

## Toilet Trouble **When a man's gotta go...**



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In which Christopher Gillett exposes (un)sanitary conditions in some of Europe's elderly opera houses, and has a revelation about the cause of his own stage fright. One that Freud would be proud of.

The first time I ever appeared on stage I wet my pants. In my defence, I was only four, but I can still remember the odd mix of relief and humiliation as the hot pee filled my uncomfortable serge trousers. It was a West End theatre, though I can't remember which, and I was dancing with my fellow students at Miss Ballantine's Dance School, a rather smart establishment which counted the children of film stars and the nobility amongst its ranks. I was neither, but I was dressed like this:



Perhaps this pant-wetting episode explains why I am sometimes overcome with terrible stage fright? Certainly I am much better these days at making sure I 'go' before going on stage but this can be harder than you might think. Most opera houses these days are fitted with all the mod cons, including loos with every dressing room, but many are not. The London Coliseum, for instance, has terrible plumbing. There is only one stall per sex for all but the top two principals. These also double as impromptu warm-up rooms; it is harsh on your colleagues to warm up in a small room which you might be sharing with up to three other soloists. The loos are below street level and in times of heavy rain the sewers are apt to back up, creating a terrible pong and closing the Ladies altogether.

Going to the loo is all very well when wearing trousers, but imagine how complicated it becomes when you're dressed like this (as I was in ENO's *Coronation of Poppea* in 2007):

Imagine some innocent stagehand spotting me coming out of the Gents dressed like that.

Abroad, the facilities are varied. The beautiful Teatro di Reggio Emilia near Bologna may have plush velvet and gold leaf in its auditorium but backstage the principal men have to make do with a hole in the floor. In Brno, [Janáček \(/uk/learn/composers/leos-janacek/\)](http://uk/learn/composers/leos-janacek/)'s home town, they take their paper rationing seriously. I took this in 2006 before singing a War Requiem:



Yes, there's no paper in the stalls. You have to tear some off before you go in. Likewise, in Turin they used to give you a ration of toilet rolls on the first day of rehearsal and that was your lot until the performances were over.

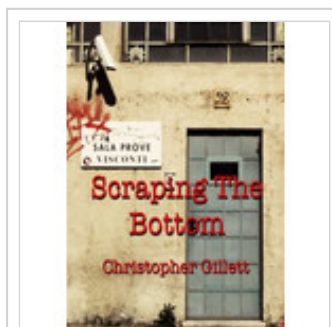
So far I haven't had any accidents since that damp debut in my infancy. But who knows? As I get older and edge closer to the childishness of senility, I wonder if in the calendar of my destiny there's a date already marked when I will again embarrass myself in equal measure and the circle will become complete. I really hope not.



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