

Letter from New Zealand

By Susan Nickalls

The rest of the world can only look with envy at how New Zealand has managed the Covid-19 crisis. Geographical distance has for once given Aotearoa (the Land of the Long White Cloud) a distinct advantage. But even so, the pandemic was not the only challenge facing New Zealand Opera, a company on the brink when Thomas de Mallet Burgess (pictured) became general manager in 2018. As well as stabilising the company's finances, his remit is to develop opera as an integral part of an ethnically and culturally diverse society and connect five million people with the rest of the world.

'When coming up with a new artistic plan, I asked myself a fundamental question which is: what is opera in Aotearoa? The answers are quite wide; we're considered a national

opera company and yet New Zealand is a lot more than the three cities we tour main scale work to. We also need to engage with Māori and Pacifica art and artists, folding them into other planks of the company, commission new work and attract young and diverse audiences.'

Developing digital capacity was also on the company's agenda. This was one area where the company was on the front foot when New Zealand went into lockdown last March. Back in January 2020, de Mallet Burgess had 'a bad feeling' as he watched what was happening in Wuhan and other parts of the world. So instead of rolling out his IT plan over three years, he decided to do it in three months. 'We wanted to adopt more flexible working practices as part of a better work/life balance for people. So by the

time the main Covid wave was breaking, we were already in a position where everybody could work from home and discover the joys of Zoom conferences. This helped us to cohere around our new agenda in a positive way.'

However, it became clear to de Mallet Burgess that NZ Opera's lack of investment in digital content meant they had few recordings they could share, apart from their 2015 *Tosca* with Orla Boylan, Simon O'Neill and Phillip Rhodes. When it screened on TVNZ on a Sunday morning, it attracted over 21,000 viewers and racked up another 127,000 views internationally on Opera Europa's OperaVision platform, says de Mallet Burgess. 'We suddenly realised there was an audience in the digital space for us to capture while also providing a link to the huge diaspora. So we knew that

digital would have to become an integral part of our thinking.'

Armed with this knowledge, de Mallet Burgess raised the money to film their production of Handel's *Semele* and started rehearsals in early August when Auckland, NZ Opera's base, was in Level 2. 'People were wearing masks and socially distanced in the rehearsal room with a digital set-up for others watching from home. A few weeks later we went into lockdown again so we had to postpone rehearsals as well as the premiere, originally planned for September. The cast had to decide whether to stay on in NZ, which they all did. Kiwi bass-baritone Paul Whelan even moved to Christchurch.'

The hope was that the government would get the outbreak under control in time for the company to stage *Semele* in October/November.

*Thomas de Mallet Burgess:
'Is our responsibility for the future to
preserve the artform or continue to
experiment and redefine it?'*

The gods were on their side as the site-specific production at Auckland's Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell did go ahead then with 'a bit of jiggery pokery', explains de Mallet Burgess. 'We put together our own Baroque orchestra but our concertmaster and our original Semele were due to come from Australia. When it became clear that wasn't going to happen, we found the Australian-based concertmaster Peter Clark marooned in Wellington, who took over that role, and Emma Pearson became our Semele.'

Although de Mallet Burgess had plans A, B and C ready depending on the Covid levels, in the end the performances took place with no masks, no social distancing and played to full houses in the cathedral. 'The venue helped us explore the tensions of the complex relationship between the sacred and profane which relates to our big purpose statement: how opera relates to our human condition. This production was also immersive so when Semele decides she can't go through with her marriage to Athamas, a motorbike pulls up outside the cathedral, Jove hops off and she runs up the aisle, like a scene out of *The Graduate*. They're seen going off around the side of the Cathedral with guests running out after them. So we had big moments in and around the cathedral space, as well as more intimate loving ones.'

With audiences hungry for live performance, the run was a huge success and the company exceeded their box office target. The dress rehearsal and first night were filmed and are

being edited for release this year in New Zealand cinemas and on the OperaVision platform. But for de Mallet Burgess the celebrations were somewhat muted. 'There was a sense of relief and real pride but also guilt because we were mindful that we were one of the only places in the world where opera was happening.'

De Mallet Burgess has ambitious plans for this season and wants to build NZ Opera's own outdoor theatre space in 2022. But he's aware that the company is potentially always going to be on borrowed time if a vaccine is only partly effective or herd immunity isn't possible. 'It occurred to me that there could be an abeyance of opera in most parts of the world. This throws up some philosophical questions for us in Aotearoa. If we were on the ark, what would our responsibilities be? To preserve the artform for other generations or continue to experiment and redefine it? It is a challenge to shift the inherent conservatism in opera. Where and when you set it has been and gone. Now it's about how, and in what way, the artform can be turned inside out and reimaged at a fundamental level. And that's not an easy conversation to have.' **ON**

NZ Opera's production of Handel's Semele is available to view on OperaVision.
www.operavision.eu

Right: From big moments to intimate scenes, live opera returns to New Zealand in a new production of Semele, available to stream worldwide

www.operanow.co.uk



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