

OPERA'S RISING STAR

Anthony Arblaster

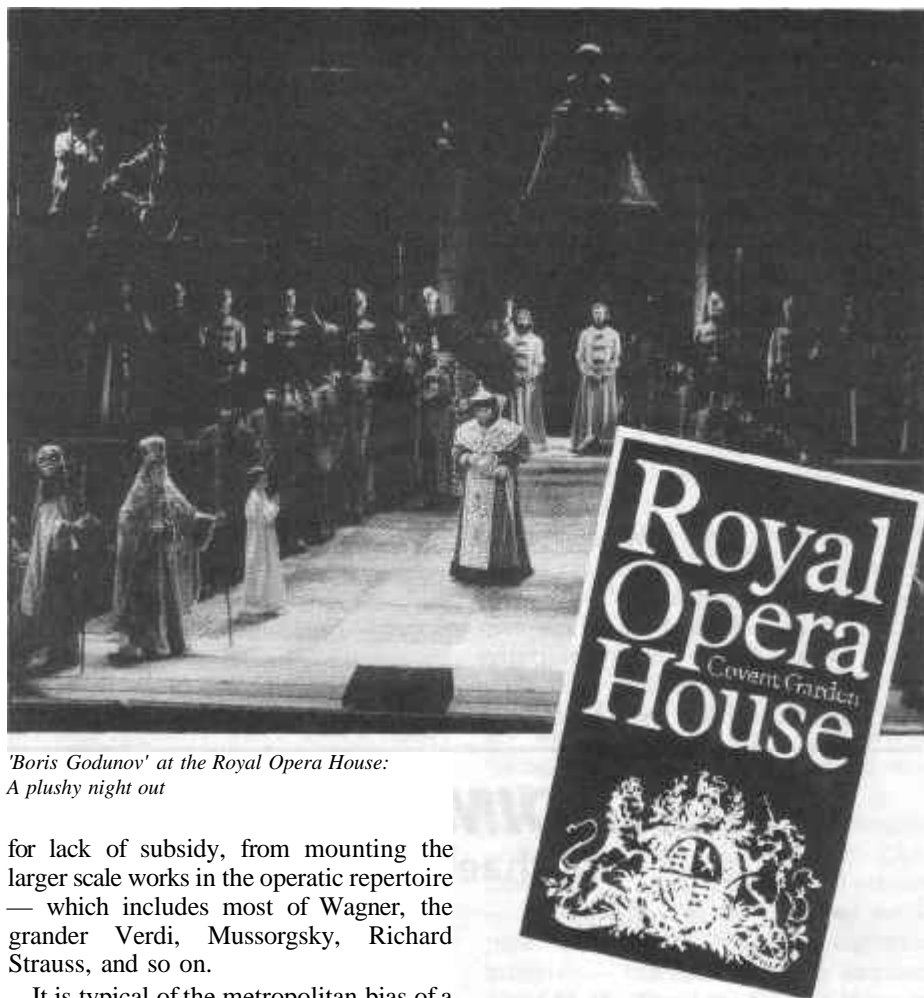
Readers of *Marxism Today*, if they think of 'opera' at all, probably identify it with the kind of event which BBC-2 relayed from Covent Garden on New Year's Eve: an evidently posh, over-dressed audience wildly applauding a farrago of nonsense sung in languages most of them don't understand, with Richard Baker in the intervals chatting to showbiz celebrities in the bar.

But as it happens the Royal Opera House — where the intervals are often as long as the Acts, where visiting business persons are taken for a plushy night out, where the average price of a seat is £16, and only a quarter of the seats cost £7.50 or less — is increasingly unrepresentative of the British opera scene as a whole.

Forty years ago there was no such scene. At the end of World War II there were the two London companies, at Covent Garden and Sadlers Wells, while the job of providing professional opera in the rest of the country fell largely to a single touring company, the Carl Rosa.

Gradually companies based outside London began to establish themselves, until today Welsh National Opera (based in Cardiff), Scottish Opera (in Glasgow) Opera North (in Leeds), and Kent Opera, together with a regular autumn tour by Glyndebourne Touring Opera, altogether ensure that Britain outside the capital now sees three opera performances for every two in London. WNO, the most active and successful of these companies, now gives around 140 performances a year (slightly more than the Royal Opera) and sells 150,000 seats. Opera North, set up only just over five years ago, sells in excess of 100,000 seats per year.

What is more, all these companies are committed to touring, which, arduous and complicated as it undoubtedly is, is the only way in which opera can be brought within reach of people in most parts of Britain. Given the well-known reluctance of both the London companies to leave the metropolis, it is clear that the regional companies now have the responsibility of providing opera for most of Britain; and Nicholas Payne, general administrator of Opera North, is quite right to argue that these companies should not be prevented,



*'Boris Godunov' at the Royal Opera House:
A plushy night out*

for lack of subsidy, from mounting the larger scale works in the operatic repertoire — which includes most of Wagner, the grander Verdi, Mussorgsky, Richard Strauss, and so on.

It is typical of the metropolitan bias of a body like the Arts Council that it should have tried to dissuade WNO from mounting Wagner's last opera *Parsifal* last year, apparently on the grounds that it was in the current repertoire at Covent Garden. Yet *Parsifal* had hardly ever been seen outside London before, partly due to its length and the problem of mounting it. WNO's highly successful production was a virtual sell-out in all the five cities where it was performed.

Despite the successes of the regional companies, both in terms of attracting audiences and of the quality of their performances, it looks as if the bias in favour of what are called the 'national' companies, ie, the London ones, is being strengthened. The Priestley Report, on the finances of the Royal Opera House and the Royal Shakespeare Company, has led to the

Government agreeing to an increase of £ 1.6 million in the subsidy for Covent Garden. This is what the 'centres of excellence' approach means in effect: more money being spent in London and second-class status for anything in what are patronisingly known as 'the provinces'.

Yet it is doubtful whether Covent Garden's status in Mrs Thatcher's eyes as a 'centre of excellence' is really deserved. It has a superb orchestra, which plays regularly under most of the best opera conductors in the world. Magnificent individual singing performances can often be heard there. And that, of course, is what people go there for. But as for hearing and seeing coherent, thoughtful and integrated performances of the works themselves — that is another matter. It is sometimes splendidly achieved, as with the revival of



Berg's *Lulu* and the new production of *Boris Godunov* in the present season. But more often the ceaseless coming and going of the international 'stars', and the generally timid and conventional production policy, make for patchy performances and ultimately unsatisfying experience of the work itself.

This is where the other British companies have been able to score their most striking successes in recent years. Unable to hire the world's most expensive singers, they have opted instead to make the most of their relative poverty. Being able to work for longer rehearsal periods with less costly performers, what they have, at best, achieved is integrated ensemble performances of carefully thought-out and well rehearsed interpretations of 'the work as a whole'. In this style of work, much depends upon the producer, and it is these companies, in particular Welsh National Opera, and, especially since David Pountney arrived, English National Opera, who have adopted the most enterprising policies as far as production is concerned.

And since opera audiences, and even more, opera critics, are a fairly conservative lot, it is not surprising that these developments have been greeted with much

protest and grumbling. The pages of the monthly magazine, *Opera*, founded, ironically, by the present managing director of ENO, Lord Harewood, but edited for many years past by Harold Rosenthal, are littered with complaints about the 'tyranny' and 'megalomania' of today's producers. All this means, for the most part, is that the established opera critics are hardly used to seeing opera produced, in any genuine theatrical sense, at all. Some of them, it is clear, would actually prefer to listen with their eyes shut.

Often there has been a barely suppressed vein of political resentment in this grumbling. Some of the producers whose work has aroused controversy come from Eastern Europe, and in particular from East Germany. Two of them, Gotz Friedrich and Joachim Herz, had worked with the legendary Walter Felstestein at the Komische Opera in East Berlin, and a third, Harry Kupfer, is now Opera Director there.

Not all of their work is manifestly political, but Kupfer's production of *Fidelio* — the most political opera ever written — for WNO aroused the ire of the reactionaries, while Herz's *Madame Butterfly*, also for WNO, was probably the only production ever seen in Britain to treat the

work as anything more than a rather sickly and picturesque tear-jerker. Friedrich was brought to Covent Garden as Principal Producer by Colin Davis, but apart from his magnificent and expensive *Ring* cycle (which has already been shelved), produced only three other operas there. It seems he was defeated by the ingrained artistic conservatism of the ROH.

Political and artistic radicalism do not necessarily go together, and some of the more inventive producers, like Pountney and Andrei Serban, seem more interested in exploring the psychological dimension than the political. But that too belongs to the air of adventure which is blowing through the world of opera in Britain today. Audiences are growing, and they are eager to see new productions and unfamiliar works. Standards of performance and production are higher than they were even ten years ago, and the central role of the producer as the creative interpreter of the work as a whole is increasingly recognised and accepted. If there is one company whom we have to thank for that more than any other, it is Welsh National Opera, whose best work continues to set standards by which that of the other British companies has to be judged.