

Jessica Duchen Interviews Director John Copley

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Within minutes of meeting John Copley, I am begging him to write his memoirs, for his story is the story of opera in half the 20th century. Now 75, this superbright, exceptionally musical and extremely modest opera director has been everywhere, seen everything and worked with everyone.

His classic production of La bohème opens at the Royal Opera House on Saturday, having first been staged no less than 34 years ago, and he is back at the helm himself, putting a new, young cast through its paces. Surveying his lifelong association with the Puccini masterpiece and the operatic supernovas who have starred in it, his affection for it, and them, glitters out of his every word.

La bohème was the first "big" opera Copley ever saw, aged 11; then, he recounts, "I was in the old production myself, in the café scene, when I was 16." He wanted to be a dancer, "but Ninette de Valois threw me out. She said I would do better in opera – and of course she was right." At Covent Garden he enjoyed an outstanding hands-on training – "I didn't go to university, I came here!" He went early into stage direction, but could also play the piano and sing marvellous falsetto; and once he stood in for Maria Callas at a rehearsal, singing Tosca from start to finish. Callas quipped that she'd heard she should come back quickly because he was so good.

Clashing with Kleiber

His association with Covent Garden from childhood stood him in unexpectedly good stead when John Tooley asked him to work with the notoriously 'difficult' conductor Carlos Kleiber on Der Rosenkavalier. "I had a very funny time with him," says Copley, though the reclusive maestro is not often associated with the word 'funny'. "He came for the stage rehearsals only and that day Tooley said, 'John, do make sure he stays!' Kleiber could be a diva. Everything went fine until the little boy who comes on with the chocolate didn't get it right: it was his first time on stage and he was overwhelmed. Kleiber started carrying on – but I said, 'Excuse me, I did that role when your father (Erich Kleiber) was conducting here, and I don't think I got it right the first time, but your father was patient, your mother was very nice to me and I used to go to their house.' He was completely knocked out. We never had another moment's anxiety."

Another vital father-figure was Sir Georg Solti; their association began with a new Così fan tutte and a dinner invitation. "It was like an audition," he recounts. "He didn't know me and he wanted to see if I was up to directing Così. He came round and I cooked dinner, which went well. Then he went upstairs to look at the set design; that went well too. As he came down, he saw we had two pianos, so he went through the music, found the Mozart Sonata for Two Pianos and said 'Let's play the slow movement'. I thought 'Shit!' but I managed it – and then he said, 'Now, from the beginning!' I was so nervous that I didn't make a single mistake. Finally he said, 'If you can do that, there's no problem with Così.' We had a bond from then on, entirely through music-making." Copley's production of Così lasted the ROH for 25 years.

An Eternal Bohème

What accounts for the longevity of his La bohème? "I think it's liked because it's very straightforward," he suggests. "And it has beautiful designs by Julia Trevelyan Oman. I'm not an intellectual, and I just can't do all those clever-clever productions set in Chinese restaurants and so on. To me the music is the most important thing."

The roster of stars passing through Copley's La bohème has been mind-boggling. Plácido Domingo was its first Rodolfo in 1974; two years later, Rodolfo and Mimi were José Carreras and Katia Ricciarelli. "They had just fallen in love, so it was the perfect opera for them! They were so cute. They broke everybody's hearts!"

Luciano Pavarotti made an unexpected ROH debut as Rodolfo in 1963, stepping in when Giuseppe di Stefano fell ill. Copley struck up a friendship with the young Italian that lasted all Pavarotti's life. "Luciano was quite lonely. He'd go to Soho to buy food, then cook spaghetti sauces at our house," he remembers. "I was very fond of him. He did get a bit paranoid in his later years – there was so much pressure because he was a household name and a great deal was expected. And I don't think he had a very happy home life." But he had little inkling, in those early days, of what Pavarotti would become: "Obviously he had a wonderful voice, but he was starting out. His father had taught him, he was modest, he wasn't a diva, and he wanted to do well. He built himself up carefully over many years and he only sang repertoire that was right for his voice. That's why he went on singing all his life."

A Bit of a Do

Later, along came Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorghiu. Scary names? "Alagna's not scary. But..." Copley gives an impish grin. "I'm friends with the soprano Jane Eaglen and when she made her Met debut in Turandot she said to me, 'It's a bit of a do.' Well, Angela was a bit of a do."

There's one diva he won't work with, but he won't name names: "I'd be locked up! Divas today are less extreme, because there's so much competition – but still, they can behave very badly, they treat their colleagues very badly, they don't show up, they don't do what they're supposed to do, they won't wear what they're supposed to wear and they're a pain in the butt. I worked with Maria Callas and she never misbehaved, in my experience. All the great ones – I worked with Janet Baker, Elisabeth Söderström, Régine Crespin, Nilsson Freni – they were beautiful people, which is why they were also great artists." In the old days, he adds, some divas even used to bring their own costumes. "One lady was told she was contracted to wear the opera house's costume, and she said 'But I am wearing it – under my own!"

Suffer No Fools

Copley reserves his real venom for the incompetent and the ignorant – the first occasionally on the conductor's podium, the latter among corporate audiences. One maestro simply couldn't start La bohème, which opens with an awkward rhythm in mid-bar. "That was a terrible day, because the Mimi wasn't very good either, and the conductor just couldn't begin the bloody thing!" Once in America he came up against disaster in Handel's Semele. "It was clear at the first rehearsal that the conductor couldn't do it. I went to the management and said 'What's he doing there?' The answer was: 'Well, he paid for the whole production, so we can't fire him!" The singer doing Juno had an inspired idea: "She came on stage for the rehearsal wearing tap shoes, went right to the front and tapped the beat so that orchestra could hear it. It worked, and by the time we opened three nights later it was like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers! I think the audience just thought that that was Handel."

But what audiences think can sometimes get him down. "I came into the Covent Garden foyer a few years ago on the first night of Elektra. And I overheard this woman saying, 'Oh yes, we come every four weeks, it's a company box, we so look forward to it – is it Domingo tonight?' 'No,' said her friend, 'it's Elektra'. 'Oh, Elektra – Greek... Domingo's not in it?' 'No'. Oh, well, we'll meet in the interval and talk about it.' 'But there isn't an interval'. 'Don't be ridiculous, there's always an interval.' 'No, it's a one-act opera.' And she said, 'No interval? But I don't see the point!' And I thought: here we are slaving away, trying to do art – for somebody who just wants the interval?"

La Bohème, though, is everyone's favourite (it even has an interval), and with an exciting young cast featuring the rising Polish star Piotr Beczala and the brilliant Andris Nelsons conducting, this classic production looks set to be as fresh as ever. Don't forget to bring a hanky.

La Bohème plays at the Royal Opera House from 19 December. Box office: 020 7304 4000 or www.roh.org.uk