

Opera Holland Park Question Time
January 15 2013
Start time: 7.00 pm

Michael Volpe (General Manager) and James Clutton (Producer) chaired the evening and the Q & A forum began.

Thereafter, MV introduced the cause and the course of the evening: the seasons of 2012 and 2013 being the main topics of the evening; and the question and answer session being held after a music break in the middle.

MV proceeded with the overview of the OHP season of 2012.

- This summer was a very difficult season. The way a perfect storm of the Jubilee, the Olympics and the second worst summer in history affected the attendance. Although many other cultural institutions were down as much as 50% OHP was 7% down from where it would normally be. However it still left a significant hole in the budget.
- The predicted 'doom and gloom' of the Olympics never came to pass the way it was expected, it really affected the way people behaved. The ticket holders believed they would struggle to get to the performances. The government and the authorities have advised people in worrying terms and it seems that the majority took them at their word or left the country. It was a very challenging year. Having said that, OHP had 91% occupancy, which is good by any standard.
- OHP managed quite well with what was an extremely challenging climatic summer. MV has spoken to some patrons who have come to the opera three times during that summer and said it was lovely every time. MV confessed: 'I wanted to touch them just for luck, really, so rare were they!'. The weather had affected the mood and the behaviour of both visitors and staff; it was really difficult to work. On some nights it would get so depressing, that it was really easy to forget how great the performances were and that despite this, the people really enjoyed the opera.
- All in all, despite all the obstacles, it was a very good season. It was a struggle to build the theatre over a year, the challenge being to give the best of all worlds.

MV thanked the public present on the night:

'I want to thank you all for your stoicism. I think only the British would do what we all did this year, really. I think everyone else would've just given up by now. Congratulations to you all for your support and perseverance, because it means an awful lot to us'.

MV continued:

- Ideal scenario – individually heated and air conditioned seats.
- Next year – a really exciting full season expected. There are plans of a transition to a private company; however it is not happening in 2013. The OHP and the council still have some preparation work to do.

- There was an application to keep the canopy up at the end of the season, which would result in less aggravation for everybody and save OHP quite a lot of money, but the idea has been postponed due to quite a lot of objections from the public. OHP do not want to upset anybody.
- Innovation and development – a brand new box office system 'Tessitura' introduced in 2013, which everyone will be invited to exploit to the full. It is much more efficient in terms of customer relationship management, ticketing, fundraising and marketing. It provides an opportunity to use more of the online capacity; the booking forms won't be used any more, which will save everyone a lot of time. Bookings over the phone will still be taken.
- Gratitude expressed to OHP Friends, who helped enormously to raise money for that system, which costs ~ £75.000- 80.000. A tool for OHP to look after their customers' needs much better. It's the same system that the Met in NY has.
- In terms of sponsorships – OHP has a continuing sponsorship with Investec Wealth & Investment.
- OHP find creative ways to raise much more money these days. Unusual scheme- an offer for the public to appear in a procession scene of *I gioielli della Madonna* for a requisite fee, which is a donation, - proving to be successful.
- OHP will continue to improve. Covering a potential question in advance – work in progress on the new toilet facilities in 2013.
- Only 20 weeks left until the opening of the new season, considering that it takes 12 weeks to build the theatre – it is much closer than it might appear now. Building of the canopy starts in early March; ticket sales start early next month.
- The new issue of Scenario 2013 Preview Edition is coming out soon.

James Clutton, the Producer of the company introduced himself and proceeded with an overview of the 2012 season.

The season is very tricky – 18 months are spent on the cycle of producing the shows. This year the reviews from the public, the team, or the national newspapers opened with 'It was very cold, it was very rainy, etc.' and were similar to weather reports. OHP took a bit of a kick on that. The weather is a difficult thing to work around, but OHP is an open air, so what do we expect?

JC moved on to the show by show overview:

- *Lucia di Lammermoor* – was a good solid *Lucia*, didn't get an amazing reaction but it did a good job nevertheless. A very good singer found to sing the role. A glass harmonica was a great thing to have on the show. Money and effort spent on getting a glass harmonica player was worth it. As a show which opened the season on a very cold evening (explained previously) it possibly did not reach the expected heights, however it was a good show, which received good reactions from the audience.
- *Così fan tutte*- really proud of the show, despite the fact that neither JC nor MV are the biggest fans of Mozart. At the OHP the young director managed to get a genuinely great concept. It was all an experiment (JC compared it to the *Truman Show*). Some great singing.
- *Gianni Schicchi* was a joy. Alan Opie was fantastic in a leading role. It was a good ensemble playing and singing, it all went really well. Young artists performance went well too.
- *Zanetto* was one of OHP's unusual ones by Mascagni (and the company does a lot of Mascagni work). During the rehearsals the show was really 'flying', although in the end it didn't quite have the expected 'kick'. It is a

bit confusing as JC is still struggling to figure out what the problems were. Still, it was a decent enough show.

- *Falstaff* was a big artistic undertaking for OHP. It was a very tricky show to produce – the band was way bigger than usually, which resulted in a long chain of new issues to solve in order to balance things off. But the end result was really pleasing – it was funny, the lead Olafur Sigurdarson was amazing. Overall it did a really good job.
- *Yevgeny Onegin* – personally for JC it was the hit of the season. Anna Leese as Tatyana, Peter Auty as Lensky and Mark Stone as Onegin were top class. The design was beautiful – in JC's opinion one of the best design OHP had on stage for a long time (since *Macbeth*, 2005). The show sold well.
- *Fantastic Mr. Fox* – the family opera, which was taken really seriously by the whole OHP team– there was a 7 piece band, 20 singers. The tickets were £2.50 for kids, £5 for adults. It is a great piece of work, which was taken to a few festivals, proved to be very popular. The show was a very vivid production, the kids (8-9 year-olds) were the energizers of the show. Seeing kids run to the next scene of an opera for OHP is like a 'Holy grail'. Work of a similar nature is something that OHP will go into more in 2013 as well.

Furthermore on 2012:

- OHP collaborated with ENB – 5 choreographers and 5 dance companies to come up with a little performance based on one of the operas. Also a lot of professional development work ongoing with the young choreographers.
- The Olympic torch came to the theatre. 8000 people were present. Despite what felt like chaos at times, 'Ode to Joy' was performed and it was a great day.
- OHP visited hospitals and schools as usual.
- OHP started a Young Artist scheme, sponsored by Christine Collins, which resulted in a YA performance. The tickets were sold for £20 and £12, with an audience of ~700 people. As a development from that, 5 of the singers, the director and conductor are now a part of OHP main stage company in 2013.

JC has concluded that 2012 was a good year, expressed the hope that the public has enjoyed and appreciated it and proceeded with the discussion on the following season of 2013.

- The double bill of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* will open the season. Conductor – Stuart Stratford, director – Lindsay Posner, who worked on *Roberto Devereux* and *Rigoletto* a few years ago. Peter Auty – the tenor in both operas. Stephen Gadd is playing two roles as well. The ladies: Julia Sporsen – singing Nedda in *Pagliacci*; Gweneth-Ann Jeffers as Santuzza in *Cavalleria rusticana*. An exciting double bill.
- *Madama Butterfly* – one of OHP's favourite singers Anne Sophie Duprels sings the lead.
- *Les pecheurs de perles (Pearl Fishers)* - was last produced here 11 years ago. The conductor – Mathew Waldren is from the Young Artists scheme. He's come from the chorus of *Les pecheurs de perles* in 2002 to conducting the show in 2013.
- *L'elisir d'amore* – a star of ENO and British opera in general - Sarah Tynan singing the lead, a debut for OHP. Really excited about the show.
- *I gioielli della Madonna*- Mike has a great skill of finding unknown operas, the tricky bit actually putting them on! The original score: 56 in the chorus, the procession, 14 mandolins... Unusually the director got involved in the business side of the production suggesting OHP selling packages for the public to appear in a procession scene of *I gioielli della Madonna*.

A fantastic experience, where everyone has to be great – Natalya Romaniw in the lead; a debut of Mexican tenor found in Germany; a debut of Kathryn McAdam; Diana Montague is back at OHP. It's going to be a very exciting show.

- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – first opera to be commissioned by OHP. 1 hour long family opera to be performed in the park itself. Composer – Will Todd (he composed the Jubilee Anthem for the Queen, 2012). Commission is a big commitment, therefore a workshop of Alice was held recently with a small audience of invited guests in order to see whether to carry on with it or not. The reactions of the audience were great; of course the company is still working on it. An exciting premiere is scheduled for July.

More on the season of 2013:

- New partnership with the Royal Horticultural Society – OHP will be putting on a performance at the Chelsea Flower show on Friday the 24th of May. Chelsea Flower Show's centenary this year – OHP will have a string quartet, a number of the company's singers. There are 1000 seats around the bandstand; the tickets will be sold via the OHP box office as well as via CFS.

7.37pm. JC has invited the audience to enjoy the music break and introduced Kathryn McAdam (*I gioielli della Madonna*, 2013) who sang two arias: 'O mia babbino caro' from *Giannni Schicchi* and 'Si mi chiamano Mimi' from *La Bohème*.

Question and answer session

Q: What does the OHP transition to a private company actually imply in relationship to ownership and relationship towards the borough?

A (MV): Firstly – it would be a charitable company. Part of the transition process is discussing that relationship with the Royal Borough. The council would continue to grant aid the company; however there would be a theoretical 'ceiling' to their commitment. The council would not be the funder of last resort (currently ~£460,000 a year, less than 20% of the overall budget). OHP would be an independent charitable company with a separate board; more flexible in terms of long term planning outside the council's rather restricted planning process. OHP Friends would continue as a charity. The customers shouldn't notice any drastic difference. OHP might ask for a few more donations every now and again, but the way the theatre operates would stay the same. It's a benign process; all the terms and conditions should be delineated next month. Operating as a charitable company is the only efficient way to work as a cultural entity these days.

Q: You have applied to put up a canopy just for a year rather than three years. Is that connected to the company's transition discussed previously?

A (MV): The reason we put it in for a year is we knew we were asking to leave the canopy up. The theory was to give the committee members an opportunity to see how the community reacts to it, and if everybody hated it – OHP would have to apply next year and it would be turned down. It was OHP saying 'Let's try it'. That was not related to the company's transition. The application to retain the canopy has now been withdrawn in any case.

Q: You speak of the council being your landlord. Does OHP pay a rental (now or in the future)?

A (MV): No. the council own the house and land and will of course continue to do so. The idea is that OHP would pay a peppercorn rate but this is all being discussed now.

The same lady continues. Q: OHP receives ~500,000 financial underpinning from the council, there's quite a considerable underpinning in terms of other facilities like tonight – the hire of Leighton House Museum...

A (MV): OHP paid for the hire of Leighton House. There's a lot of misunderstanding in the community in terms of council provided services that are considered as part of subsidy. OHP has two types of costs on their budget line: controllable costs (relate to putting the theatre up, the productions, money that leaves council coffers and goes to outside suppliers. The ticket income, other incomes, Friends donations, sponsorships etc are also counted against that. Then there are 'uncontrollable costs' – central costs/cross-charges that are applied to every department of the council that would exist even if OHP did not exist – in such a scenario, these would be applied elsewhere. There are no hidden costs and services. The council provide OHP with the theatre site, which does not have any intrinsic value. They paid for company's assets, although eventual ownership of the roof and the seats after the transition are still in question. The offices provided will save the independent company money of course, but we may need to pay some rent. The company will hire its own lawyers, accountants, IT specialists, etc. The council give services that don't cost them new money to provide. After three years the subsidy will be negotiated; hopefully the company will be operating more efficiently and entrepreneurially as an independent charity.

Q: Will you still have the Inspire tickets?

A (MV): Absolutely. It's critical. It will be a big part of the council's deal.

Q: In relation to Inspire tickets- is it possible to have slightly more time to actually fill in the form online?

A (MV): We will definitely look into it. Thank you.

Q: Are you going to put on, perhaps, one operetta a year?

A (JC): I don't think it will ever be an operetta a year, but one is possible in 2014. We have a varying record of producing operettas over the years. No one touches us on really unusual operas – we are braver, take more risks, we can pull things together and get great singers, and offer great ticket prices. In terms of producing operettas – I think there are people who normally do it better than us. We would certainly do it every now and again. We want to do it well.

Q: A question was asked about corporate seat occupancy

A (MV): The corporate seat occupancy will still be about the same – 4-5%. This is a balance we struggle with. We hope to get the right sponsors who have the right attitude (Investec). **(JC)** OHP Prime seats are hardly ever empty, as opposed to the Olympic/Wimbledon seats. If corporate seatholders are good and supportive and we can use them – it's great, it helps us survive, and it's the reality. We believe we can create an environment, where people want to stay (without leaving the central seats empty and leaving the performers and the audience frustrated).

(MV) The one big yearly corporate event is for 'Winton Capital'. A special marquis and a performance is put on for them. They pay handsomely for that sponsorship and one big evening event. We try and create the balance: have some corporates without upsetting anyone and also subsidising several thousand seats at £12, a couple of thousand free seats etc.

Q: What is the good thing that came out of the Olympics?

A (JC): The volunteers (the Games Makers) set a beautiful example of good spirit and participation for a cause, and showed what that can do. We hope to channel that spirit this year. **(MV on volunteers)** They save us a lot of money as well! **(JC)** The OHP volunteers are doing a great job so far, the more the merrier.

Q: What jobs do you give your volunteers?

A (JC): Stage door, programme selling, stewarding. **(MV)** Everyone interested in volunteering for OHP – please e-mail friends@operahollandpark.com (Lisa). **(MV continues)** Front of house costs ~£60,000 per year. The volunteer culture could save company money, but we have to be able to rely on people.

Q: What do you think about putting on Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*?

A (MV, very enthusiastic): We'd love to do *Grimes*! It's the one Britten we'd love to do. It's bloody big!

Q: What about *Albert Herring*?

A (MV): We've done *Albert Herring* a few years ago. **(JC)** OHP guest- hosted *Albert Herring* last summer. *Peter Grimes* is a massive show. It is more and more possible as time goes on. *The Turn of the Screw* possibly could work beautifully at our place. **(MV)** It is necessary to make sure people come to see the shows. Now it's lovely to forecast 92% occupancy, but it's not so good to NEED it (which we do). Future model/hope – being able to afford 70% forecasts. **(JC)** If we can balance the books enough to sell 11 *Bohèmes* and 5 *The Turn of the Screws*, 13 *Carmens* and 5 Wolf Ferraris – that can work.

Q: Might it be worth doing a subscription in that respect?

A (MV): Before the Friends there was a subscription scheme. Various discounts or deals are things we always look at doing. Sometimes you just can't give things away. Audience decides whether it wants to see something or not regardless of a discount offered. **(JC)** The nature of the opera selection requires trying to please different parts of the audience.

Q: Questions and suggestions for future repertoire were asked, especially with respect to bel canto repertory.

A (JC): Bellini – a possibility in 2014. Generally as a company and as a business we can only exist if we can bring the first timers in as well- create and sustain audience-renewal. As an opera-experience, attending *Butterfly* at OHP is possibly (theoretically) the safest place for the first comer. **(JC)** Season 2013 is about being safe (*Madame Butterfly*) vs. being brave, getting out of the comfort zone without being stupid (*I Gioielli della Madonna*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Pagliacci*). **(MV)** We listen to all these pop shows every night – *Butterfly* or *Carmen* for example. The point is – when you listen to them, you realise why they are so popular... They are 'boring' (as some regulars would contend) and brilliant at the same time – things come together. It's important to find that balance.

8.24 pm. The Q&A session came to an end.