



Illustration 1: Soprano Jill Gomez and the author, Covent Garden's first Dramaturg, photographed during an interval in a dress-rehearsal, 1990.

## Chapter Twelve

### Phantom at the Royal Opera<sup>1</sup>

As the Royal Opera House (ROH) staged its grand reopening in 1999, two of its former bosses filed conflicting accounts of its recent history.<sup>2</sup> Both John Tooley (1970-88) and Jeremy Isaacs (1988-97) describe the House's considerable achievements over the past half-century; and Isaacs' part in pushing through the magnificent rebuilding was heroic. What we still want to know is why things also went so cataclysmically wrong.

Isaacs had come to the job after six years as head of Channel 4 (he was, in fact, the founding chief executive), where, thanks to him, the performing arts had been given a good run – in one remarkable year the channel broadcast twelve operas. Sir Claus Moser, chairman of the ROH Board, had invited Isaacs onto it in 1985 and within three years he found himself general director. Tooley argues that the job

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1. Source: 'How Long before Ofop Steps In?', *London Review of Books*, 16 March 2000, pp. 26-27.

2. John Tooley, *In House: Covent Garden, 50 Years of Opera and Ballet* (London: Faber, 1999), and Jeremy Isaacs, *Never Mind the Moon: My Time at the Royal Opera House* (London: Bantam, 1999).

needs theatrical experience, but Moser's Board took a different view, passing over the claims of music and theatre men like Humphrey Burton, John Drummond and Brian McMaster, and instead gambling that Isaacs would find a proper place for Covent Garden in a televisual age.

Isaacs knew that the House was adrift. He looked forward to bringing a sense of purpose and adventure to the programming, as I did when I agreed to join him in the new post of dramaturg. My own brief was to be 'involved in discussion of the planning and rationale of all ... opera productions' and responsible for arranging lectures and other events. I had seen 'dramaturgy' at work in German theatres and knew something of what Edmund Tracey and Nicholas John had been doing at the English National Opera. No one did that kind of thing at Covent Garden, and the mail I received suggested that others, too, thought it was high time they started. Those in the House were less certain. An opera house is a trade- and craft-oriented place in which every seamstress and stagehand knows just how the show ought to go. Hiring an outsider to have a say in that was not altogether popular.

When Tooley stepped down in 1988 he'd been with the House since 1955, first as assistant to David Webster, the Liverpool department-store manager who'd built it up from its wartime use as a dance-hall, and then for eighteen years as general director. The high point of Webster's reign was the Georg Solti era (1961-71). Tooley presided over the rather lesser era of Colin Davis (1971-86). Things, indeed, began to fall apart when Davis' partnerships with Peter Hall and Götz Friedrich broke down. Tooley dutifully chronicles the years from 1947 to 1988, but only comes alive in his final 80 pages, with a disgruntled assessment of his successor. Isaacs for his part is critical, if not harshly so, of Tooley. He is, if anything, tougher on himself and disarmingly candid about some (but not all) of the things that went wrong. His tone is characteristically brisk and bullish, his account not short on pride that he achieved so much.

The one point on which Tooley and Isaacs are agreed is that the House has always been strapped for cash, and under Thatcher became impossible to manage sensibly. Public subsidy, as a proportion of income, was cut back from 56 per cent in 1980-81 to 37 per cent in 1991-92 – less than half what comparable Continental houses get. The House struggled to make up the shortfall with private sponsorship (up from 9 to 19 per cent over the same eleven years) and huge hikes at the box office (seat prices up by 126 per cent over the five seasons 1986-91, compared with a retail price index rise of 37 per cent).

The consequence of this was that wealthy donors had too much influence on policy, and that a great many people were priced out. The general impression – which did not wholly accord with the facts – was that the taxpayer was stumping up to subsidize the pleasures of the rich. (No one complained that the premium prices paid by the wealthy subsidized the cheaper seats.) Guardians of public money of every political colour from David Mellor and Gerald Kaufman (described by Isaacs as possessing 'toxic conceitedness') to Chris Smith were not amused.

How, people asked, was the 'income requirement' of the Arts Council's most voracious client arrived at? Were the singers' fees not excessive, did the stage crews not live the life of Riley? A succession of investigations by expensive consultants initially acquitted the House of poor housekeeping, though, as Isaacs' regime drew to its close, they did pick

up on much that was wrong. In 1983, an investigation of both the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the ROH, commissioned by Thatcher from Clive Priestley, an adviser to the Cabinet Office, concluded that the House was efficiently run and should be more generously supported. A one-off increase in the grant followed, but Priestley's crucial recommendation, that the annual grant be pegged to inflation, was disregarded. Opera and ballet were luxuries that must be paid for by their audiences. Cash was now coming in from private and corporate sources, and seat prices went through the roof. For a short time, the books were balanced. But the upswing in self-generated income was taken by the government as reason to reduce public funding further. The recession of the late 1980s took its toll of the private sponsors. The House began to falter just as Isaacs' more adventurous repertory came on stream.

Tooley attributes the crisis to Isaacs' refusal to be deflected from his artistic goals. He himself had been careful not to programme anything that was likely to embarrass the House with the bank. But even so, during his last eight years in charge, it was in the black only twice, and that includes the year of the exceptional one-off rescue package secured by Priestley. Tooley had a fine record of play-safe productions, in which the world's best singers could appear without needing too much rehearsal. Ironically, it was thanks to Tooley's legacy (an artistic doldrums, according to his successor) that Isaacs could put on the modernist triumphs of Berio's *Un re in ascolto* and Birtwistle's *Gawain*. But there's no denying there were also some terrible Tooley-hatched turkeys: Andrei Serban's *Fidelio*, Bill Bryden's *Parsifal*, John Copley's *Norma*, the Lyubimov *Rheingold*. There were also bizarre mismatches between conductor, director and designer – something my own arrival was supposed to help correct.

Isaacs knew he had to do better, to restore a sense of excitement with more new productions, if possible commissioned from the new wave of British directors and designers who'd been ignored by the previous regime. It would be expensive, but he would somehow find the money. Tooley expresses surprise and dismay that Isaacs kept on so few of his own closest associates to help him achieve these aims – rash and ill-advised though they seemed. But this scarcely corresponds with the facts. So far as I'm aware, the only notable change was the replacement of Tooley's technical director with John Harrison, who was to work miracles with the moribund stage equipment and play a key role in devising the stage mechanics of the new theatre.

Isaacs did create one or two wholly new jobs, bringing in John Cox, for example, as director of productions. The hope was that a more carefully thought-out approach would result in a better alignment between the House's musical strengths and the theatrical side. There were, however, serious obstacles, one of which was Bernard Haitink, the music director recently appointed under Tooley. Haitink had come from Glyndebourne, where he had never had to conduct anything that taxed his limited understanding of opera as music theatre. He had apparently accepted the job at Covent Garden on the understanding that he would be able to conduct the *Ring*. No one was unduly concerned about the limited time he would be able to give to the House, or about the desirability of his being involved in the planning and production processes. He was a world-renowned orchestral conductor and that was enough. But of course it wasn't, and Tooley's appointment of Jeffrey Tate as principal conductor made little sense

because his strengths and Haitink's were not complementary. Both were chasing the German repertory, leaving the Italian one to ad hoc guest conductors.

Lacking any distinctive theatrical taste of his own, Haitink became the victim of those who had to decide things for him. In Michael Waldman's unsparing television documentary *The House*, the hapless Haitink is seen to be flabbergasted as the head of the opera company, Nicholas Payne, tries to sell him the director Richard Jones' scheme for the *Ring*. In *Die Walküre*, Fricka would arrive not in a chariot drawn by rams – as specified by the composer – but in a collapsible car. 'What can I say?' Haitink sighs, and the show goes ahead. What he made of the obscenely gross, nude Rhinedaughters or bag-lady Norns is not hard to guess. Before that, in his first *Ring*, he had endured Yuri Lyubimov's crass *Rheingold* (Lyubimov had been Haitink's own choice) and, when that was wisely aborted by Isaacs, the claustrophobic vision, inspired by the Washington subway, of Götz Friedrich's second-hand *Ring*, which was hastily pulled in to fill the gap.

Haitink also had to keep his head well down through Bill Bryden's 1988 *Parsifal* (another own goal: he'd imagined that the director of *The Mysteries* would be just the man for Wagner's sacred festival drama). He turned down the idea of a collaboration with Elijah Moshinsky (one of the few people with whom he might have struck up an understanding partnership) on the grounds that Moshinsky's positioning of the chorus in *Lohengrin* had not made the most of their volume.

Had Haitink been working at the Met these problems wouldn't have arisen – there, Isaacs observes, all that is usually demanded of the *mise-en-scène* is that it be 'lavish'. Isaacs, quite rightly, had other ambitions; but they were never going to fit in with Haitink. Another serious problem was that Haitink showed little interest in the day-to-day affairs of the House, nor did he take the lead in artistic policy and planning. Nominally, he was music director (and would be until 2002), which ought to have meant that he was boss in his own theatre, as Solti had so notably been. But he wasn't, and although the orchestra loved him, his effect on morale in general was not good. Nor, when the crisis deepened, was he there to talk to the world and win sympathy for the House.

All of this meant that it was necessary to have an administrative head of the company who was also, in effect, its artistic head. Isaacs' plan had been to bring one in from outside, which would have involved 'dropping' Paul Findlay, who after years of helping to make things work for Tooley, was at last in the driving seat as director of opera. When Isaacs mentioned his plan to Tooley over breakfast at the Savoy, a snag emerged. Aware that Haitink had decided that the experienced Findlay was someone he could rely on, Tooley told Isaacs: 'Keep Findlay and you have Haitink, or you lose both. That you cannot afford.' It was advice Isaacs had to swallow.

My own job as dramaturg and John Cox's as production director were, I suspect, intended at least in part to curb Findlay's excesses and help sift his good ideas (of which there was never any shortage) from the bad. Isaacs set up an artistic planning group, chaired by himself with Haitink, Findlay, the casting director Peter Katona, Cox and me as members. When we met we reviewed the future schedule and discussed ideas for new productions. Haitink was seldom present, nor was anyone else from the music staff. On the rare and refreshing occasions when Jeffrey Tate was there, lots of

ideas were aired. But the group was treated as advisory, few decisions were taken and nothing was minuted. When his proposals were contested, as they often were, Findlay insisted that he discuss the matter privately with Isaacs later, and Isaacs acquiesced. When Cox or I had doubts about Findlay's schemes, we were overruled.

After the first three instalments of the Friedrich *Ring*, it was agreed at the usual post-production meeting that we should draft some notes on the production to be sent to Friedrich. The draft was sent to Haitink for his comments. 'I feel I must warn you', he replied, 'that should this list of alterations actually be mailed to him, the opera house can surely ... accept the fact that Götz will not return to Covent Garden. In any event, I do not wish to be associated with such a letter.' So it wasn't sent and more's the pity, not least because I knew Götz well enough to be sure he'd have been glad to have our comments and to take them seriously.

I tremble to recall the *Fidelio* of 1990, in which the director, Adolf Dresen, could not be dissuaded from rewriting the German dialogue in a fatuous attempt to give it 'relevance'. He got his come-uppance at a rehearsal from the conductor, Christoph von Dohnányi. Dresen was spending so long making a hash of the chorus blocking that Dohnányi took control of the stage as well as the pit, leaving Dresen to prowl around at the back of the stalls. Why Findlay wanted to revive this *Fidelio* is incomprehensible, as is the fact that essential changes to the production were forbidden in the interest of remaining faithful to Dresen's wretched concept of the opera, even though Dresen himself did not return for the revival.

In the end, Isaacs disposed of Findlay and brought in Nicholas Payne from Opera North, as he had always wanted to, but by then it was too late. By laying off staff (myself included), constricting the repertory and slashing budgets, the House was pulled back from a deficit approaching £4 million; but irreversible damage had been done in those first four years of Isaacs' regime. Much on the stage was still of high quality, yet it was quite evident that too little had been done to forestall trouble. It wouldn't be right to attribute the House's entire financial plight to artistic recklessness but that did play some part. On the other hand, Isaacs isn't wrong to insist that the bold programming, with its balance between crowd-pleasers and rarities, kept the box office buoyant when the high prices might have sunk it.

Through all this, Isaacs was pushing ahead with the immensely troublesome development plans, which involved temporarily closing the opera house and devolving the second ballet company to Birmingham. Again, I think this was right. What is hard to understand is why he made life so difficult by taking a confrontational stance with the media and with the politically sensitive – and doubtless exasperating – keepers of the public purse. It was one thing to slash the freebies to the great and the good, quite another to rob critics of their second ticket, deny them open questions at a crucial press conference, fire Ewen Balfour, his popular and respected head of PR, appoint a new PR chief in the shape of the phone-slinging Keith Cooper and allow unconditional access to the cameras that put the House on television in January 1996.

Maybe it is some consolation to Isaacs that when Lord Chadlington, the head of Shandwick, one of the most successful PR firms of modern times, assumed the board chairmanship in 1996, he, too, cocked up in this direction. It may be that there is something about running an opera house that goes to the head of almost everyone who

comes in from outside and thinks they can do it – and in that sense Tooley’s insistence on theatre experience as a requisite in an opera-house boss makes sense. With hindsight nothing in the adversarial Thatcherite climate was more important than getting public perceptions right. The House took far too long to learn that you put the artists in the shop window and keep everyone else out of sight.

Isaacs would perhaps have done better if he had taken the full measure of the resistance to a Royal Opera House that swallowed a lion’s share of the arts budget but seemed to be so prodigal in its management and so exclusive in its clientele. He did fight hard to win recognition for the House’s thriving programme of children’s education, but the press never really wanted to know, and the Arts Council crassly continued – as it would continue to do – to bang on about finding new audiences and increasing ‘access’. Isaacs did make efforts to give the House the accessibility that can only come from exposure on television – in 1991-92 3.3 million viewers tuned in to five productions. But it was not enough, and his inability to crack the in-house union problems – essential if the cost of televising shows was not to be prohibitive – did not help.

I often wonder whether it wouldn’t have been better to have had a major clear-out at the end of the Tooley regime, thus enabling the fresh start that only the catastrophe of closure later made inevitable. The trouble was that Isaacs simply didn’t know enough about running an opera house to have the confidence to hard-prune the theatre as he found it. Both he and Tooley give accounts of the chaos that descended after Isaacs’ early departure (supposedly to give his short-lived successor Genista McIntosh a free hand). In all this one error of judgement was followed by another. But it has to be said that Isaacs and his board were not totally to blame: the finger also points at the Arts Council and the government.

Isaacs had reason enough to be exasperated with the Arts Council. It can’t have been easy trying to negotiate with George Christie, chair of the Council’s music panel, from whose Glyndebourne the House had filched not only Haitink but, more painfully, the fund-raiser Alex Alexander. Whether he would have got more cash had he been quietly persistent rather than confrontational is an open question. Maybe if he’d been even tougher, if he’d cancelled performances and offered his resignation unless he was given adequate core funding (a strategy successfully deployed by the RSC at the Barbican some years before) he’d have won through, or at least gone down in glory. Had the Council in turn had any understanding of what Isaacs might be able to do for the House, and supported him, it could have been a different story. But the Council had become the timid agent of the government’s policy for Heritage and was no longer championing its clients’ needs against Whitehall’s parsimonious philistinism.

That the House has survived its troubles is due not to a visionary public arts policy but to Lottery largesse and munificent donors like Lord Sainsbury and Vivien Duffield, whose patience and enthusiasm stayed the course. What happens now [2000] is anyone’s guess. It has taken an American chief executive, Michael Kaiser, to restore a semblance of order. He has the advantages of experience – having rescued three American ballet companies from the brink of extinction – of being a foreigner (that always helps in opera) and of coming totally fresh to the House. But there still isn’t any palpable sense of artistic purpose. We must hope that Antonio Pappano will be a hands-on music director