

# Odysseus Unwound

(previously titled, A Shetland Odyssey)

## Evaluation

This evaluation has been conducted by Claire Summerfield (independent Theatre Producer) on behalf of Tête à Tête. In gathering her source material Claire Summerfield held conversations with Anna Gregg (Producer, Tête à Tête), read preview publicity material & production reviews, analysed audience feedback forms from each venue, and examined the financial statements. The format of the evaluation is based on the company's originally stated aims and objectives for the project.

### 1. Introduction/Project Description (as per ACE application)

The application to ACE deals with activity from the end of the developmental workshops (detailed below) in Shetland onwards and addresses the commissions following the initial drafts, artistic appraisal and development with associate artists leading to the rehearsals, premiere and tour in 2006.

**Odysseus Unwound** is Tête à Tête's first full-length commission, a reworking of the story of Odysseus as told in Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* and Euripedes' *Hecuba*, libretto adapted by Hattie Naylor, music by Julian Grant.

**Odysseus Unwound** has grown out of a long deep working relationship with Julian Grant, who has been involved with the company since 1999 as contributing composer to *Shorts* and *Six-Pack*, and associate composer for *Family Matters*. The subject matter and librettist are both his choices. Having seen Hattie Naylor's brilliantly original text for Kenneth Hesketh's *The Overcoat*, it's a very exciting prospect to work with this accomplished and wholly original writer on what will be only her second libretto. The project develops her adaptation of Homer's epic as a youth theatre play, 2001.

Julian Grant writes: "Odysseus as war criminal, mercenary, compulsive liar, opportunist, fantasist - this piece will throw a contemporary light on a mythic figure, without compromising the picaresque side of his adventures. Earlier operas based on 'The Odyssey' - notably Monteverdi and Faure - have concentrated this homecoming, but we have been attracted to depicting Odysseus's epic adventures and examining his state of mind. A previous piece of mine 'Jump Into My Sack' (Mecklenburgh Opera 1996) told the story of a whole life from birth to death in forty minutes with a four singers and six instruments. Thus the attraction of this subject and the musical challenge to me is to create a huge musico-dramatic canvas with grand epic gestures shoe-horned into severe economy of means. Though the piece will concentrate on the dark side of Odysseus's character, I envisage the piece as shot through with a savage humour and a lyricism portraying the multifarious adventures (or visions) of the main character. On one level a cautionary tale of the horrors of war in any age, and on the other a fantastical adventure of great breadth."

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Thanks to visionary grants from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, PRS Foundation and the Scottish Arts Council, we have been able to develop plans from a very early stage in the most surprising, original and thorough way. After an inspired approach from the *On the Edge* project, ("OTE," a research project based at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen, dedicated to finding new lines of attack for the visual arts in remote rural areas) from an early stage we have been investigating how this project might incorporate Shetland knitters and spinners as part of a performing opera company to deliver this story.

Shetland has a unique knitting and spinning heritage, where creative skills of absolutely international standard are common currency amongst the older population, but little known or valued outside the islands and often even within. Recognising these creators as fellow artists of international standing, we would like to work with them to deploy their timeless craft as part of the dramatic/musical vehicle to tell this timeless story, something like a cross between Giorgio Battistelli's *Experimentum Mundi* and Monteverdi's *il Ritorno d'Ulisse*. In order to understand and enrich the way this will work, we will hold the workshop phase of the project in Unst (5<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> October 2005,) and Fair Isle, (26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> October.)

Again, thanks to the early PRS and Gulbenkian funding, Julian Grant has been working with Bill Bankes-Jones on the opera for almost two years, and with Hattie Naylor for 18 months; she has completed her first draft libretto for the workshop stage, Julian Grant is now working on the music. This process has consisted of around two dozen meetings, first to agree the parameters of the commission, (including a visit with Julian Grant to Shetland to help concretise the concept of involving knitters) followed by discussions of drafts and of potential casting. These meetings and discussions will continue both before and after the workshop phase, and are now starting to involve other company artists such as Tim Murray, music director.

This workshop phase is planned very much along the lines of the very successful *Family Matters* workshops at BAC, August/September 2003, where we managed to draw over 400 members of the public into the creative process of making new opera, very much influencing the writing and planning of the end-product. In this case, a major new function of the experiment is to employ 5 professional knitters as part of the performing company (alongside 6 singers, 7 instrumentalists, MD, Repetiteur, Conductor, Designer, Lighting designer and Stage Manager, Composer, Librettist, producer,) in order to understand fully their role in the end-product, both practically and in terms of how they are used artistically. The model for this is very much the same as how roles for the homeless participants in our tremendously successful *Canticles* project were created through the rehearsal process, rather than planned in advance, and we identify this cross-art-form blending as one of the cornerstones of the project in terms of developing artistic practice.

Throughout this project, we plan to use the instrumental ensemble Chroma as our band ([www.chromaensemble.co.uk](http://www.chromaensemble.co.uk).) This develops a relationship both with Tête à Tête (Stuart King, Artistic Director of Chroma has also played for Tête à Tête, as have many other members of the ensemble) and also with Shetland (Chroma were the centrepiece of the Classic Fair Isle festival in 2003.) Chroma will take on the responsibility (and therefore cost) of fixing the band, and also take overall charge of the educational programme running alongside the project in both Shetland and Mainland UK, both major benefits to the project. This educational programme falls outside the scope of this application.

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Huge benefits from the developmental workshop process accrue not only to the local population but also the company of artists: our journey across a string of remote islands each with very strong characteristics mirrors Odysseus' journey back to Ithaca; Shetland people understand the meaning of "home," an absolute cornerstone of this story, in a far deeper way than the average metropolitan opera singer, and the environments of Unst and Fair Isle will provide a uniquely inspiring and idyllic environment for our artists to create.

After a further year of re-writes and planning in response to these workshops, we intend to return to Shetland to première the full production at the Clickimin Centre in Lerwick, (3 performances) before touring to the Riverside Studios in London (5 performances) and 4 further venues throughout mainland UK, vigorously pursuing our aim of taking opera to those who don't normally get access to it. This project will do this partly by attracting a whole new audience from the UK community of knitters, partly by surrounding the tour with a lively education programme building on the success of that aspect of *Family Matters*, and partly through vigorous and carefully targeted marketing. We then intend to deliver further performances of the production in Iceland, Tasmania, and one further foreign country, though this is outside the scope and budgeting of this application. We intend that these international collaborations will benefit the project's overall economy and status.

### **Outcome:**

**Odysseus Unwound** premiered at Alexandra Palace from 10<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> October (in conjunction with the Knitting & Stitching Show) and performed at Stavanger, Norway 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> October; Basingstoke Anvil Theatre 7<sup>th</sup> November; Riverside Studios 13<sup>th</sup> November; Manchester Royal National College of Music 15<sup>th</sup> November; Liverpool Unity Theatre 21<sup>st</sup> November; Lakeside Arts Centre 23<sup>rd</sup> November; Harrogate International Conference Centre (in conjunction with the Knitting & Stitching Show) 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> November and Climkin Centre, Lerwick, Shetland 27<sup>th</sup> November.

Workshops were created for Tête à Tête by |

**Comment [31]:** This ones for you Anna

## **2. Aims**

Tête à Tête's Mission Statement:

*To bring uplifting, surprising, daring and intimate opera productions of the highest quality to the widest possible public.*

Tête à Tête aims to achieve this by:

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- presenting opera in unusual, innovative and imaginative ways to the highest possible standard.
- widening access to opera through both participation and through the development of new audiences, performing in English and in unusual venues and formats.
- developing the repertoire through the commissioning of new operas, translations and orchestrations.
- contributing to the personal development of authors, performers artistic personnel and all other staff while creating the best possible working conditions.
- operating efficiently, creatively, generously, and professionally.

### Specific aims for **Odysseus Unwound**

- to create a major new production of exceptional originality
- to involve the local communities of Shetland as deeply as possible in the creative process
- to make the final product reach as wide and broadly-based audience as we can
- to deliver 12 performances across the UK plus further performances abroad
- to use both the form (involvement of knitters,) location (Shetland) and subject matter (classic texts) to draw in as many newcomers to opera as we can.
- to encourage the re-evaluation of Shetland knitting and spinning in as positive a light as possible
- to re-define and invigorate the art form of opera
- to re-invigorate and inspire the company of artists
- to stimulate the exchange of ideas and skills between Shetland crafts and artistic communities and Tête à Tête's professional authors, artists and technicians and managers

### Marketing:

Our target audience is: people who already enjoy contemporary opera, people who enjoy opera but do not normally attend new work, as well as people who never attend opera events. For our last show near 11% had never seen an opera, but as many as 49.2% had never seen a new opera.

### **3. Evaluation**

The following methods were used to assist the process of evaluation:

- audience feedback surveys
- company feedback surveys
- press report

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### Analysis

#### **a: Audience feedback**

Each member of the audience was given a feedback form at all performances. The return rate for feedback forms was as follows:

Alexandra Palace	37 forms returned out of 558 attendees (7%)
Stavanger	4 forms returned out of 165 attendees (2%)
Basingstoke	10 forms returned out of 165 attendees (6%)
Riverside	5 forms returned out of 284 attendees (2%)
Manchester	15 forms returned out of 140 attendees (11%)
Liverpool	24 forms returned out of 102 attendees (24%)
Nottingham	7 forms returned out of 60 attendees (12%)
Harrogate	15 forms returned out of 45 attendees (33%)
Lerwick	16 forms returned out of 196 attendees (8%)
Overall	133 forms returned out of 1715 attendees (8%)

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to rate their enjoyment of the piece out of 5 (1 = disliked, 5 = liked). Individual scores were given for: Music; Singing; Acting; words; direction, and Costume & set. The overall rating for each component is as below:

71.6% rated the music at 4 or 5

84.3% rated the singing at 4 or 5

78.3 % rated the acting at 4 or 5

51.1% rated the words at 4 or 5 – this figure is lower for two reasons, firstly respondents in Norway commented that subtitles were needed to overcome the language barrier and secondly, that several respondents commented that they could not hear the words sufficiently clearly. At Alexandra Palace audiences commented that the acoustics were poor(see Audience Comments)

72.1 % rated the direction at 4 or 5

84.1 % rated the costume and set at 4 or 5

Although there were some variations between the venues, the pattern of approval was remarkably similar. Of particular interest was the response in Harrogate, with respondents rating all elements 73% and above. Audience figures at Harrogate were the lowest out of all the tour dates. The data for Norway & Riverside may not be reliable due to the low number of respondents in relation to audience size.

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**The response shows that the audience perception was that Tête à Tête delivered a high-quality production, with the majority enjoying the singing and high production values.**

The feedback forms also asked the respondents a number of personal questions. Although it would be unwise to extrapolate conclusive figures from the proportion of forms returned, the data is nevertheless interesting in the light of Tête à Tête's objectives:

All venues: 7.3% of attendees had never seen an opera before, and 31% had only seen one in the last 10 years. Norway & Shetland had a higher proportion of attendees who had not seen an opera before i.e. 50% of Norway respondents & 25% of Shetland respondents.

44.2% had never seen a NEW opera, and for 21.5% it had been in the last 10 years. Again Norway (50%) & Shetland (73%) had much higher figures, although in London 45% of respondents at Alexandra Palace had not seen a new opera – this may reflect that audiences attended due to the interpretation of the myth and the performances being held in line with the Knitting & Stitching show.

91.1% had never seen a show by Tête à Tête before, a very high figure and a clear success for Tête à Tête in attracting new audiences for its work.

**In terms of the company's objectives of widening access to opera, *Odysseus Unwound* appears to have been very successful in attracting audiences to New Opera. Combined with the earlier statistics relating to their enjoyment, it would be fair to assume that this new audience would be prepared to visit both Tête à Tête and New Opera again in the future. It will be important for the company and the funders to take this on board in terms of building audiences for New Opera, particularly internationally & in the regions.**

**Qualitative responses:** audiences were invited to give general comments on the performance. The vast majority of those taking up this opportunity were very favourable (see Appendix A) with people commenting on its emotional impact, originality, the synergy of art forms, and its production values. A common criticism from Alexandra Palace was the intelligibility of the libretto, with a number of respondents suggesting this might be to do with poor acoustics in the venue. As the numbers demonstrate, however, this did not in general have an adverse reaction to the overall enjoyment of the piece.

**Age breakdown:** The majority of the audience were over 25 with 17.5% 25-45, 45.3% in the 45 – 64 year old age bracket and 17.3% 65 years old and upwards. On average only 16.3% of the audience were under 20, although in Shetland this was 24%. This may reflect the particular involvement of the community in the production. Nottingham also a high scores for the under 20s - 29%. This may be due to a number of factors, none of which are certain, such as the host venues target audience and being a University town.

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The company managed to reach a broad age-range, the largest group 45 - 64. Whilst this is a higher age bracket than Tête à Tête's previous project, PUSH!, this might be reflected by the marriage of a classical myth & traditional craft.

### b: Company feedback

### c: Press

Comment [32]: Another bit for you Anna

The production received national & regional preview publicity features and was widely reviewed in the national press, with general acclaim. **Odysseus Unwound** was also Pick of the Week (Guardian), Five Best Concerts (Independent), Critics Choice (Independent on Sunday), Top Opera (The Times), Must See (Daily Telegraph), Critics Choice (Evening Standard)

Preview Publicity includes:

BBC 2 *The Culture Show*, BBC Radio 3 *In Tune*, BBC Radio Manchester, Channel M TV (Manchester), BBC Radio Merseyside, BBC Radio Shetland, Opera (Magazine) Liverpool Daily Post, Nottingham Evening Post, Manchester Evening News, Simply Knitting (Magazine)

Reviews:

The Guardian: 3 Stars "Julian Grant's score is the biggest plus...his music is sharp, flowing and sometimes pleasingly childish" 13 October 2006

The Daily Telegraph: 3 Stars "This is that rare thing, a new opera which I craved to hear and ponder again. His (Julian Grant) music has a cracking vitality that embraces both a witty syncopated chorus for Circe's snorting pigs and some shimmering and seductively blended Straussian episodes" 15 October 2006

The Times: 3 Stars "It gives us plenty to admire" 12 October 2006

The Evening Standard: 3 Stars "Bill Bankes-Jones's production makes ingenious use of knit and weave motifs" 13 October 2006

The Stage "This accessible production is to be applauded for combining an impressive array of talent in an original format which was enormously entertaining" 17 November 2006

Opera "This Company seems to have cornered the market in offbeat, original takes on the conventions of staged music"

Stavanger Aftenblad "Thread, knitting needles and a knitted net was used as set and as a picture of his physical state, and as strange as it possibly can sound: it worked!"

**Overall the reception of the critics to the production was positive, however there was some reticence in a minority of the reviews about the use of the knitting analogy. The**

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Riverside London reviews have a slightly more positive note as in a number of cases Alexandra Palace was noted as having a detrimental effect on audibility. The positive reviews helped generate other press stories and were a useful tool in the tour marketing campaign.

d: Venues

**Comment [33]:** I have not been provided with data for this so am unable to complete

### 4. Outcomes

#### A: GENERAL AIMS OF THE COMPANY

- **presenting opera in unusual, innovative and imaginative ways to the highest possible standard.**

It is clear from both audience and critic responses that the production **Odysseus Unwound** met this general aim. The merging of traditional craft techniques with opera was groundbreaking and the production was consistently highly rated in audience feedback.

- **widening access to opera through both participation and through the development of new audiences, performing in English and in unusual venues and formats.**

Just under half (44.2%) of the audience that completed feedback forms had never seen a New Opera and a very high proportion (91.1%) had never seen a show by Tête à Tête. These figures reflect how successful the company has met the above aim. Encouragingly 47% of respondents asked to be added to company's mailing list, giving an indication that the production was enjoyed and the demand for more work by the company is high. This is a very strong case for supporting the work of Tête à Tête in order for it to build on these audiences.

The use of the disused theatre at Alexandra Palace clearly illustrates how Tête à Tête has used an unusual venue.

- **developing the repertoire through the commissioning of new operas, translations and orchestrations.**  
**Odysseus Unwound** was the Company's first full commission.
- **contributing to the personal development of authors, performers artistic personnel and all other staff while creating the best possible working conditions.**

- **operating efficiently, creatively, generously, and professionally.**  
All the material I have reviewed indicates that the production was managed, produced and performed in a highly creative and professional manner.

**Comment [34]:** Anna, I'm unable to comment on this – perhaps you can add from the company feedback forms

#### B: SPECIFIC COMPANY AIMS FOR ODYSSEYS UNWOUND

## *Odysseus Unwound* - Evaluation

- **to create a major new production of exceptional originality**

The audience responses and reviews clearly express that this was achieved

- **to involve the local communities of Shetland as deeply as possible in the creative process**

The unprecedented use of 5 highly skilled traditional Shetland Craft artists/knitters in the fabric of the performance i.e. on stage and incorporated in the action, reflects how the community of Shetland have been involved in the process. As mentioned in section 3a 24% of the audience in Shetland feedback respondents were under 20- this was the highest number for the whole tour and may reflect the investment in the project by the local community. The preview publicity studied also shows how the community engaged on a deeper level by assisting in the lobbying for, and raising of, additional financial resources to ensure the production was brought to the Shetland Isles. This committed support gives a strong indication that the community strongly engaged in the project..

**Comment [35]:** As I'm unaware of the true detail of the Shetland money raising, feel free to amend if this does not reflect actuality

- **to make the final product reach as wide and broadly-based audience as we can**

Whilst striving to monitor its audience Tête à Tête has not collected enough data to fully judge whether this has been achieved. **However**, the knitting 'theme' of the production and the partnership with the Knitting & Stitching show in London and Harrogate do indicate that an imaginative approach is being used to broaden the audience base. Disappointingly, few of the audience responded to the question regarding cultural identity therefore it is not possible to comment on the diversity of the audience.

- **to deliver 12 performances across the UK plus further performances abroad**

The company exceeded in this aim for the production as a total of 16 performances of **Odysseus Unwound** took place during the tour. Tête à Tête also performed internationally by holding 2 performances in Norway.

- **to use both the form (involvement of knitters,) location (Shetland) and subject matter (classic texts) to draw in as many newcomers to opera as we can.**

As mentioned earlier the involvement of knitters was groundbreaking and the collaboration with the Knitting & Stitching show resulted in a high press coverage drawing in a large number of first time opera audiences. The locations of Shetland and Norway positively contributed to the development of new audiences as 50% of the respondents in Norway and 25% of those in Shetland had never seen an opera previously.

- **to encourage the re-evaluation of Shetland knitting and spinning in as positive a light as possible**

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The remarkably high level of national & regional publicity generated by **Odysseus Unwound** undoubtedly raised the profile of Shetland knitting on a national and international level. Audience feedback forms indicate that the re-evaluation of Shetland Knitting has been in a truly positive light - the skill of the knitters is mentioned throughout the audience comments and reviews. The merging of this traditional craft with contemporary opera has increased the accessibility of Shetland Knitting beyond those already familiar with the craft or end product.

- **to re-define and invigorate the art form of opera**

Given the high number of newcomers to new opera (44.2% overall) and their obvious enjoyment of the production as reflected in the consistently high scores, the production can certainly be said to have invigorated the art form. The press reviews of the production support that **Odysseus Unwound** has indeed re-defined the art form “Bill Bankes-Jones’s production makes ingenious use of knit and weave motifs” Evening Standard, “Têtê à Têtê continues to push the envelope” Metro, “This Company seems to have cornered the market in offbeat, original takes on the conventions of staged music” Opera, “An impressive array of talent in an original format “ The Stage.

- **to re-invigorate and inspire the company of artists**

**Comment [36]:** Anna, another one for you from the company feedback

- **to stimulate the exchange of ideas and skills between Shetland crafts and artistic communities and Têtê à Têtê’s professional authors, artists and technicians and managers**

The development process involved the collaboration with knitters in Shetland with the creative team of **Odysseus Unwound**. The input of the knitters and weavers not only influenced the concept of the production and music but the design and staging. This exchange of creativity culminated in the presence of 5 knitters on stage and incorporated in the action of performances This collaboration has influenced the music, with Julian Grant stating that he has incorporated patterning techniques within the score. Whilst it is very clear that the exchange of ideas and skills between the artistic team and communities has been strong there is no data to support that this has been the case for the technicians and managers. However, by incorporating knitted ‘nets’ on stage and the knitters into the action it does indicate that some understanding of the craft would need to be held by the technical team in order to complete a successful ‘fit-up’.

### **C: MARKETING**

Very few respondents to audience questionnaires completed the section regarding how they had heard about the production therefore it is difficult to get a clear indication of which marketing tool was the most successful. The wide press coverage is commented upon and similarly ‘word of mouth’ seems to be a strong tool in marketing the company. There is one notable exception to this - the venue brochure in Liverpool, a high proportion of respondents

**Comment [37]:** Can you add a couple of general sentences about the overall marketing campaign and the target audience

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cited this as 'how they heard' about the production. Perhaps a simplified feedback form which is covering less areas of the production might encourage more respondents to complete the marketing section.

### Management

#### D: FINANCIAL OUTTURN

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#### E: Management

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**Comment [38]:** As the budgeted and out turn figures are so variable I think this might be easier for you to complete Anna

**Comment [39]:** Natalie;s absence needs to go here

### 6: CONCLUSION

Whilst it is clear that Tête à Tête have strived to evaluate the production as thoroughly as possible a number of comments indicate that the feedback forms were distributed during the interval – I am unaware whether the instructions to complete the forms asked for post the performance feedback, but I would suggest that for future projects this is clarified. The Company has gathered detail information regarding the various artistic elements of the production but the design of the form may benefit from some simplification in this area to encourage completion of the questions regarding audience breakdown and marketing.

**Odysseus Unwound** appears to have met all the Company's general aims, and the specific aims as set out in its Arts Council application. It created a ground breaking collaboration between Shetland Knitters and Opera practitioners of high artistic merit that introduced a significant number of people to new opera.

Claire Summerfield ©  
January 2007