

# Scottish Opera's production of *Flight* is ready of take off



David Kettle

Strangely, it feels even more topical now than it did when it was first performed." Composer Jonathan Dove is talking about his airport opera *Flight* – unveiled at Glyndebourne in 1998, and getting its Scottish premiere courtesy of Scottish Opera from 17 February – and he's referring specifically to one of *Flight*'s major plot strands: the plight of refugees.

As Dove explains, *Flight*'s mysterious refugee character, trapped eternally in the airport's departure lounges and food courts, is actually based on fact. The reference point that he and librettist April De Angelis took as their inspiration was the remarkable case of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, who lived in Terminal One of Charles de Gaulle airport from 1988 to 2006, claiming to have been expelled from Iran, but refused entry to both Britain and France due to a lack of papers. "If anything, his story has become even more relevant in the 20 years since *Flight*'s premiere," Dove says.

You'd be forgiven for wondering, though, what the pitiable predicament of a stateless person is doing amid the froth and farce of a comic opera – which *Flight* very much is, at least some of the time – and that's something Dove himself was aware of when composing the piece for Glyndebourne. "Every so often I'd explain to them what it was going to be about – about a refugee stuck in an airport. And they'd say: and that's going to be funny? I'd say: yes, it's going to be great! Glyndebourne were incredibly trusting..."

That trust paid off, however. "I've never been so nervous in my life as I was at the dress rehearsal for *Flight*," Dove remembers. "But then I could hear people laughing – and I thought: wow, people are really coming along with this story."

*Flight* has gone on to be phenomenally successful, with dozens of productions right across the world. And it established Dove internationally as an opera composer: he's gone on to create more than 20 more stage works. "It

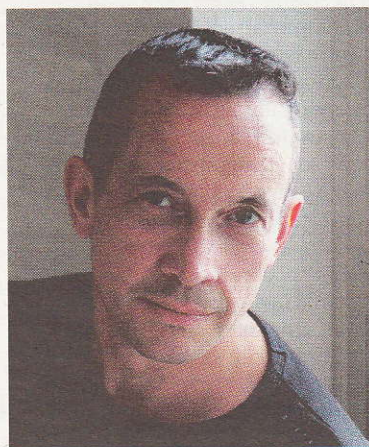


James Laing as the refugee in Scottish Opera's production of the airport-based comic opera *Flight*, main; composer Jonathan Dove, below

was huge for me, and I think it opened a lot of doors," he says.

*Flight*'s remarkable success is no doubt down to its equally remarkable blending of tragedy with high comedy – although in fact, the opera's cast of comic characters are all dealing with their own sadnesses. There's middle-aged couple Bill and Tina, off on holiday to rekindle their flagging sex life with some sun and sand; a high-ranking diplomat jetting away with his reluctant (and pregnant) wife to a new posting in less than sunny Minsk; and an older woman, forever awaiting the 20-something fiancé whom she met in a bar in Majorca. "Everyone is grounded by an electrical storm," Dove explains – and when they emerge from it, their relationships will never be the same."

But there's another reason for



*"If anything, Refugee's story has become more relevant in the 20 years since Flight's premiere"*

the opera's astonishing success: Dove's radically accessible, immediate music. It's singable, hummable, memorable – in itself something quietly militant in the complex, dissonant world of other contemporary opera. "How many comic operas written in the 20th century can you name?" Dove asks. "You could perhaps say that the way musical language developed it was simply less suited to comedy, but it was good for cosmic anxiety and things like that. I think it was also not so common at that time for new opera to be particularly singable – there were a lot of jagged lines and pushing things to extremes. But I had a different idea in mind."

Dove's music for *Flight* sometimes seems shameless in its borrowings from John Adams, Bernstein, Britten and others – you can almost spot musical references whizzing past your ears. But he weaves them together in a thoroughly convincing style that's entirely individual and as energetic as it is entertaining.

Scottish Opera's production is an indoor reimagining of Opera Holland Park's semi-outdoor staging from last year, and the company's music director Stuart Stratford, who conducted it down south, clearly feels passionately enough about it to restage it north of the Border. With *Flight*'s intercontinental track record, you can see why – it might seem like a wild card in Scottish Opera's current season, but in fact it's almost certainly a safe bet. ■

*Flight* is at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, on 17, 21 and 24 February, and at Edinburgh Festival Theatre on 1 and 3 March, [www.scottishopera.org.uk](http://www.scottishopera.org.uk)