

# SEEKING DIRECTION

The road to becoming an opera director is rarely straightforward, and the only way to learn is on the job. We introduce three young directors who discuss their experiences at London's Royal Opera House where they have been working as freelance assistants, revival directors, and apprentices on the Jette Parker Young Artist Programme, which offers a unique forum for developing opera directing skills in a world-class professional environment.

## JULIA BURBACH

Julia is a freelance opera director who honed her craft while assisting on productions at the Royal Opera House. She recently revived Christof Loy's *Tristan und Isolde*, having worked alongside the director at the production's debut in 2009. This summer, she will be directing *Madama Butterfly* at the Grimeborn Festival, held at the Arcola Theatre in East London.

I grew up in a family with a grandfather who was an operatic baritone and a mother who is a chanson singer. However, though I was surrounded by opera from an early age, I was initially much more interested in film, theatre and dance. I attended a performing arts school where I thought of becoming a performer, while actually really wanting to direct films.

I came to opera almost by chance – opera directing had just never occurred to me before. I now see that it suits me very well and that all my previous experiences in different fields and my language skills are proving to be very valuable.

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Naturally, the first show you get to work on always remains to be an important milestone. At the Royal Opera House, Christof Loy brought me along for *Lulu* closely followed by *Tristan und Isolde*. I remember how exciting it was just to be in the building and how incredible it felt to step onto the stage for the first time.

Working on *Adriana Lecouvreur* with David McVicar was a highlight. It was the first show where the ROH actually employed me, marking the beginning of my time as a regular freelancer with the company. It was altogether a very inspiring and intense experience. *Il trittico* with Richard Jones was unforgettable, especially the general rehearsal of *Suor Angelica*. The chemistry between the stage and the audience was incredible and I don't think there was a dry eye left when the curtain fell.

Over the last five years, working my way through different shows and gaining more responsibility, I grew up and learnt so much without even really noticing. You always improve and fine-tune your directing skills, gaining confidence while enhancing your awareness and understanding of social dynamics. I suppose the most important lesson I have learnt is how to combine my strength and sensitivity: embracing the two is the key.

I believe that our main focus as directors should be to enable, enhance and explore the qualities of what it is to be human, and to communicate this to our audience. Personally, I enjoy traditional and modern productions equally, but I admit that I'm more disappointed when the modern ones don't seem to achieve their desired effect.

In my opinion every production, traditional or modern, is a concept production. The second you have a director, choreographer or artistic team making a decision about a character, a relationship and an emotional journey within a particular setting, a conceptual decision has been made. Updating operas is a risk and always a challenge, but most importantly, also a great opportunity. Surely, taking risks has always been part of the artistic processes and when successful, great results are achieved. I certainly embrace this in my own work and like to explore between the lines when appropriate.



CLIVE BARON/ROH

▲ Julia Burbach revived Christof Loy's *Tristan und Isolde* this season, having worked alongside the director at the production's debut in 2009

I am very excited to be directing *Madama Butterfly*. I was born in Tokyo and have always been surrounded and heavily influenced by Japanese culture, so I'm looking forward to working on a piece where I can include some of my observations of this world. The main inspiration comes from Japanese ghost stories and the Asian idea that you live your life surrounded by ancestral ghosts. *Butterfly* will be a roaming ghost trying to come to terms with the circumstances of her suicide and the loss of her child. In this way, she will be present throughout the piece, which should introduce a new perspective to it. It's a rather radical concept, but I'm going to embrace the challenge!

## GREG ELDRIDGE

From Australia, Greg joined the Royal Opera's Jette Parker Young Artists Programme in the 2013/14 Season. In the current season he has directed *La scala di seta* in the Linbury Studio Theatre (Meet the Young Artists Week) and assists the directors of *Rigoletto*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Andrea Chénier*, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, *La traviata* and *Don Giovanni*. Eldridge's accolades include an award from the Australian Foundation for Youth Excellence. He is the youngest director ever to be employed by Victorian Opera, Australia.

I was at drama school in Australia (training as an actor) and while I really enjoyed the intense process of interrogating a text and a specific character, I felt a real desire to involve myself in the telling of the whole story. I was drawn to directing, since it allowed me to collaborate with others – singers, dancers, actors, designers – to bring a world to life.

In opera, there is a meeting of all the art forms – music, text and movement. I love it because it can be at once evocative and intellectual. There is a spectacle to opera that I find really compelling, but there is also a heart to its stories. It's this combination that I think entrances those of us who love it.

A director on the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House works on several main stage shows and also has the opportunity to direct two shows a year. Watching how an established singer returns to a role they know backwards, or how performer and director negotiate the important corners of character that define a production, provides insights that I take into my own rehearsals.

Every director has a different approach and, through observing what others do, I've been able to feel more comfortable in solidifying my own rehearsal technique. More than anything else, realising (or, perhaps, re-remembering) that everyone is human and has the same fears, foibles and desires has been a great lesson.

I firmly believe that every note of music and every word that is uttered on the stage must be analysed and interrogated in order ▶

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◀ to find which of the thousand possible meanings, interpretations and intentions is the best fit for the world and the message of the current production. If there is nothing in the text that contradicts the relocation or re-imagining of an opera, then I think a director has an enormous freedom to adapt the source material to speak anew to an audience.

What I find unforgivable in all circumstances is when a director chooses to ignore or ‘not translate into the surtitles’ text that is being spoken on the stage. If your interpretation or setting of a piece

is contradicted by what people say on the stage, then there is an innate problem with your interpretation. As an audience member, I find it insulting to have to assume that the entire chorus has gone momentarily insane because they are referring to an object or event that is not reflected in the staging. Change the text or change your concept!

My work has been described in the past as ‘naturalistic with a bit of magic’, which I think reflects my belief that theatre should represent worlds that are similar enough to our own to resonate, but exotic enough to allow us to lose ourselves in another place or time. My belief is that the performance needs to take place in the minds of the audience rather than in the minds of the performers and the director. The audience should not be mere voyeurs. I think my first duty is to tell the story and I work on every moment with the performers so that the world they inhabit is believable and consistent (even if their world is not governed by the same rules as ours).

I utterly adore *Don Giovanni* and if I could direct a new production every year, I wouldn’t in my lifetime exhaust the number of interpretations, character choices and subtle differences in focus that exist within this masterpiece. A *Carmen* set in Francoist Spain (to provide Don José with a backdrop of sufficient danger), an historically accurate *Macbeth* and a *Ring* cycle embracing an aesthetic true to the Norse legends are all high on my list of dream projects.

◀ Greg Eldridge directed the Jette Parker Young Artists production of Rossini’s *La Scala di Seta* this season



MARK DOUZROH

## RICHARD GERARD JONES

British stage director Richard Gerard Jones joins the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme from the start of the 2015/16 Season. Previous engagements with the Royal Opera include assistant director on *Anna Nicole*, *Gloriana* and *Quartett*. In the 2014/15 Season, he directed the revival of Rossini's *Il turco in Italia*.

What first exposed me to opera was being taken by my parents at a very young age to ENO in the early 90s, when day seats were still only a couple of pounds. That made it possible for us to go often and I got to know lots of shows in a short space of time. I saw the work of many great directors and I saw what was possible in terms of opera directing: it could be radical and inventive and surprising and I wanted to be a part of that. I studied languages at university and then went into directing through assisting, earning a living working on big productions and directing smaller shows of my own.

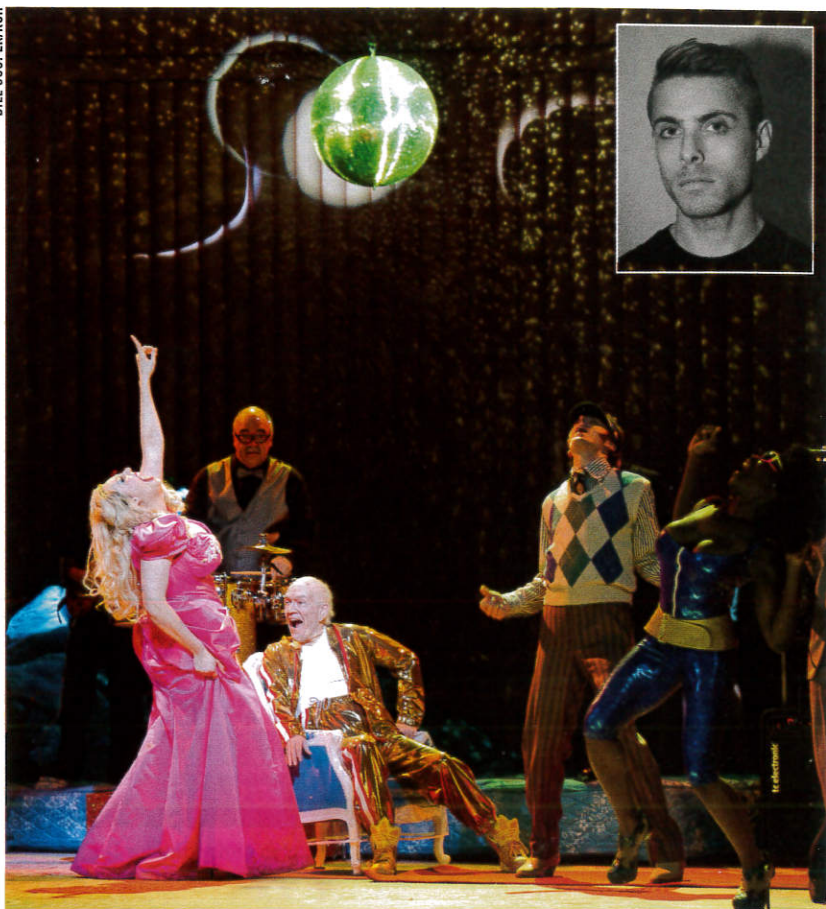
I think 'concept' is a dirty word but what lies behind it is vital: innovation of approach to a piece, encouraging a director to interpret and conceive their response without limitations on their imagination or their visual style. I believe in the need to re-address each piece afresh and without the cultural baggage and snobbery that can sometimes accompany an art form as old as opera. Realising that nothing is finite was what I learnt from growing up watching 'concept' productions; it's fine to do things differently each time because there will always be another *Tosca* and these pieces are strong enough that they can not only support but benefit from reinvention. Nothing lasts for ever and not everyone will like everything.

The only way I can find honesty of expression is through updating things to now. I try to find ways of approaching opera that examine the text and the music through the filter of the world around me: news events, TV, film, visual art and popular culture are my ways of understanding the world and the tools I use to transmit my interpretation of historical pieces.

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▲ Richard Gerard Jones will be joining the Jette Parker programme as a director in the 2015/16 season. He has already worked at the ROH as an assistant to Richard Jones on *Anna Nicole*.

My work is very physical, (I love the body in space) and very psychological (I use physical pictures to relay psychological ideas). I am quite old fashioned: I'm interested in the body within the confines of the proscenium, using ideas of depth versus flatness on stage. Many of my contemporaries seem more interested in video and in digitising their responses to opera, or to moving the whole experience out of the opera house. I want to work in a traditional setting but to 'punk it up': opera has been allowed to fall asleep and it needs waking up again.

In terms of the operas I like to work on, Mozart and Handel give my imagination the most stimulus. They allow directors to build their muscles on pieces that are of sufficient genius to stand rigorous dissection and re-assembly. The thing I'm proudest of so far is my *Così fan tutte* (Act I finale) that I presented at the National Opera Studio: it was funny, engaging and physical. It managed to create its own world, with a life of its own. 📺

The next round of interviews for the Jette Parker Young Artist opera director scheme will be in early 2017, to find a new stage director to start at the Royal Opera House in September 2017. Those wishing to be considered for these auditions should send their contact details to [JPYAPAssistant@roh.org.uk](mailto:JPYAPAssistant@roh.org.uk), stating that they are interested in stage director interviews. Requests will be kept on file and formal applications sent out towards the end of 2016.