

SKYLARK'S MAGIC FLUTE

"I never ever thought in my whole life that I would be able to perform in an opera!"
Susan Barnes, lady with Cerebral Palsy

SUSAN WAS ONE OF the participants in a remarkable project held at Winged Fellowship, Skylarks Holiday Centre for severely physically Disabled People last November.

Over four days a professional team from Opera 80 worked with 25 guests in the second half of their holiday for people with a special interest in music. The aim was to devise an original opera based on Mozart's Magic Flute which could be performed on the final evening. The guests were severely disabled, mostly confined to wheelchairs and many had little or no verbal communication.

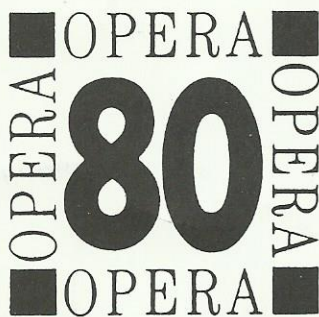
Encouraging

Many people hold strong prejudices against opera, believing it is the exclusive territory of the rich or academic. Opera 80 is a unique company which aims to make opera more accessible by touring right across the country to areas otherwise denied first class opera. Working alongside the main company, we have a thriving education department which runs projects with as broad a selection of the community as possible. We seek to encourage an interest and enthusiasm in opera, offering the opportunity to share our professional skills and expertise. We believe that active participation in the creation and performance of opera leads to a greater understanding and therefore enjoyment of the medium. The range of our work covers school projects with pupils of all ages, projects for people with hearing impairment, recitals for patients in long stay hospitals and pre performance talks for members of our audience.

A Blow to the City?

"The headline rate was stuck at 5.8% last month partly because of the impact June's funny weather had on the cost of strawberries" stated the Daily Telegraph's City Comment on 13 July 1991.

If such fruit are of sufficient import to the financial health of the Nation, one may be excused for wondering what impact raspberries might have on the Musical Establishment, especially after the publication of the report of the National Curriculum Music Working Group. Musical education in schools is of fundamental importance. Your points of view would be appreciated. Letters to the Editors, please.



Creative Opera Project

Directed by:
Jillian Barker
Education Officer

The Skylarks Magic Flute project was our first attempt at working with severely disabled people. Our team of six included a director, a composer, a répétiteur and three singers. On the first day, the Opera 80 team presented a condensed version of the opera, featuring the main arias and highlighting the storyline. This provided the stimulus for the group to devise their own work exploring musical and dramatic themes from the opera by drawing on their own imaginations and experience. Through a democratic process of brainstorming, the group developed the story along their own lines. They elected to explore the theme of the lack of understanding that arises between able bodies and disabled people. They then built up the plot of their new opera around this theme and so created "The Magic Pump". Roles were shared between the Opera 80 team and Skylarks group. This new work included some of the original music from Mozart's opera and some new choruses composed by the group which generated from harmonic sequences in Mozart's original.

Pride

As in the original, "The Magic Pump" describes the experiences of a man being sent on a quest to attain wisdom and love. The Queen of the Night became Queenie who runs a rigid institution where disabled people lead miserable lives. She sends Tamino to rescue her daughter from Skylarks, an enlightened place where disabled people lead fulfilled lives, integrated with able bodied people. Before he can win Pamina, Tamino must complete four trials which test his understanding of the problems which disabled people face. Once he has successfully completed these, Tamino is united with

Pamina and the inmates of Queenie's institution are released.

Opera 80 provided the stimulus and expertise but throughout the project, the disabled guests were very much responsible for their own piece. They explored a sensitive subject in a brave way, with good humour which conveyed a powerful message. They were all involved in the devising process and also sang, acted and played in our orchestra. We are keen that all guests should perform with an instrument, and were amazed at how well people played even with their feet.

Trust grew up among the group and there was a sense of pride and increased self respect. As we talked to some of them about their own lives in institutions, we began to realize why "The Magic Pump" was so important to them. So often unable to speak for themselves whether through disability or society's prejudice, the project offered a vehicle to explore their ideas and create a work of their own. Their energy and enthusiasm was almost overwhelming.

Challenge

At the final performance the guests performed alongside the professionals and created a moving show. It was a tremendous experience to work together as a group, building up performance skills, sharing a love of music, and creating a new work. Like the Pamina in "The Magic Pump", the guests demonstrated that in the right environment and with the right level of support, disabled people can produce a high level of achievement - in this case devising an original opera.

From a personal point of view, the project was a great challenge and proved to us the power of opera as a medium for communication. By making this project accessible to disabled people, we have shown that there are no barriers to the enjoyment of it. One enduring memory will be the transformation of one of the participants at the end of the performance. He had severe cerebral palsy and usually sat bent double in his chair. After the opera, he came forward sitting bolt upright to take his curtain call. For me, this summed up the achievement of the project. As another lady with cerebral palsy put it:

"It was a thrill for me to take a major role... During the last performance I was so elated to think that there I was acting and singing in an opera I had helped to write!"

Editors' Notes:

A second project based on Rossini's "La Cenerentola" will take place in November.

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