

Rising star

GREG ELDRIDGE OPERA DIRECTOR

At 27, the Australian is the youngest director ever to be accepted on the prestigious Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House. Is he nervous? You bet, but excited too

You clearly love opera with an abiding passion. How did that come about?

I came to opera quite late (compared to most who are working in the industry). My parents were both teachers and my Dad was from a family of farmers in country Victoria but my Grandfather had a great love of opera. He always played from his extensive collection of records when I went over to visit as a youngster, so I remember it being in the background from when I was quite little.

You trained as an actor. What made you switch to opera directing?

While at University, I worked closely with my great friend Liam Suckling on a number of projects, including an adaptation of *Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which we wrote and directed together. It was a success and from that I was able to get some work in lighter opera and then eventually I was taken on by director Cameron Menzies as his assistant. I worked with Cameron for three years, completely abandoned my other studies and threw myself into learning about operatic theatre.

Opera isn't the most 'hip' artform. Why did you choose it over, say, theatre or film?

Great opera transcends who you are. It lifts you from the auditorium into a world where emotions are felt so deeply that the only way to express them is in song. Where superhuman difficulties and passions have to be expressed with superhuman high notes, low notes, runs and rhythms. Having once experienced the world of a great opera, it's difficult not to want to find it again – like a child who, having been to Narnia, spends the rest of their time investigating every wardrobe door, trying to go back.

You're the youngest director accepted onto the Royal Opera's Jette Parker Programme. Will working with the likes of Bryn Terfel and Plácido Domingo be daunting?

Yes.



BORN 1986
BASED LONDON
LOVES MUSIC, THEATRE, OPERA

What will your job at the ROH involve?

I will be an Assistant Director on several productions in the main house as well as directing opera scenes and a chamber opera in the smaller Linbury Studio Theatre. My duties will vary from production to production, but they could be as diverse as rehearsing childrens' choruses, working on text with specific singers, liaising with stage management and mechanists and taking and giving notes as necessary. On all productions, I'll be keeping track of blocking and technical notes in my score, which may then be used by other directors in future revivals. I'll also be receiving specialist coaching in all the main operatic languages (Italian, German, French, Russian, Czech) and I'll be requesting weekly sessions in dance, fencing and stage combat. It's going to be an amazing two years, and I want to make the most of every minute!

You're about to work with Jonathan Kent, Francesca Zambello, Kasper Holten and Sir David McVicar. Who are you most excited and/or nervous about and why?

I have to confess that as soon as I heard I'd be working on one of Francesca's shows, I sent her an email asking what research I was best to start with to make sure I was as useful as I could be! People like Jonathan Kent and Sir David McVicar have been idols of mine since I was first interested in theatre, and working on their shows will be an amazing experience. I have a huge amount of respect for Kasper Holten and think he's one of the very best directors of any form of theatre in the world today.

Do you think it's easy, difficult or damn near impossible for a young opera director to build a career in Australia?

It is very difficult. There are few opportunities for the kind of practical, hands-on experience that we need to advance our directing methods. There is no equivalent of the Jette Parker Young Artist Programme in Australia – no place for young directors to be exposed to best practice in rehearsal rooms. While singers, repetiteurs and conductors all have places available to them with major companies where they can learn and hone their craft, there exists no such opportunity for directors.

Do you plan to return to Australia? And if so, how would you like to change the face of opera in this country?

I would love to come back and am currently talking with companies about 2016. I think Australian theatre has a quality that gives it a unique voice. We are clever, quirky and irreverent and I hope very much to be able to take the best of those home-grown attributes and mix them with British and European ideals to create great theatre. I'm looking forward to the next two years, and hope very much to keep my Australian accent – both in speech and in theatre making.