

## *Pass Me a Sparkler* by Henrietta Bredin

The Spectator, Oct 7, 2006

Would I like to attend an operatic speed-dating evening, as a librettist who might be interested in meeting some composers? Certainly one of the odder invitations I've received but tantalising, provocative and of course irresistible -- all three descriptions you could equally well apply to Bill Bankes-Jones and the work he does with his opera company, Tête à Tête.

From its very first production, *The Flying Fox*, an immensely witty miniaturised version of *Die Fledermaus* arranged for an Anglo-Viennese quartet in which members of the audience doubled as revellers at Orlofsky's ball, this company has done things differently, and with freshness, daring and skill. So when I saw the Bankes-Jones signature on the invitation that dropped into my inbox I accepted with alacrity.

On the evening in question, a dirty London wind wrapped rubbish round the ankles of those hurrying through the vestry door of the Union Chapel in Islington, before blowing us up the stairs and into a shabby rehearsal room. As we arrived, we were each given an identifying name badge and a sealed envelope, which we were firmly instructed not to open. I picked out a few familiar faces – composers, conductors, singers, directors – but, as the crowd grew until we numbered around 80, there were a great many unfamiliar ones as well.

Palpably, and reassuringly, I was quite clearly not the only person to be feeling extremely nervous. A bench ran around the sides of the room and there were tables scattered about the centre. Large signs bearing letters of the alphabet were fixed to the walls and to the backs of chairs. After a while, Bill shouted for quiet and issued his instructions. At his word we opened our envelopes, which by this time we were all clutching as feverishly as if they contained the meaning of life, to find something that looked like an order for a Chinese takeaway. Mine went:

1D 2D 3E 4E 5G 6S 7D 8U

The numbers simply indicated the order of your progress, the letters showed where you were to go for a four-minute slot, to meet a mystery date. If you found yourself at a table, you would encounter three people with whom you had a double session, i.e. eight minutes, in which to write an instant operatic scene. And if the letter you were directed to marked a slot on the bench around the wall, you would meet one other person with whom you were simply expected to strike up a conversation, which might turn out to be of mutual interest or benefit.

The idea was that, after the first eight minutes, two complete mini operas would have been written and the finished manuscripts would be taken away to be collated, rehearsed and then performed by a small group of astonishingly open-minded, quick-studying and intrepid singers and instrumentalists.

I found myself teamed with the composer David Bruce, who wrote the music for Tête à Tête's most recent production, the immensely successful *Push!*, surely the first opera to deal exclusively (and graphically) with the subject of childbirth. He'd been given an empty sheet of music paper and we also had a list of short episodic descriptions, one of them highlighted as the one we were to address. It read 'baritone meets mezzo and sparks fly'. So we knew we had two characters to deal with and what their voice types were. What should we do with them? Was this episode in the middle of their story? Yes, it was. David took the plunge. 'I'll just write a chord to get things going,' he said, and started scribbling. I ripped a page out of my notebook. 'All right, let's be literal about this – if sparks are flying, they're at a firework display.' I wrote down B for baritone and then: 'I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before.' David was writing music as fast as I could write words. I gave him the line and wrote another one for the mezzo: 'I don't

think so. Pass me a sparkler.’ We were both wondering where this exchange could go next when we heard Bill counting down the seconds to the end of our session.

Chivvied by various people who seemed to know what they were doing, everyone rushed on to the next assignation. Pass Me a Sparkler librettists turned out to be in short supply, so I was at a table again, with another composer, John Webb, and another mini scene to write. This time we had ‘baritone calls soprano and asks her out’. We were all getting the hang of things by now.

Director Martin Constantine said, ‘Let’s have him ringing from the street outside her flat’, I dashed down some words, John was already peppering the page with notes, which turned out when we heard them later on to be a witty take on the Nokia ring tone. In the nick of time we got the baritone spluttering out his proposal and the soprano agreeing to go out with him.

After that ferment of concentrated creativity it was quite a relief to sit and talk to three further composers and a choreographer about what they were doing and what they’d like to do. Impressive though it was to encounter people who thrust CDs or draft scenarios at me, I found it much more interesting to talk to those who had come along on spec, with no particular agenda or proposal to push.

Talking later to Bill and the conductor Tim Murray, the complexity of the event and the bravura with which it was executed became even more evident. They are in the middle of rehearsing a new opera production, *Odysseus Unwound*, by composer Julian Grant and librettist Hattie Naylor, involving a group of Shetland knitters and spinners. Don’t ask – just check out their website and book yourself into a performance at Alexandra Palace in October or numerous other places through November including Stavanger, Manchester, Liverpool and Lerwick. I can guarantee that you will find it an exciting and revelatory experience.

As they’d already got the rehearsal space booked, they decided to use it, *Odysseus* singers and stage managers volunteered to join the experiment and Tête à Tête board members generously provided wine, bread and cheese – so the event cost absolutely nothing and may pay untold and ongoing artistic dividends. Bill spent hours making sure that everyone would meet as many Pass Me a Sparkler people as possible and then found that on the evening itself his role was limited to that of official timekeeper. Tim spent a large portion of the evening photocopying the mini opera scenes, deciphering them and piecing them together in some sort of order. His tip for anyone thinking of doing this sort of thing again – ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t use a 2B pencil.’ It can’t be denied that the results were rough and fairly chaotic but the whole exercise was enormously stimulating and, something one doesn’t get the chance to say often enough, huge fun.

Both Bill and Tim are passionately keen to provide an open forum for people to present new work to the public, whether by mounting a regular festival or by establishing a dedicated venue for small-scale opera. The Bankes-Jones approach is joyously lacking in caution, wholeheartedly embracing risk and the unexpected. This is cause for optimism, celebration and support.