

CULTURE

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[THE WEEKENDER]



'Home from home'

Stuart Skelton's *Peter Grimes* electrified audiences last year. He returns to the English National Opera, bringing another troubled soul to life

BY GEORGE HALL
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Peter Grimes is very much the English National Opera's own opera. It was the work the company (in its previous guise, as Sadler's Wells Opera) chose to recommence operations with at the end of World War II, thereby re-establishing both Benjamin Britten and English opera on the international map. Today, it is hailed by many as simply England's greatest opera. And yet it was Stuart Skelton, an Australian-born singer living in Florida who last year gave what the *Guardian's* Andrew Clements called "probably the most complete Grimes in London since Jon Vickers at Covent Garden in the late 1970s." *The Observer's* Fiona Maddocks said: "The Australian tenor radiates a musical intelligence as electrifying as it is heartbreaking," while David Alden's English National Opera production was hailed as "the must-see operatic event of the entire 2008/9 London season," by Hugh Canning in the *Sunday Times*. The acclaimed production has duly been nominated for next week's Olivier awards, with Skelton himself up for the outstanding achievement in opera category.

Written for Britten's partner Peter Pears, the title role in *Peter Grimes* has been approached via the English lyric tenor tradition by successive generations of artists — the late Philip Langridge among them. But an alternative tradition was created in the late 1960s by the outside personality and voice of the Canadian Heldentenor Jon Vickers, who redefined it in a reading that stressed Grimes' elemental violence as much as his visionary, poetic side.

Skelton is well aware of his great predecessors in this iconic role but insists that he had to find his own way to do it. "Only Vickers could do Vickers. I couldn't do Pears either; that was a unique thing. But you can take the intensity that Vickers used and the intellectual and musical rigor Langridge used and apply those to your vocal and physiological strengths and weaknesses, and hopefully you come up with your own performance."

Sydney-born and raised, the 41-year-old fair-haired and burly Skelton might be a relative newcomer to the English stage, but his Heldentenor voice is in its prime and looks set to keep him busy at an international level for decades. Following training in Cincinnati and at the San Francisco Opera, first prize in 1997's Belvedere competition in Vienna gave Skelton the international platform he needed and he landed his first shot at the

lengthy and demanding role of Lohengrin in Karlsruhe. How did it feel? "Like a homecoming. It was an absolute eye-opener. I was physically tired and mentally frayed, but vocally I felt absolutely at ease. I walked off the stage thinking, "I could do that again."

Skelton was quickly co-opted into another *Lohengrin* production under Daniel Barenboim at the Berlin Staatsoper. With Erik in *The Flying Dutchman* already under his belt, he gradually added other Wagnerian parts — Siegmund in *Die Walkure*, Parsifal, even the rare Rienzi. So far, Skelton has sung five major Wagnerian roles. Is he saving the others up? "Only one — Tristan. The others I'm not interested in. *Tannhauser* was written in the early part of Wagner's compositional development, before he had worked out what a tenor could and could not do. As far as *Siegfried* goes, I don't have the right sound and quality for it. *Tristan* feels an inevitability, given the colors my voice has at its disposal." But he is in no hurry, and has already turned it down several times.

Skelton is one of those savvy singers who knows exactly what his voice can and cannot do. "There's a whole heap of repertoire out there that is not for me. Once you find things that suit you physically, emotionally and physiologically, you'd be mad to not pay attention." *Peter Grimes* is clearly one of those things.

"It's a tough night emotionally and physically," Skelton says. "Grimes is a bottomless pit of anger and frustration with a childlike ability to burst which, given his clear physical power, makes him extremely volatile and dangerous. In addition, you have to be prepared to leave yourself incredibly vulnerable and exposed."

Hunted by villagers, in a hue and cry that has contemporary resonance, Grimes' final solo is accompanied only by the eerie sound of an offstage foghorn. Many see it as a mad scene, but Skelton disagrees. "I've always thought of Grimes as a volcano. During the opera you see all the fissures on the surface opening up, little flashes of steam here and a little bit of lava there, then it closes over to the point where at the end the volcano explodes. In that last scene, with his repetition of his name, over and over again, he's emptying himself of everything that made him."

Is he able to leave him behind at the opera's end?

"Not for the first 25 minutes. I often sit by the side of the stage when he goes off and the chorus come on, and the boat is sinking out at sea. I just take myself into a corner. You need a little while to shake it off."

His current assignment, Boris in David Alden's new English National Opera production of Janacek's *Katya Kabanova*, is also complex and troubled, at least in the reading Skelton has worked out. Boris is the lover Katya has an affair with while her husband is away. Her guilt destroys her, and she blurts out the truth publicly. Victimized by her malevolent mother-in-law Kabanicha, Katya commits suicide after Boris has left town. Why doesn't he take her with him?

"He's always chosen the path of least resistance," says Skelton. "His treatment of Katya is no different. After she's announced that it's him she's been having an affair with, it becomes too hard for him."

The rapturous love music Janacek gives Katya and Boris certainly suggests something tender and transcendent in their brief relationship. "In every opera Janacek wrote there's always one big MGM moment. We do get some stunning music. Partly that's the reason it's hard to write Boris off as a complete cad, because that music means that it has to be heartfelt. In the scene when he tells her he's leaving, he ultimately makes the decision that he makes, but I don't want it to seem too easy." It's difficult, though, to make him seem anything but craven at their final meeting. "You can't, but we're giving it our best shot. Apart from Kabanicha, virtually every other character in the piece breaks your heart a little."

Skelton's first English National Opera appearance, back in 2006, was also in Janacek, as the troubled Laca who eventually marries Jenufa — another Alden production that won an Olivier award. Though he does return to sing in Australia, he lives with his wife Meredith, a former singer, in Florida. He relishes his opportunities to come back to the English National Opera. "I love working in this house. I'm friends with people now — backstage guys, stage management and administration. They really care about their artists and really care about shows doing well, making sure that their audiences are part of the group. The audience are just so appreciative of stuff. This is my home away from home."



Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's newest production, *Listening to the River* lacks the depth of Lin Hwai-min's previous works. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

'Listening to the River' turns a deaf ear to audiences

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

I'm glad I went back to see *Listening to the River* (聽河) a second time. I was still not impressed with the piece, but I'm not as disappointed with it as I was after Thursday night's premiere at the National Theater, where it was the final dance production of the 2010 Taiwan International Festival.

Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (雲門舞集) artistic director Lin Hwai-min (林懷民) said he was afraid he had made the piece too pretty. It is pretty, but pretty in the way that trays of cakes at the average Taipei bakery are — nice to look at but when you bite into one you find lots of air; there's nothing substantial beneath the surface.

Listening to the River doesn't have either the choreographic or emotional punch of Lin's last two works for his company, *Windshadows* (風影) and *Whisper of Flowers* (花語).

Chang Hao-jan's (張皓然) videography provided beautiful footage of sunlit waters, gently flowing water, burning lanterns floating on black currents and raging torrents (courtesy of Typhoon Morokot), while Ethan Wang (王奕盛) was credited with the projection design that allowed dancers to dance with their own images in the water. Visual and set designer Lin Keh-hua (林克華) said they spent a lot of time reviewing all the footage that had been shot and then matching the segments to the music, which included pieces by Giya Kancheli, Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky, David Khechyl and Somei Satoh, among others.

The water was beautiful, projected onto a screen that fluidly expanded or contracted to fit the needs of the 10 segments. However, sometimes it was more interesting to watch the projections than the dancers, or watch how the change in the currents or colors of the water was so well matched to the mood or tempo of the music.

Lin Hwai-min has choreographed a series of solos, duets and group pieces that showed the pliability of his dancers, but left them strangely disconnected, for the most part, from one another as well as the audience. Even the duets and trios seemed more like solos placed together than a collective element.

The one exception was a quirky duet by Lee Tzu-chun (李姿君) and Wong Lap-cheong (王立翔), set to Kechley's *The Funky Chicken*. The moves were a mix of Lin Hwai-min's unique pairing of tai chi and modern dance, with a few street dance moves thrown in. Lee's smile lit up her face and while the couple still danced separately for the most part, you could feel a connection between them and with their audience.

Cloud Gate dancers are so terrific that it's wonderful to watch them no matter what they are doing and Tsai Ming-yuan (蔡銘元), Huang Mei-ya (黃曉雅), Huang Pei-hua (黃佩華) and Su I-ping's (蘇依屏) solos showed just how good they are. Su also packed more drama and emotion into her *Night Prayers* segment than the production had as a whole.

As for the naked butt so proximately displayed on the company's posters and brochures for the piece, there was no sign of it in the actual show.

The company takes *Listening to the River* on the road next month, with performances at the Tainan Municipal Cultural Center Performance Hall on April 10 and April 11 and in Taichung Chungshan Hall on April 17 and April 18. If you haven't bought tickets yet, try and get seats on the left side of the hall, it's a better angle to watch the show.

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

MARCH 12 TO MARCH 18



1 Show Luo (羅志祥) and *Rashomon* (羅生門) with **41.73** percent of sales

2 FIR (飛兒樂團) and *Let's Smile* (讓我們一起微笑吧!) with **10.29%**

3 JJ Lam (林俊傑) and *100 Days* (100天) with **4.66%**

4 Ocean (海洋樂團) and *I Wanna Rock N' Roll* with **1.74%**

5 Huang A-lin (黃麗玲) and *Before, After* (以前、以後) with **1.73%**

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unlawful compensation for their services as unlicensed employment agents." Ortnor wrote that Fusari and his company violated statutes that prohibited them from "acting as employment agents without a license and charging Lady Gaga an unlawful fee for their purported services." Fusari's lawyer, Robert S. Meloni, called the claim "ludicrous."

"Fusari is a PARTNER in the Team Love LLC with Gag and her father (through their company Mermaid)," Meloni wrote. "Rob was no more of an 'agent' for her than she is a Roman Catholic nun."

In other legal news, a federal appeals court ruled on Friday that the estate of late model **Anna Nicole Smith** was not entitled to one cent of the more than \$300 million she sought from the estate of her billionaire oil baron husband. In the latest twist in a 15-year battle over the estimated US\$1.6 billion fortune left by Texan **J. Howard Marshall**, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals sided with his late son, Pierce.

The husband of actress **Sandra Bullock** apologized on Thursday for causing her "pain and embarrassment beyond comprehension" after recent



The fight is on for Lady Gaga's fortune. PHOTO: AP



Jesse James, Sandra Bullock's husband, has eaten a (small) slice of humble pie. PHOTO: EPA

claims he cheated on her while she was filming her Oscar-winning role in *The Blind Side*. **Jesse James**, a custom motorcycle manufacturer and reality TV star who married Bullock five years ago, said he took full responsibility for his actions. But he stopped short of admitting to published allegations by a California tattoo model of a five-week affair.

Several former members of the renowned Vienna Boys' Choir have come forward to tell of abuse by

leaders in the 1980s, *Der Standard* newspaper reported on Wednesday.

The choir set up an emergency hotline on Friday of last week after two former singers alleged to the Austrian newspaper that they had been sexually molested.

Since then eight former choir members have come forward, the latest report said.

On the choir's trips, a teacher would call choirboys one-by-one to the back of the bus "to question them closely about sexual experiences," one former member, now 40, was quoted as saying by *Der Standard*.

The choirboys suffered huge "pressure" in the prestigious choir and "permanent humiliation," the man said on condition of anonymity, describing the choir as a "concentration camp."

"All the men are over 40 and were members of the Vienna Boys Choir in the 1980s or earlier," the woman in charge of the hotline, Tina Breckwoldt, told *Der Standard*.

The choir's management said in a statement to the newspaper that it aimed to bring "clarity on potential cases, justice and help for victims and avoid future abuse." — AGENCIES