

## Inside Out The dangers of the operatic stage



Christopher Gillett on the life-threatening dangers of the operatic stage.



News from Milan that the dress rehearsal of Raskatov's opera *A Dog's Heart* had to be curtailed – leading to cancellation of the first night, postponed until Saturday - when a 25 kilo stage weight fell and nearly hit two performers has stirred memories of a few close scrapes, though none of them, for me at least, life-threatening.

Standing on a stage, looking up at the hundreds of stage lights hanging on fragile-looking cables inside the fly tower can evoke similar feelings to sitting on a jumbo jet and wondering if it's right that such a huge piece of metal should be up in the sky. Only with the fly tower you find yourself pondering whether it's a good idea to be standing underneath so much dangerous-looking, dangly ironmongery. So far, like plummeting jumbos, I have been spared stuff falling on my head. Except for rain, which regularly used to drip freely through the roof of the Coliseum and onto the stage below.

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The real danger is falling. Not just falling over, which I've managed for unintended comic effect a few times, but falling down trap doors or other holes in the stage. Modern stages owe their design more to aircraft carriers than architects, the surface of the stage moving and sliding to reveal vast chasms beneath. A good stage these days can open up to a depth equal to the height of a house. It can be truly terrifying.

Above the stage, you are rarely allowed to step anywhere that doesn't have a guard rail and if you do, you will be made to wear a harness. This is sharp contrast to the 1980s. When staging Covent Garden's production of Verdi's *Otello* for the first time, Elijah Moshinsky asked me if I would have a go at jumping off a rather high watch tower, straight down to the floor, before singing my very first line as Roderigo. Eager

to please (I was 28) I said I'd give it a go. It felt like jumping from a high-diving board with no water beneath. I hit the ground with a very loud thud, wobbled about for a bit, missed my cue and limped through the rest of the scene while several of my toes turned a deep blue inside my shoes.

Amazingly, nothing was broken but thereafter I jumped off a canon instead.

**I've known singers who have fallen in the pit and broken limbs and worst of all, a dancer in Amsterdam who fell off the stage and died**

I was lucky. I've known singers who have fallen in the pit and broken limbs and worst of all, a dancer in Amsterdam who fell off the stage and died. During *Turandot* in Wembley Arena, I was singing one of the three ministers, Ping, Pang and Pong, with Simon Keenlyside. Simon was unbelievably impressive with the gymnastics he would perform in the show, but it was eventually his undoing. In Act 2 we had to leave the stage by running down some steps and out through the audience. One show, there was a tardy light cue and we couldn't see where we were going. Pong and I (Pang) held back, waiting for some light, but Simon, undaunted, did an extraordinary leap into the black void. It looked fabulous, but he landed badly and fractured his ankle. It didn't stop him finishing the show, which he did by performing his gymnastics on one foot with extravagant hops. It looked brilliant and strange, but he went to hospital, had his leg put in plaster and missed the rest of he run.



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While singing an opera based on *Alice in Wonderland*, I and the entire cast entered a stage that looked like an enormous chess board. Several of the squares doubled as trapdoors that could swivel and open at the press of a button. As we walked on one night, the Red Queen, just in front of me, stepped on a square which hadn't been properly fastened. It swivelled and swallowed her up like a dog swallowing a biscuit, then swivelled shut again. One second she was there, the next she had utterly disappeared, the stage apparently intact. I was in a state of shock. By my reckoning she had plummeted at least two metres. Was she alright? What if she were seriously injured? Shouldn't we stop? Could I ensure I wouldn't stand on the same square? I looked around. I stared at the conductor, willing him to stop the show, but it had all happened so quickly he had no idea she was missing until the moment she was supposed to sing and she didn't.

The show went on, the cast in an unfocussed daze. It wasn't until I left the stage at the end of the scene that I saw her, unhurt but in shock, her voluminous dress having cushioned her fall. On stage it's not what hangs above your head that will probably get you. It's what lies beneath.

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