

The Lady

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TWO DECADES AT THE ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA

by Margaret Lyell

IN 1970 AT THE ripe age of sixty, I joined the Front of House staff at the English National Opera Company. In those days, it was still known as the Sadlers Wells Opera, having moved from there in 1968. In 1972 it became the English National Opera Company.

I had come from Worthing, where I had been teaching French, Music and the three Rs, in a small private school, and supplementing my meagre salary by ushering each evening in the very good local repertory theatre. There I sold programmes and icecream, tore tickets, and cleared the theatre, for £2.10 a week. When I found that the post at the ENO for the same duties was £7.15 I was very impressed.

I found a roomy attic flat in south London, a morning job as a librarian and enjoyed my busy life – I taught piano privately, and did voluntary work among Turkish and Greek immigrants. I did not then envisage that I would still be working at the ENO at the age of eighty!

IN THE EARLY seventies, the usherettes were mainly middle-aged women who had been doing this for many years, since the days of caps and aprons and tea trays in the stalls, but by the mid-seventies they had been

replaced by music students (mostly singers) anxious to supplement their grants by evening work, and at the same time to hear good opera every night. Several of these students have achieved fame, notably Jean Rigby, Claire Powell, Christine Teare, Geoffrey Dalton, who are all now on the Glyndebourne, Covent Garden and international circuit.

I REMAINED an usherette until 1978, when I took over the stalls promenade bookstall. This consisted of valuable old books and programmes. Patrons browsed happily during the intervals, but they did not buy much, and in 1982, an American came to the Coliseum to open the Coliseum shop and reorganize the theatre bookstalls. Realizing that the work would be too hard for me, and the money aspect too complicated, I then became an usher, a much more relaxed and pleasant job, and I remain an usher to date.

One of the duties I care for least is to have to persuade patrons that they may not re-enter the stalls during the performance, if they have had to go out to cough or visit the loo. They must go up to the dress circle until the interval. This rule can make some patrons are very annoyed indeed.

One night, half-way through the first act of *Aida*, a girl appeared out of the

stalls, coughing. When she wished to return to her seat, I told her she must go upstairs. She was of no nationality known to me, and spoke little English (I tried German, French and Italian on her, to no avail).

Soon a middle-aged lady appeared asking: 'Vere is my dotter?'. Up she had to go, as well, and believe it or not five minutes later came an elderly foreign lady, appearing very agitated saying 'Vere is my dotter and my granddotter?!'

I have used my three languages (all now a bit rusty) quite often and have learnt some novel English phrases.

Many are the strange questions asked as we tear the patrons' tickets. One I remember – a Frenchman, I think, said 'Where I shed my mantle?'. Americans ask for 'the little boys' room' or 'the cold water faucet'. Some discover at the door that they have left their tickets on the dressing table, some get through to the stalls with balcony tickets (due to an oversight when we are very busy) and that causes *havoc*, as they have to be found and sent up to the gods (the topmost balconies), much against their will!

DURING these twenty years, many of the Royal Family have spent an evening at the ENO, precipitating elaborate security operations with sniffer dogs looking for explosives, and uniformed commissionaires and police in attendance.

The early seventies especially brought frequent bomb scares, which had to be taken seriously and the auditorium emptied as quickly as possible. Rain or snow, out they had to go, without coats, to huddle in St Martin's Lane while the theatre was searched.

We have our share of tramps and drunks, who slip in through the front doors during the intervals, but of course female ushers are not expected to deal with them.

At the end of a royal gala, ushers line the promenade from the stage (where members of the cast are presented) to the main exit. The public are kept behind us as the procession passes, and I well remember a gracious and kindly act by the Duchess of York last year. Behind me I had two very excited little girls, hoping for a good look at the Duchess, but not allowed to stand in front of me. As the Duchess passed me, she caught sight of the two little girls, and paused to speak to them both and shake their hands. A moment to remember for those two!

So, evening after evening I arrive at the Coliseum, not only to hear good opera, but also to meet old friends and make new ones, and hope to continue to do so for as long as I can. @

ROYAL BOOKS

THE profusion of books launched to mark HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's ninetieth birthday poses an *embarras de choix* for anyone wondering which souvenir volume to pick. In reality, the differences are negligible and almost all publishers have chosen a standard formula – a potted biography and a lot of pictures; and a standard tone – nobody expects a biography of a living royal to be eccentric or controversial.

Debrett's offering, by Valerie Garner (£14.95), has an unusual squarish format and boasts some nice vintage photos of the Queen Mother in her youth; there are few pictures of the rest of the family, although the conquering hero Prince Andrew, home from the Falklands with a rose between his teeth, gets half a page. Tom Corby has produced a similar volume for *New English Library* (£12.95), again strong on the historical

material, although he keeps the text to a minimum; the latter half of the book is entirely pictorial. The best compromise seems to be *Queen Mother: The Lichfield Selection* (Doubleday, £12.95), drawing mainly on pictures from the Hulton Deutsch collection. Lichfield has the insight of a member of the Royal Family, and a deft touch with prose and anecdote which is doubly welcome after a surfeit of gush in the general press.

In this last respect it contrasts rather favourably with *Travels with a Princess* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £11), which is not a Queen Mother souvenir – in fact she hardly features in it at all – but a survey of Jayne Fincher's last ten years as a royal photographer. The emphasis is on the younger royals in their role as clothes-horses. The photographs are generally very good, and hardly need the photographer's chummy captions. @

Kay Albrecht reviews some recent publications