

## Inside Out **The threat of a tenor's legs**



As Christopher Gillett gears up for the world premiere of Iain Bell's *A Harlot's Progress* at Theater an der Wien, a chain of unfortunate events puts his voice, legs and opening performance (and lunchtime canteen sales) at jeopardy!



Last night I sang in a world premiere in Vienna: Iain Bell's *A Harlot's Progress*, starring the incredible and delightful Diana Damrau and four of the loveliest cast-mates it has ever been my privilege to work with. It was what the papers like to call "a glittering occasion", the audience stuffed to the rafters with Europe's operatic senior management, the air thick with expensive perfume and high expectations. It was terrifying and thrilling in equal measure.

I've been trying to figure out if there's a particular pressure, singing a world premiere rather than a new production of a standard repertoire piece and because I haven't reached a conclusion, I think it's safest to say it's just different. Yes, there is the responsibility of creating a new work, of delivering what the composer and librettist want, of selling an unfamiliar piece to an audience that hasn't come simply to hear their favourite arias; but on the plus side, there are no expectations to meet. There's no previous incumbent of your role with a performance to rival your own, no inner voice which says to you as you go for the high note: "your top C isn't as good as Pavarotti's and it never will be".

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Mind you, I found myself with other things to worry about. Two weeks before we opened I came down with a cold. No big deal, plenty of time to recover. Besides, we had already done four weeks of rehearsal and everything was in good shape. The rule at the Theater an der Wien is extremely civilised and one which should be adopted the world over. You are sent to see a doctor (I was sent to a very good ENT specialist) and his prognosis and his alone decides when you return to rehearsal. The specialist said I needed three clear days to recover, so the theatre didn't call me for any rehearsals during that time. No-one tried to guilt

me into coming back sooner. This is so sensible; for one reason it avoids the risk of someone returning to work too soon and infecting everyone else. And just as well, as on this show we don't have understudies. If anyone goes ill, there's no-one else on the planet who knows our roles.

The ENT gave me various drugs and potions, I went back to work as planned and one week after starting the cold I was back in full voice. Hurrah! But then something very strange happened. It turned out that I was allergic to one of the drugs I'd been prescribed and my entire body, except my face and hands, developed an angry rash that was itchy and unsightly. This would pose a problem not only for my personal comfort but for the show, as I have two scenes in which I drop my trousers and there's only so much you can expect an audience to put up with. The costume department tried to spare my blushes by kitting me out with some long johns but an accidental flash of my midriff during rehearsal one day undoubtedly put a dent in the sales of lunch at the theatre canteen.

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I was sent to hospital and prescribed a course of steroids and anti-histamines. Both of these are worrisome for a singer as they play havoc with your breathing and muscle control, and can even cause you catastrophic damage. But needs must, I took the drugs. (Only, it turned out, the rather young assistant at the fancy pharmacy which dispensed my prescription gave me the wrong medicine and it was two days later, with the premiere now only three days away, that I found out I had actually been ingesting an ulcer treatment rather than cortisone. And no, I wasn't very pleased.)

In the course of the final week I made three visits to hospital between rehearsals. My body came through in the nick of time and by the first night I was drug-free and able to reveal my legs once more.

If I'd been singing a standard repertoire piece, the theatre might have called in a replacement. But since it was a world premiere, no-one had any choice but to cross their fingers and hope wildly that I'd get better. And that's the thing about world premieres; they're just so exciting, but not always for the obvious reasons.

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