

LADIES & GENTLEMEN...

THERE WILL NOW BE A LONG INTERVAL

In the theatre world it certainly has been 'the season of darkness' with a predicted 'winter of despair', but hopefully there will be 'the spring of hope' for us all.

Arguably Irving Berlin's greatest lyric is, "There's no business like showbusiness, like no business at all". However, since March 23rd necessity has dictated a rewrite, "There is no business like showbusiness, in fact there is no business at all". For eight months theatres throughout the country have been dark. They were not even shut for that length of time during either World War.

Even in normal times theatre life can be tough. It requires talent, determination and resilience. It also requires an understanding of what is called the three Rs, "resting, redundancy and rejection". Performers are accustomed to creative pandemonium but not to a clinical pandemic. Throughout the culture sector the ramifications have been myriad and manifold. Another time-honoured theatre expression is, "no play, no pay". Never has that cliché been more pertinent. So many singers, actors, musicians and dancers are self-employed, freelance with no company contract to offer some protection. As has been widely documented there is financial help and currently DCMS are working through the process of allocating a £1.57billion Cultural Recovery Fund to help save jobs, protect special places and kickstart the sector. It is important to remember that arts and culture contribute £10billion per year to the economy.

As Christmas approaches there is evidence across the land that theatres are starting to find ways to open, albeit in a reduced fashion, dictated by social distancing regulations which are at the heart of all planning. Probably for the first time 'health & safety' is combined in equal measure with 'drama & music' to create a show. However, in the majority it will be smaller shows dictated by the current DCMS guidelines, "Social



ENO Board Meeting held on stage at London Coliseum

distancing should be maintained at 2m as far as possible but this can be reduced to 1m where 2m is unviable and where other mitigations are in place e.g. audience members wearing face coverings". It is economically impossible to run major theatres with social distancing. It has been documented that it is unlikely we will see large West End productions until late spring next year. Even so, nothing is guaranteed. The only thing which can be predicted is unpredictability.

Many companies will be divided into 'two bubbles' performing on alternate nights, doubling up to safe guard the production in case one bubble is struck down by the virus. Rehearsals are both a creative and disciplined environment but there is now a third element; adherence to strict public health regulations. Besides the demands of learning lines, arias, songs, entrances, exits, cues, staging and blocking there are the added complications of a rehearsal room with square metre grids, perspex screens, temperature checks, masks and sanitation with the performers being answerable not just to an 'artistic director' but also a 'covid marshal'.



Drive in Production of La Bohème opera held at Alexandra Palace

As an example, ENO's recent production of La Bohème required much ingenuity. The trick at Alexandra Palace was that each car became in effect, its own bubble. Four people were allowed per vehicle with smaller cars at the front and larger vehicles at the back. Sound was courtesy of the car radio FM87.7! Never before has an opera company taken its final curtain call to an avalanche of flashing lights and tooting horns. La Bohème was the

perfect choice for such a brave production the juxtaposition being a clear resonance to current events with Mimi contracting what was called, at the time, consumption.

Just as an aside, and as a medic, some would take a view that a doctor (referred to in the final scene) has prescribed drugs for a patient that has never been visited or examined. Concerns could be reinforced by the fact the doctor, although called, does not appear to turn up at all before Mimi dies. This is of course all before the days of 'virtual appointments' let alone 'no win, no fee'!

There are several theatres (like the London Coliseum) across the land with capacity of over 2000 seats. With the current guidelines an audience of just under 50% is achievable. However, any performance will be a complex operation from arrival to exit, staggered entrances, contactless tickets, one-way systems, track & trace and strict use of facilities. For example, each auditorium will require a preparatory deep clean. Lifts will be policed. However, an upside is more legroom and bar service to your seats. The secret will be to provide a clinical and caring environment without removing any of the traditional mystery & magic of theatre whether opera, music, dance or drama.

And finally, talking of drama, *La Bohème* was contemporaneous and maybe a further twist would bring it unequivocally into the 21st century. Mimi is struggling with tuberculosis, a physician appears and, what is more, is therapeutically up to date. The doctor immediately prescribes rifampicin, isoniazid et al. The patient, after a period of convalescence, is fully invigorated, inspired, and aspirational. Mimi and Rodolfo, the two lovers, run away, hand in hand to their own 'Spring of Hope' and live happily for the rest of their lives in Shoreditch.

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