

RUTH PADEL, Final Report on Poet in Residence Faust Project at the Royal Opera House for *Criticism Now*.

As Writer in Residence at Covent Garden, I watched rehearsals for three Faust operas, blogged three times a week, tweeting about what I saw. I wrote pieces in their programmes so audiences could see behind the scenes, accompanied KCL students from Music, Drama and English to a few dress rehearsals and in a seminar discussed how they felt about them.

In ROH. I talked to singers (soloists and chorus members), conductors, composers, stage managers, props managers, directors, set designers, stage hands, ushers, children's trainers and child performers, lighting engineers and video artists. I described all the work developing, on all fronts.

For ROH, I wanted to share with the public activities of the Opera House, what's involved in creating opera, how we can respond to it. Everyone shares criticism of films and TV: why not opera, too? I wanted to open up perceptions of it as offering important insights into contemporary reality. Mixed communities put on operas throughout the UK; children perform in it, but the media ghettoize opera as "elitist". *The Archers* picked up the Trafalgar Square plinth but not opera: modern *art* is perceived as accessible, not this. Morse is a sad out-of-touch old loner: opera is his relationship substitute, a psychic retreat. The ROH turned down *Eastenders* asking to film a gay character taken to opera by his aunt, because they'd have no control over how ROH was represented and the storyline was stereotyping.

The problem which does not originate with ROH but with guardians of popular culture, TV producers, newspaper editors. But we need to address it.

For KCL, I kept thinking about new ways to respond to contemporary culture. What place does 'criticism' have in popular culture today, what do students, and the public, think it means, how does it sit in relation to tweets and blogs sharing instant subjective opinion? One of my 2nd year students, coming to a dress rehearsal, said her mother had been an ROH usher. But like most of the students there, this was the first time she had engaged with opera. I wished we could do more with these students on opera's relevance to other arts today.

After seeing ROH rehearsals, **the responses from official conventional "critics"** on the end product made me cringe.

At *Faust's* first rehearsal, I watched Bryn Terfel think constantly about refining his role, but all the *Guardian* review said on his performance was, "Terfel enjoys himself as Mephistopheles, sneering and snarling through the demonic routines", offering readers no insight into the way a role and

performance is built up. This was “criticism” responding in a shallow way only to the end product.

How can we get across a deeper knowledge of a production to the public and inform a different kind of critical response? How, I wondered, might we engage with opera differently, critically in a deeper sense, to open up discussion rather, as opera reviews conventionally do, close it down?

I hoped that blogging about attending rehearsals, both for the two new chamber operas and the main stage revival of Gounod’s *Faust*, would bring new readers and listeners to think about opera not as “museum art” but living art. The blog got a lot of hits and hugely increased my Twitter following, but **two and half months was not enough to establish it** and get it talked about.

In print media, the Opera House PR team did not find anywhere for me to write about it. They already had a *Guardian* piece lined up: I suggested the *Independent* but that fell through. A pity, since a print piece, which would go online, would be a good focus to start discussion.

New opera and the critics

ROH had commissioned two new small operas on Faustian themes from two very different contemporary composers, Luke Bedford and the sound artist Matthew Herbert.

Luke Bedford’s libretto was by a highly regarded dramatist, David Harrower. I felt it was a very original convincing new opera, was fascinated to see the way director conductor and singers developed it and was delighted to see the professional opera critics praise it.

At least they got that right, I thought. They do know their stuff: they just have a narrow, “keep it to ourselves” vision of their role.

New opera and the KCL students

Matthew Herbert wrote his own libretto and directed his piece. I thought the ideas were interesting but the language, verbal and musical, was not. In the KCL seminar the drama students said they felt it was dramaturgically amateur, the libretto seemed improvised. One who specialized in electronic music felt that aspect if it too was banal. I thought perhaps Matthew Herbert had tried to keep too much in his own hands and had not appreciated enough the input from many different expertises, which is at the heart of opera performance: and reflects the way an opera is a “total artwork” involving many arts.

I mentioned the high quality of performance, from soloists and children, and the students agreed but were sorry such high level performers was working on what they felt was dramaturgically and musically uninteresting.

I thought that was a good discussion, bringing in different expertises. It showed that though opera has its own knowledge, language, and sophistication, it is

possible for acute open minds with no background knowledge of its traditions to critique it.

What did ROH and KCL get out of my time there?

For KCL students, and staff, a dress rehearsal and seminar are only a taster. To engage them deeply and get their feedback, a monthly lunchtime seminar, discussing each time a different opera, involving people at all levels through the year, from all arts departments, might offer those not used to classical music or opera to think about it from their own perspective, since it is the art form which, like Orpheus, draws all others to itself.

But one problem, clearly, is the whole language of contemporary classical music, seen as “difficult”. We need to think how they can listen without perceiving it as “not for them.”

For ROH, the project simply needs longer, so the public gets to know. As Trustee of the Zoological Society which runs London Zoo, I am in the second year of a series of talks I dreamed up and chair, *Writers’ Talks on Endangered Species* and now, the literary world is beginning to accept them as established, and talk about them. Audiences are larger, discussion of issues involved is growing. But this takes time. Two months is too short.

I’d like to write a big newspaper piece to start a wider issue discussion ball rolling. At the moment newspaper editors only thin, of opera in terms of first night reviews, opera stars and opera scandals. (See below!)

If I were there for a year, I could blog once a week, establish the blog securely, write newspaper articles and then, for my next non-fiction book (I’m sure my agent could get me an advance for it) write a book on as it were “*What Is Opera Today? A Year in the Royal Opera House*.”

One thing I’d discuss is the sexism which pervades popular perceptions of opera.

The woman conductor, for Luke Bedford’s opera, said a woman conductor is still a rare being: it is challenging to find your own way of doing a traditional man’s role.

Opera has been made over centuries by men, for men, many plots involve the destruction of a woman, but a woman’s voice (in arias) is usually is the high, and supremely criticizable, point of most operas.

Our KCL seminar coincided with a row that made national headlines: male broadsheet critics made disparaging remarks about the looks of a young female singer. They defended themselves, petulantly, by saying that opera has a visual as well as a vocal aspect.

This sexism row made the Today Programme; we used it to discuss who is in control of public discourse about opera, and what knowledge this area of

cultural criticism conventionally rests on. The “opera critics” are erudite, what’s at issue is not their knowledge but their interpretation of their own role.

So, the students asked, how much prior knowledge do you “have to have” about opera before you can enjoy it? And how might we begin to think about what is important for a renewed form of cultural criticism? How can audiences without background knowledge authentically critique opera?

The answer was provided for me by the video artist working on the two new operas had never seen one before but found opera “a highly stylized way at getting at authentic feeling.” While getting to know the music, he saw the dramatic and lyrical force of the whole thing.

Opera may seem on the outside all fake glitter and high falutin’ fancy but, as a director said, “it’s got to be true”. How do we get opera’s truth and authentic feeling into the critical arena of the general public? My work for *Criticism Now* suggests the answer lies in exposing them all to it. More.

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