

## Grimes on the Beach #2 Arriving in Aldeburgh



Robert Murray (Bob Boles) behind the set, focusing on his next entrance

Tenor Christopher Gillett speeds to the Suffolk coast and hits the beach for on-set rehearsals of the Aldeburgh Festival's seaside production of *Peter Grimes*. Will he and the other members of the cast be, quite literally, blown away?



### Grimes on the Beach - Arriving in Aldeburgh

After three weeks in London, in a stuffy, gloomy rehearsal studio big enough to take only half of the set, the cast of *Peter Grimes* was ready in more ways than one to hit the beach. On Sunday we checked in to our various digs in Aldeburgh, mine a lovely house in the middle of the High Street which I'm sharing with Stephen Richardson and Henry Waddington (Hobson and Swallow in the opera). Stephen and I shared a house this time last year when singing in *Peter Grimes* at La Scala and at times I feel like Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day*, only this time round Stephen has the opportunity to do a lot of fishing, which will make him happy.

**To any singer who grew up under Britten's spell, coming to Aldeburgh is a pilgrimage**

I always get excited going to Aldeburgh, so much so that last time I got a speeding ticket and a visit to a Speed Awareness Course. A word of warning on that: Suffolk police put a lot of camera vans on the A12 and near Snape where it's very easy to drift over the limit. I hope no-one spoils their evening at the Festival by rushing to get here.

To any singer who grew up under [Britten \(/uk/learn/composers/benjamin-britten\)](#)'s spell - and let's face it, most British singers did - coming to Aldeburgh is a pilgrimage. I first got to sing here when I was just 21. Britten had died two or so years before and [Peter Pears \(/uk/learn/artists/peter-pears\)](#) was the dominant presence. He made a brief appearance in *Alice*, the opera I was in at the Jubilee Hall, in a nightgown and cap, reading Lewis Carroll's 'The White Knight's Song'. He was also doing the bit part of Monsieur Triquet

in [Tchaikovsky \(/uk/learn/composers/pyotr-ilyich-tchaikovsky\)](#)'s *Eugene Onegin* at Snape Maltings, probably the only time (as the tenor singing Lensky observed) that Triquet has ever taken the final curtain call.

Since then, Aldeburgh has changed as a town. No longer entirely the preserve of retired colonels and their intimidating wives, it has modernised. At the moment it manages to keep a foot in the past and one in the cupcake-loving, latte-drinking present. Amazingly, given the easy supply of fresh fish, no one yet sells sushi. Give it time. Thankfully, you can still buy little wooden boats to sail in the pond by the Moot Hall.

Yesterday, our first day of beach rehearsals, the place was full to bursting point. Fine weather had brought in the bank holiday crowds. The queue outside the fish and chip shop was 60 deep, the ice cream parlour a jam of buggies and impatient toddlers.

**Moving a production from studio to stage is like a painter transferring a sketch from cartoon to canvas**

While the crowds potted about in shorts and sandals, the cast of *Peter Grimes* decked themselves in fleeces, hats, scarves, windbreakers and suntan lotion in order to rehearse on the beach. A brisk south-easterly wind was blowing in off the North Sea and though the sheltered High Street basked in sunshine, we at the water's edge were taking no chances. Wisely too, as it turned out. After a few hours on the beach we all felt as if we had been out at sea all day.

Moving a production from the studio to the stage is a process rather like a classical painter transferring a sketch from his cartoon to the canvas. Certain points are marked out but a degree of rearranging has to be done in order to accommodate the new space, especially when you are trudging over shingle to make an entrance.

The biggest difficulty we are having to overcome at the moment is the amplification. These are early days, but singing with a Madonna mike complete with wind-guard is well outside our comfort zone, and until we are given in-ear foldback (hi-tech hearing aids, to all intents and purposes), we are floundering about (I might as well use as many fishing metaphors as I can) with good old-fashioned loudspeakers parked in front of the stage, our accompaniment a clunky electric piano. From time to time the amplification stops working and we are left high and dry, our mouths working like a freshly-landed cod, no sound making it over the soldiering wind.

**[www.brittenaldeburgh.co.uk](http://www.brittenaldeburgh.co.uk) - Grimes on the Beach (<http://www.brittenaldeburgh.co.uk/whats-on/event/grimes-aldeburgh%20>)**

[christophergillett.co.uk](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk) (<http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm>)

[saddoabroad.blogspot.com](http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/) (<http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/>)

**Read Christopher Gillett's other blog diaries, [Grimes on the Beach #1 \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-1\)](#) and [Grimes on the Beach #3 \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-3\)](#)**

**Discover the story and characters of Britten's opera in our [Peter Grimes Opera Strip \(/uk/features/series/opera-strip/peter-grimes\)](#).**