

## Grimes on the Beach #5 **Curtain up**



As the metaphorical curtain rises on the performance of *Peter Grimes* live on Aldeburgh beach, tenor Christopher Gillett and the rest of the cast stand undaunted in the face of any issues with weather and sound technology, and are raring to go.



### **Grimes on the Beach - Performance night**

A few years ago I was rehearsing a production of *Le nozze di Figaro* in Amsterdam and the strapping Texan singing Figaro was not getting on with the diminutive German director, at all. Things came to a head during a stage and piano rehearsal when the the Texan suddenly said: 'Why don't we go and settle this outside?!' I'd never actually heard anyone say that before, nor had the German director, who just said with understandable incredulity: 'You want to fight me?' Thankfully, they never came to blows but I'm trying to imagine what the same Texan would say here in Aldeburgh, given that trying to settle everything outside is the default position. That could be misinterpreted as implying that tempers have been fraying in the final week as we get [Britten \(/uk/learn/composers/benjamin-britten/\)](#)'s *Peter Grimes* onto the beach, but that's far from true; everyone has remained remarkably cheerful, despite rehearsals that have taken us well beyond bedtime. Well, my bedtime, that is. It must be a strange experience for the burghers of Aldeburgh, as they stand in their kitchens stirring their cocoa, to hear our director Tim Albery's voice booming all over the town as he delivers production notes over the PA system.

**Who thought that putting on an opera a couple of feet from the North Sea was a good idea?**

There have been times when the whole undertaking has seemed as bonkers (and as cold) as Scott's expedition to the South Pole, his equipment only a stout tweed suit and a pot of Gentleman's Relish. I suppose that's a terribly English thing. Like test cricket. Who on earth would think that devising a five-day outdoor sporting event was a wise move during an English summer? What planet did whoever dreamt up Grimes on the Beach come from, thinking that putting on an opera a couple of feet from the North Sea

was a good idea? And yet, like Scott and cricket, it's the very folly of the enterprise that gives it such appeal. I have to say, though, that despite the amount I, for one, have banged on about the weather, it is not the thing that has been the biggest challenge. We have lost only one rehearsal to rain.

No, the greatest difficulties we have had to overcome have been electronic. First of these is the amplification, without which the whole thing would be unthinkable. Madonna mics are all very well but even with foam covers they pick up a lot of wind noise, and if the breeze gets above 20 km/h it can sound like we're singing on Piccadilly Circus station. Second, our in-ear-monitors (or IEMs as the techies call them) have been giving us a lot of grief. These are like wearing a Walkman with tight-fitting earbuds; fine if you're just listening to a bit of Britney Spears but distinctly odd when you have to sing. You don't hear the sound of your voice as you usually hear it. You hear it after it has been through your Madonna mic, over Wi-Fi, through a mixing desk and back again. Most of us have taken to using just one earbud, especially as the radio packs have a habit of losing the connection, leaving you hearing nothing at all but a loud hiss and feeling that you are singing your head off but absolutely no sound is coming out.

**If anything is at a speed that is a bit adrift from what we had in mind, tough potatoes**

Our very biggest hurdle has been getting used to the pre-recorded orchestra. After two live concert performances this has been particularly hard. In a normal opera performance, there is a degree of give-and-take, a running dialogue between stage and pit. Here there is none. Whereas a good conductor will normally accommodate variations in tempo, here he is powerless and his role has been reduced to that of a glorified metronome. In the pit (quite literally) Stuart Bedford watches video of himself recording the orchestral track and relays the same tempo for us. If anything is at a speed that is a bit adrift from what we had in mind, tough potatoes, there's nothing that can be done about it.

So what with the noise of wind, the hissing and popping IEMs, the intransigent maestro (through no fault of his own) and his tapes, the complexities of opera singing have been taken to a whole new level. A similar experience, I imagine, would be trying to sing an opera on a plane, while simultaneously watching an inflight movie wearing headphones and explaining to the attendant that you'd like the beef rather than the chicken.

**It will become the audience's task to decide whether the adventure has succeeded**

By the time you read this, the curtain (if there were one) will be about to go up on the premiere and it will become the audience's task to decide whether or not the adventure has succeeded, or whether we, like Scott, should have been better off staying indoors.

My abiding memory will be of the dress rehearsal. Waiting, out of the cold, in a hut by the beach, I was watching one of the many TV monitors that relays a view of Stuart. So that we can see him better he wears a heavy, builder's hi-viz jacket, which sits at odds with his somewhat professorial appearance. Act 3 begins with an orchestral Sea Interlude which, as it is recorded, he doesn't have to conduct. So Stuart took the opportunity to eat a biscuit. While the audience imagined a maestro in tails steering the orchestra through a stunning depiction of the moon on the sea, there Stuart was, on the monitor, looking exactly like an elderly geography teacher out on a field trip, with a finger of shortbread dangling out of his mouth.

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[christophergillett.co.uk](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm) (<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 \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-1\)](#), [Grimes on the Beach #2 \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-2\)](#), [Grimes on the Beach #3 \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-3\)](#), and his [photo gallery \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/grimes-on-the-beach-4\)](#)

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