional in a way that when you do watch those talk shows now they seem upsetting, whereas before I would have dismissed them as nothing. It dignifies the people involved. When people wrote about it in the summer, pretty much exclusively they said it dignified the people involved, except the *Daily Mail* which said it was an attack the working class scum of America, but obviously that's their own agenda.' 'But then,' pipes up Thomas, '*Marxism Today* said it was fab, so ...'

It will be interesting to see how the opera is received. Apparently the box office at the National have had people saying 'We want to book tickets for your new opera – who is Jerry Springer, and what is it about?' Similarly of course there will also be people who know nothing about opera but are familiar with Jerry Springer. It's a potentially explosive mix, certainly, but definitely progressive and exciting and a chance for opera to burst from its bubble. So, via a television show that has taken TV for the people to its extreme, new life is being breathed into an old art form. Whatever your perspective, clear your mind and see the show.

Jerry Springer – The Opera runs at the National's Lyttelton Theatre from 9 April to 5 July. To book tickets, call +44 (0)20 7452 3000, or fax +44 (0)20 7452 3030 or visit the website at www.nationaltheatre.org.uk. Tickets range from £12-£38. The show is not suitable for children



GENERAL DIRECTOR Marc Clémeur
PRINCIPAL CONDUCTOR Ivan Törzs
GUEST CONDUCTOR Silvio Varviso

OPERA

LUISA MILLER

Ivan Törzs – Guy Joosten – Johannes Leiacker – Klaus Bruns
Fiorella Burato – Carl Tanner – Bruno Caproni – Asklar Abdrazakov
Urban Malmberg – Milena Kitic

ANTWERP → 20, 23, 26, 28|9 AND 1, 4|10 GHENT → 11, 14, 17, 19, 21|10

ACHILLEUS | Wim Henderickx

Michel Tilkin – Jakob F. Schokking

Johanette Zomer – Corinne Romijn – Quirijn de Lang – Kor-Jan Dusseljee
Huub Claessens – Wilfried Van den Brande

GHENT → 30|10 AND 2|11

LES CONTES D'HOFFMANN

Patrick Fournillier – David McVicar – Roni Toren – Brigitte Reiffenstuel
Heather Buck – Fionnuala McCarthy | Mireille Delunsch – Barbara Haveman
Paula Rasmussen – Gerard Powers – Philippe Rouillon – François-Nicolas Geslot

ANTWERP → 31|10 AND 2, 4, 8, 11, 13|11 GHENT → 22, 25, 28, 30|11 AND 2|12

HÄNSEL UND GRETEL

Stefan Klingele – Andreas Homoki – Wolfgang Gussmann

Nidia Palacios – Natalie Karl – Irmgard Vilmaier – Doris Lamprecht
Xenia Konsek – Werner Van Mechelen

ANTWERP → 9, 11, 13, 16, 19, 21|12 GHENT → 8, 10, 13, 16, 18|01|2003

KÁŤA KABANOVÁ

Friedemann Layer – Robert Carsen – Patrick Kinmonth

Michaela Kaune – Kathryn Harries – Natascha Petrinsky – Richard Decker
Yves Saelens – Guy De Mey – Jozsef Gregor

ANTWERP → 3, 5, 7, 10, 13, 15|2 GHENT → 25, 28|2 AND 2, 5, 7|3

IL PIRATA | Vincenzo Bellini | CONCERT VERSION

Ivan Törzs – Peter Dijkstra

Michèle Crider – Susannah Self – Zoran Todorovich – Zeljko Lucic – Kurt Gysen

GHENT → 22, 26, 29|2 AND 6|3 ANTWERP → 3, 10|3

IDOMENEO, RE DI CRETA

Gerard Korsten – David McVicar – Michael Vale

Kristine Jepson – Olga Pasichnyk – Lyne Fortin – Deon van der Walt | Bruce Ford
Russell Smythe – Lorenzo Carola – Kurt Gysen

GHENT → 27, 30|3 AND 2, 4, 7|4 ANTWERP → 15, 17, 20, 23, 25, 28|4

ARABELLA

Ivan Törzs – Francisco Negrin – Paul Steinberg – Jon Morrell

Camilla Nylund – Lisa Larsson – Catherine Wyn Rogers – Caroline Stein
Wojtek Drabowicz – Evan Bowers – Jozsef Gregor

GHENT → 4, 7, 9, 12, 15|5 ANTWERP → 22, 25, 28, 31|5 AND 2, 5|6

VENETIAN JOURNAL | SATYRICON | Bruno Maderna

Luca Pfaff – Georges Lavaudant – Nicky Rieti – Jean-Pierre Vergier

Sally Burgess – Corinne Romijn – Valerie Debize – Johannes Chum – Nigel Robson

GHENT → 15, 17, 18, 20, 22|06 ANTWERP → 30|6 AND 2, 4, 6, 8, 10|7

JEANNE D'ARC AU BÛCHER | CONCERT VERSION

Silvio Varviso – Kurt Bikkembergs

Mireille Capelle – Marie-Noëlle de Callatay – Anja Van Engeland – Susannah Self
Philippe Sireuil – Guy De Mey – Chris De Moor

GHENT → 26|06 ANTWERP → 27|6

RECITALS

Felicity Lott – Thomas Allen | ANTWERP → 27|10

Cheryl Studer | GHENT → 27|11

Vesselina Kasarova | ANTWERP → 10|12

Waltraud Meier | GHENT → 17|01

Sergei Leiferkus | ANTWERP → 27|02

Christopher Maltman | ANTWERP → 31|03

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