

Hitting the headlines

Can you make lasting operas about today's burning issues? James Waygood went to the Royal Opera's *Yes*, and drew some conclusions about how politics impact on opera.

Austerity, strikes, protests – in a time of political upheaval, there are plenty of strong opinions flying around, left, right, and centre. The arts have always been influenced by the political world, turning political dialectics into absorbing stories with thought-provoking subtexts.

At the end of last year, I went to the world premier of *Yes*, a new opera by Errollyn Wallen with a libretto by American-British playwright Bonnie Greer. It was funded and nurtured by the Royal Opera House's *OperaShots* programme. The opera, termed a 'docu-opera', took snapshots of public and private opinion over the controversy of British Nationalist Party leader, Nick Griffin, appearing alongside Greer on BBC's flagship politics discussion programme, *Question Time*. The new work promised 'a visceral and verbatim exploration of race and racism in Britain'.

The production itself certainly looked impressive. John Lloyd Davies and Anna Hourriere's stark, monochrome set, awash with emotive words, mocked the idea that the debate was in any sense binary. Intuitive use of lighting and projection enhanced the maelstrom of movement about the stage. Most of all, Wallen's music had some impactful moments: from gritty choruses to playful arias sung by a superb cast, there were some powerful and striking scenes amid the severe atmosphere.

Whenever the polemics of the piece were clear, some interesting and surprising views emerged in the opera. But other opinions were too enigmatically expressed to make an impact. Though *Yes* had some memorable moments, it was nothing like as hard-hitting as promised.

So, what makes a good political piece? Clear arguments are vital – something which let *Yes* down at points. The study of power is another, both theatrically and musically, in order to hold the audience to a point. Subtlety is needed to ensure a mandate isn't too heavy handed, dryly academic, crass, or pious. But the message also must have the ability to endure.

Opera, with its capacity for high drama and sharply defined characters, ought to be a perfect vehicle for exploring politics – and yet its history is littered with examples of less-than-successful operas about political issues.



Playwright Bonnie Greer performs in her own opera *Yes*, tackling the theme of racism in modern Britain. Photo by Catherine Ashmore

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The desperate poverty and disease faced by Puccini's Bohemians; a young geisha's undoing by American paternalism and cowardice in *Madama Butterfly*, both are scathing social critiques of their time. But they tend to be surpassed by tragic romances that make political resonances unclear and unnoticed. Sometimes, the political message just fails to endure: Offenbach's *Ophélie in the Underworld* is less remembered for its satire of Napoleonic France and more for its rip-roaring music and dancing.

More recently, Nico Muhly's *Two Boys* was derided by many for being dull, unable to powerfully communicate the dangers of anonymity and crime in cyberspace. And Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera on the poisonous nature of celebrity culture, *Anna Nicole*, was overshadowed by less than subtle shock tactics.

But there are also examples of successes both in history and in modern times. Verdi's operas were rallying cries for popular change at a time when Italy was forging a new national identity: *Nabucco* is a condemnation of religious suppression and ethnic cleansing; *Don Carlos* is one long, absorbing study of the nature of political power. Elsewhere in history, *Fidelio* is Beethoven's manifesto

for an end to tyranny. And Puccini's *Tosca* is an exposé of state corruption, torture, attempted rape, and murder – a daring masterpiece of its time that still has immense power to this day. There are contemporary voices too: John Adams' visionary *Nixon in China* revolves entirely around a real-life political episode that reinvented the axis of global power; and his *Doctor Atomic* is as haunting as it is provocative about a technological invention that would change the world for ever.

So there's no reason why opera shouldn't tackle overtly contemporary political subjects in a way that will transcend the confines of time and resonate through the ages; but it seems to me that modern composers shy away from politics, turning instead to more obviously enduring mythical, spiritual and allegorical themes (witness Thomas Adès' *Tempest*, James MacMillan's *The Sacrifice*, Britten's *Minoan*, and Damon Albarn's *Dr Dee*). This is why an initiative such as *OperaShots* is so important, even if, as with *Yes*, it doesn't quite get it right. It's important to get new and emerging talent to engage with bold, contemporary ideas if today's opera is to have anything worthwhile to communicate to future generations. **ON**