

SAILING THE OPERATIC WAKA

THOMAS DE MALLET BURGESS TALKS TO JOHN ALLISON

It's Friday morning in Auckland, and Thursday evening in London, and to emphasize that contrast further it's also summer versus winter. Talking via Zoom with New Zealand Opera's general director Thomas de Mallet Burgess, I probably sound just a touch envious when I suggest that he couldn't have known quite what a clever move it would turn out to be when he took up the job two years ago—after all, he's living in a country that (at the time of writing) is virtually Covid-free and able to plan productions without fear of cancellation. Good geographical and political situations have helped New Zealand to weather the pandemic better than almost anywhere else, and on top of that his post with the country's only major opera company looks perfectly tailored to his strengths as an administrator and his approach to the art form as a stage director. What's not to like?

De Mallet Burgess doesn't deny any of this and sounds as energized as you might expect, but maybe to set my mind at rest he lists a few of the downsides. 'Well, it's true—though before this I was in Perth, which also has zero community transmission. There's an awful lot to recommend these places. Jacinda Ardern's astute leadership and the luck that we have in being geographically remote mean that we are considered by many to be living in some sort of paradise. But there are flip sides. Auckland house prices are some of the most expensive in the world, so if you're in any way involved in the arts—as opposed to being in finance, law or medicine—then you have little hope of owning your own place here. If you live away from the centre then you're looking at about an hour and a half's commute in the morning because almost every road is jammed, bumper to bumper. The lack of investment in infrastructure means that rail travel is pretty much out of the question—it's plane flights between the cities. And the border situation has hit families very hard. I can't get my daughter back here to New Zealand because she hadn't lived here long enough to establish her residency before leaving late last August to start university at Oxford. Many families are in worse bureaucratic situations.' But the Devon-born director, who has not been based in Britain since 2000, adds, 'I sometimes feel that having lived in the USA, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand as well as the UK, and of course having worked throughout Europe, I've fallen in love with so many places that I'll probably never be fully content in any one place again.'

But lest the board of NZO starts to worry, it should be said that he is really very happy in Auckland. De Mallet Burgess is a creative director who likes to think outside the proscenium arch, and opportunities for building audiences in New Zealand are exciting. But being 'stuck' far away from most operatic centres, with the perennial issue of funding in a small country, must have its challenges? 'Yes, you have got right to the heart of the matter, and it's impossible to dissociate all this from the politics—the post-colonial politics, really—of a country of just five million people that is in the process of huge change. On multiple levels, I think that I've arrived at the point at which that change is most keenly felt, and of course that's a very interesting place to be for any

artist, any leader of an organization, but it doesn't mean that comes without pain. When I arrived the company was facing quite substantial financial challenges, and I think that its principal funder Creative New Zealand—the equivalent of the Arts Council in England—didn't feel that the company had made sufficient progress in areas that demonstrated its public value. It's not only a question of opera being an expensive art form—which it is if you are going to honour all the different elements fully, though I've produced it very cheaply, particularly when I was in Perth—in a country where benefaction is not as developed as in the US or even for that matter in the UK. A key programme of this government is diversity, and we need to build a company that is more representative of New Zealand than perhaps it has been.'

Although British colonists were never—anywhere in the empire—among the world's most ardent opera fans, New Zealand still finds itself in a position of viewing opera as a European art form. It arrived with the Europeans, some 500 years after the Māori landed in their wakas—'so it has a very specific context in contrast to its more fluid development in Europe'. Yet building on the example of such stars as Inia Te Wiata and Kiri Te Kanawa, many of the most exciting operatic voices coming out of New Zealand are of Māori or Pasifika ancestry. 'Yes, these singers are very much punching above their numeric weight. I could give you so many names who've gone through our artist development programme and into the wider operatic world, but look at the Met's current Lindemann Young Artists Development Program roster—out of 14 it includes

the tenor Manase Latu and the bass-baritone Samson Setu. The tenor Pene Pati was a member of San Francisco's Merola Opera Program. Then there's his brother Amitai Pati, who sang Jupiter in our *Semele* a few months ago and was slated to sing Tom Rakewell for ENO before the pandemic struck. In London you'll also know Filipe Manu, one of the Jette Parker Young Artists.'

But such names are only part of building a more diverse programme and company, especially if they end up pursuing bigger career opportunities abroad. 'Yes, I feel that "raising" singers and sending them abroad has a bit of a colonial tinge, especially when in contrast the fundraising events are so predominantly white and Anglo-Saxon. This raises awkward

Thomas de Mallet Burgess



questions. But it's a fact that, after Ireland, New Zealand has the largest diaspora and so the history of our islands is not unlike the history of Ireland—people do need to go abroad. That's also visible in other areas—many film people end up in LA, for example Taika Waititi, who directed *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* and more recently *Jojo Rabbit*.

De Mallet Burgess also accepts that some of the fundamentals of opera as a European heritage art form may disappear if he is successful in fully integrating it into New Zealand culture. 'Yes, a good example is our Gluck production this season, now called *(m)Orpheus*. I started by approaching Neil Ieremia to direct it—he's one of the most talented artists working here in contemporary dance, and he thought about it for a long time. I was able to put in place people around him who know opera well but whose egos won't dominate the creative process: the designer Tracy Grant Lord and the assistant director Jacqueline Coats. Neil came back and said he was going to set it in a garage in South Auckland and that he wanted it to be about male emotion—which was fine by me as I felt it would make a good balance with the feminist *Marriage of Figaro* Lindy Hume will be directing for us a couple of months before. But the moment he started talking about South Auckland [local bywords for urban grittiness and deprivation] I felt that it would make no sense at all to have a traditional orchestra playing, and so we have asked the composer Gareth Farr to re-score the work for a small ensemble including marimba, electric guitar and saxophone as well as strings. Neil also came to me to say he wanted a Pasifika cast, at which point I realized that our largely white, European-heritage chorus would look a little colonial, and the result is we've reduced the chorus to an ensemble of eight young Pasifika singers.'

Does he expect any backlash from the more traditionalist segment of NZO's audience? 'We've been having a massive discussion in the company around positive discrimination and all these things. Of course, there are the arguments for casting on merit alone, and people who've been part of the NZO chorus for many years may feel overlooked when it comes to this production. But underlying everything I feel that we cannot introduce new communities to opera and then start telling them what

The baritone Robert Tucker and flautist Luca Manghi in Thomas de Mallet Burgess's staging of 'Eight Songs for a Mad King'



the barriers are. It's challenging. If we turn to the audience, about eight per cent of our tickets in Auckland come from one well-heeled suburb in particular, and they have a strong voice because they feel they own the company. On the other hand, some of opera's more popular titles are seen as problematic by some, and I get calls from people asking when we're going to put on an opera where women aren't victimized or where there isn't a sort of subtle promulgation of white power. So it's a balancing act, but I keep reminding myself



NZ Opera goes to church: last year's production of Handel's 'Semele', which de Mallet Burgess staged in Auckland Cathedral, with Emma Pearson in the title role and Paul Whelan as Cadmus

that it's not just about what happens during my tenure—it's about what opera will mean for New Zealand going forward in the future. Some general or artistic directors come in and think just about the short term, think about making a splash after five years before getting on the plane. I'm trying to think beyond that.'

NZO is, however, the only company in the country with the resources for mounting full-scale productions, and these remain central to its work. Taking the current season as a representative blueprint, it's clear that this might mean only one large production a year, given in three different cities—Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, each time with a different orchestra and different chorus, which adds to the rehearsal time. 'It makes our tours long, and it costs—which is not easy if you're trying to attract the highest quality singers we can afford, so inevitably there's a lot of persuasion about the charms of New Zealand. But our work is not only about the cities. There are a lot of places in New Zealand other than Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland, but the audiences there are not sufficiently big or well developed for us to be able to produce large-scale work for them, given the costs. What's interesting to me is that we can tour different work to these places—for example, our recent production of Poulenc's *The Human Voice*. We toured this around hotel rooms, with the piano in the bathroom and audiences of 20 in the room itself. You know, getting 20 people along to an opera performance in a small regional town is a success! The idea of putting an operatic voice so close to the audience has been with me ever since I was a young assistant director encountering great voices up close for the first time. I remember thinking how sad it was that an audience could never experience anything so visceral.'

Since arriving at NZO, de Mallet Burgess has directed four stagings, of which *The Turn of the Screw* was the only one to have been performed on a traditional stage. In addition to the Poulenc, there has been Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in an innovative indoor/outdoor setting and, perhaps most strikingly, *Semele* in Auckland Cathedral. It's as if everything this director—with his strong interest in community and education work—has done before is coming together in New Zealand. 'Absolutely, and when this job came up I was told they were looking for someone who could combine organizational and artistic work, but within that intersection it was the need to reimagine opera within a New Zealand context that really attracted me. I've always wanted to challenge the art form itself, even—dare I say it—the authority of the score itself. It's good to be so far away from my roots because early on I became something of a marked man. It was Rodney Milnes who labelled me a "Handel vandal". One of the things that site-specific work does is that it challenges the score. Different acoustics require different solutions.'

De Mallet Burgess came to NZO from Perth, where in 2012 he co-founded Lost & Found Opera, whose site-specific productions include Charpentier's *Actéon* in the university's aquatic sports centre and Ullmann's *Emperor of Atlantis* in a synagogue, and other unusual repertoire such as Milhaud's *Médée*. He'd moved to Perth from Wexford, where at the National Opera House he'd enjoyed a creative director role—separate from Wexford Festival Opera itself but working out what to do with the space outside the festival period. He also directed a couple of productions for the festival. 'I can tell you I never want to touch Mercadante again! Anyway, what really prompted the move was that the financial crisis was devastating for Ireland and we thought about the children's futures plus the always challenging relationship between Ireland and England, and with my wife [the soprano Fiona McAndrew] being from Perth originally, we decided to move. I wanted to be completely financially sustainable and took a day job with the government running an arts programme before setting up Lost & Found. At my age I felt I'd got past the stage of inviting the Arts Council round to see a small performance in a London pub, but Perth had money after 25 years of growth in the mining industry and we were able to attract proper funding.'

Prior to Ireland, de Mallet Burgess had been a professor at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. 'It is a remarkable place, and during my time there the head of the opera department was none other than Malcolm Fraser [who founded the Buxton Festival]. The position opened up when my predecessor Jonathan Eaton moved to Pittsburgh. I was directing wonderful students but really developing my own craft as well. As a freelance director you're doing well if you get a few shows a year, but in Cincinnati we were producing eight new productions a year, of which I did maybe half, and still the university allowed me time to go back to Europe to direct. I really welcomed the opportunity in Cincinnati to direct show after show. I'd enjoyed some success in the 1990s working with English Touring Opera [*La Bohème* in 1994 was his official debut] and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, but you know it seems to me that in England you have only a certain amount of time before people just decide they're not going to invest in you. Learning your craft in England is really challenging.' Which is perhaps why around this time he wrote *The Singing and Acting Handbook*. 'The publishers have been on at me for years to write a second edition and I'm desperate to include all the things I've learnt since then, but finding the time is another matter. Reading it now it feels like a young man's sport.'

De Mallet Burgess had originally set his sights on acting, yet at Oxford (from where he graduated in 1987) he realized he 'wasn't getting the help I needed from student directors, so I thought I might try directing myself. Which I did, but when I left university I didn't know how to become a director, and back then people thought, by and large, that you couldn't train directors. Well, there was the Bristol Old Vic, and I went for an interview but it was so stuffy that I knew it wasn't the place for me. So I pretty much taught myself, reading critical texts—although I'd also had a chance to observe things at Peter Brook's theatre in Paris when I spent a year there studying philosophy and French.'

His first encounter with opera had come by chance, when a group of students from Trinity College of Music, as it was then called, asked him to direct Menotti's *The Medium* in autumn 1988. 'I thought it would be interesting. I mean, I'd never really listened properly to an opera, but it was a success, down in Croydon. Something clicked for me, and I realized that I might have a role in opera. I saw that things were changing excitingly—this was the time of David Pountney and Mark Elder at ENO. But ironically, I didn't go to work at ENO. On the back of *The Medium*, John Cox very kindly helped me out, and I went to work at Covent Garden as an assistant director, working with lots of stars. But remember *The House*, on BBC TV? It was not a happy place, and eventually at a certain point I decided that I wasn't fit for purpose as an assistant and that I needed to be doing my own thing.'

It's fair to say that at NZO de Mallet Burgess is doing his own thing more than ever before, for all that he needs to keep a tight rein on the budget. He's still not sure exactly what he will be able to afford in 2022, though he is planning a new commission based on the story of the 'Unruly Tourists', a group of British visitors who just a couple of years ago became the talking point of New Zealand by leaving a trail of havoc behind them,

De Mallet Burgess rehearsing *The Turn of the Screw* for New Zealand Opera in 2019



scamming restaurants, trashing motel rooms, littering at beaches and even stealing a Christmas tree from a service station. 'It needs to be a really biting satire, and it needs to attract a wide audience. I think there has never been such a divide in theatre as we find in opera today between two basic musical strands, the one fantastically clever and brilliantly written but in which the Average Joe ticket buyer has no interest whatsoever, and the other more accessible but which sounds a little like Jake Heggie with a few pop riffs. I've decided to lean towards the latter and have asked a star of the musical theatre scene here, Luke Di Somma, to compose the score. I hope to direct it, maybe even as a site-specific production, but certainly as an immersive production.'

Before that, this month in fact, there's another premiere, *Ihitai 'Avei'a—Star Navigator* (from which title the season theme, 'Navigating Love', takes its cue). Described as a staged concert piece, *Ihitai 'Avei'a—Star Navigator* has been on the cards for some time, commissioned by several partners before de Mallet Burgess arrived, but the project had become bogged down. Its composer Tim Finn—the rock musician of Split Enz and Crowded House fame—may have seen the newcomer as his ally in getting it cancelled. 'Tim said to me that the project had been stuck for a long time and did I want to let it go? "I release you to release it," or words to that effect. But I pointed out to him that his starting point had really been a series of songs, and that everyone since had tried to turn it into an opera of Verdian proportions, which of course wasn't working. I suggested that he restored it to its original integrity and that we should treat it as a sort of song cycle. There had been whole satellites of other people around the project, but to be fair they all dropped away very willingly.'

The story is set on the maiden voyage of the Endeavour in 1769. Tupaia is the Tahitian star navigator who sailed with James Cook, and *Ihitai 'Avei'a—Star Navigator* tells of two master mariners locked in their separate worlds—one a Tahitian priest, guided by his ancient knowledge of the star pathways, the other a naval officer, desperate to prove his faith in science. Tim Finn's music is offset with Tahitian monologues by Célestine Hitiura Vaite. 'Captain Cook is a very divisive figure here, and in 2019 the 250th anniversary of his arrival was hardly marked. It seemed to me that everybody was avoiding the issue. But there is something very symbolic about this story in the way we present it—the two characters both far from home and unable to find their way into each other's world. The moment you ask whose story this is—and whose story this is to tell—you get into potential conflict, so what we're trying to do is actually to use the project to bridge that and have a serious and sensible post-colonial discussion. Using music, of course.'

Ihitai 'Avei'a—Star Navigator, with Amitai Pati and Paul Whelan. c. Uwe Grodd, d. John G. Davies, receives its premiere in Manakau (Auckland) on March 19; *The Human Voice*, with Fiona McAndrew and David Kelly (piano), d. Thomas de Mallet Burgess, opens in Dunedin on April 17; *The Marriage of Figaro*, with Emma Pearson, Joanna Foote, John Moore and Richard Ollarsaba, c. Zoe Zeniodi, d. Lindy Hume, opens in Auckland on June 8, in Wellington on June 23 and Christchurch on July 8; *(m)Orpheus*, with Benson Wilson and Marlena Devoe, c. Marc Taddei, d. Neil Jeremia, opens in Auckland on September 22 and Wellington on October 6. See www.nzopera.com for further details.

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