

Here and there

It was the end of an era. My first visit to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre took place in April 1961 at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba. At the height of the Cold War (and before the Beatles had officially inaugurated the 1960s) there was some doubt on the school coach back to London whether we would arrive before World War III was over. We had just seen *Richard III* and now, 46 years many visits later, I was at the same theatre on the day before it closed for its refurbishment. William Houston is a charismatic actor of stature. His *Coriolanus* was riveting and a fine way to close proceedings in this frustrating auditorium. The *Swan Lake* was also shut in August and my last visit there was to see an American presentation of *The Merchant of Venice* with F Murray Abraham as Shylock. This contemporary interpretation was very New York and very clever and I enjoyed it enormously. The comedy aspects were well executed with an inevitable use of mobile phones and the three caskets were, of course, Apple computers. I found the American diction exemplary.

The RSC's exciting temporary theatre, the Courtyard, was the setting for Ian McKellen's *King Lear*. I assume there was more than usual interest because of his alter ego, Gandalf, in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Those who came because of his film and TV fame were rewarded with a definitive and dazzling characterisation of *Lear* which will be hard to beat for some years. The cast were without a weak link and I was especially impressed with William Gaunt's Gloucester. Trevor Nunn's direction should ensure a smash hit.

In pursuit of new venues I found myself at the Watermill, Newbury. This is a delightful theatre in the established tradition of English eccentricity and *For Services Rendered* by Somerset Maugham seemed as relevant today as it must have been in 1932. This anti-war polemic examines the lives of a typical post-war family that is coming apart at the seams. The title alludes not just to war service but to more subtle indebtedness that helps shatter the family. The intimate surroundings produced an evening of deep poignancy. The restaurant provided comfort food of good quality!

Operatic mixed notices

I did not particularly enjoy the double bill of *L'Heure espagnole* and *Gianni Schicchi* at the Royal Opera House. The Ravel was well staged and quite amusing but Bryn Terfel seemed to be on poor form as the eponymous star of Puccini's little piece. It was rather like a meal of canapés



Vienna State Opera House

www.staatsoper.at


Bavarian State Opera House, Munich

www.operafolks.com


The Watermill, Newbury

www.watermill.org.uk

Alan Frost enjoys venues old and new.

– I was still hungry afterwards for some real emotion. But quite the worst opera experience this year was a visit to Bratislava where Opera Slovakia staged an execrable representation of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The problem was not just lack of budget, poor direction, static acting, tiny orchestra, and uncomfortable seats. It felt as though time had stopped some time in the early 1900s. It probably had – the interval wine was 1950s prices. The contrast with Vienna could not be starker as they are but a stone's throw apart along the Danube. There at the Wiener Staatsoper I had luxuriated in a *Swan Lake* of sublime poise and musical accomplishment. The orchestra enjoyed itself as much as we did – and it showed. The previous night's *Tosca* was merely adequate because Neil Shicoff has lost the masterly tenor lustre he once had. There was compensation in the *Tosca* of Eszter Sümegi, an Hungarian soprano of notable quality. The opera house itself was new to me and a Hapsburg jewel.

An altogether different *Tosca* at the Bayerische Staatsoper starred the husband and wife team of Daniela Dessi and Fabio Armiliato. His tenor was rather stretched but she more than compensated as *Tosca*. Even more exciting was the *Scarpia* of Mark Delavan, a Canadian of rich promise. Götz Friedrich's staging is all you can hope for in this Puccini masterpiece. The best opera experience this year was *Der Rosenkavalier*, also at Munich, where I wallowed contentedly and with chin a-quiver amid the angelic voices of Adrienne Pieczonka, Sophie Koch, and Diana Damrau. John Tomlinson played for laughs as Baron Ochs but looked and moved remarkably like Buster Merryfield as Albert in *Only Fools and Horses*. An appreciative audience loved it – as did I. The snack and beverage service is outstanding.

Home to class

Marin Alsop, in her last season with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, concluded with a semi-staged performance of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. She began the evening with an introduction to Bartók's music which was all the more interesting given my recent visit to Hungary. After the intermission the interpretation by Gustav Beláček as Bluebeard and Andrea Meláth as Judith was probably one of the finest musical experiences in the Lighthouse (aka Poole Arts Centre) for many a year. It was world class, deeply moving, and totally accessible. I thought the standing ovation de trop but 800 punters loved it. Duke Bluebeard! Bartók! Who'd have thought it?