

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Simon Callow: Analysing Wagner's Backstory

Edinburgh International Book Festival
19 August 2017

In an effort to earn his position on the stage, frequent (and very good when he gets a word in) Book Festival event chair Al Senter began this hour with recording of a clip from Cole Porter's "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?", specifically the lines that ask, "Who wants an opera box I bet? / And sleep through Wagner at the Met"—before getting in his only question to Simon Callow about the subject of his latest biography, *Being Wagner: The Triumph of the Will*.

Callow, whose obsession with Wagner began at an early age playing old 78s, ran with this theme, accepting that many people have this idea that Wagner's music is boring and interminable, but also, due to his well-publicised anti-semitic views, that the music itself is somehow "bad"—it is still banned in Israel. On the other hand, there are the Wagnerians, the real obsessives, whom he described as pale "creatures of the night".

Wagner, like the surrealists much later, wanted to get below the surface of the music to create music from the unconscious that would access the unconscious of the listener. He believed that people were out of touch with their inner selves and that the purpose of art was to lead them beyond the intellectual and into the visceral.

Callow described Wagner as a difficult child and a terrible student, but he read voluminously and wrote extensively on all manner of subjects in order to clarify them in his own mind—although Callow said his writings don't clarify much for the reader. He was in love with the theatre and wanted to be a dramatist until he heard the music of Beethoven.

He became a conductor, but his attitude to others—Callow described him as the epitome of the artist who believed the world owed him a living—and his joining protests for left-wing and anti-establishment causes didn't endear him either to his fellow artists or to the authorities and often got him into trouble.

His first opera was three and a half hours long and was not performed during his lifetime. His second was abandoned after the first performance. For the third, he took it to the composer Meyerbeer, who helped him get it produced in Dresden where it was a great success. However his rebellious activities forced him to escape to Paris and then to Zurich, where he remained in exile for nearly 20 years.

He took five years off from writing to think about what opera should be: it should be sung speech, with characters that are profound archetypes and should achieve catharsis like Greek tragedy. He believed that no one knew how to do his "new" form of opera.

He began work on the Ring Cycle, but stopped writing *Siegfried* after reading Schopenhauer, changing the focus of the story—after he took a break to write *Tristan und Isolde*.

Simon Callow: Analysing Wagner's Backstory is now out in hardcover.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)