

Flight

David Kettle

'I found myself saying I'd like to write a comedy – a *Marriage of Figaro* for the 1990s.' Composer Jonathan Dove remembers distinctly the moment in 1995 when he was asked by Anthony Whitworth-Jones, then General Director at Glyndebourne, to write a full-length, main-stage opera for the house. 'It was an insanely ambitious idea.'

Nonetheless what, after months of collaboration with librettist April De Angelis, became *Flight* has gone on to wild success right across the globe, with dozens of productions since its 1998 Glyndebourne premiere as far afield as Ghent and St Louis, Munich and Adelaide. But *Flight* is, after all, that most unusual of things: a contemporary comic opera, written in a radically accessible musical style.

Dove was already well immersed in opera in 1995, having written and mounted three community operas for Glyndebourne as well as working extensively with its chorus. De Angelis was an established dramatist, with plays at the Young Vic and the Royal Court, among several others, to her name. They'd first met through a hothouse opera-writing workshop, after which they collaborated on two small-scale chamber works – 'one mini-opera, and one micro-opera,' as Dove describes them.

It was natural that they should work together again. And the composer's seemingly off-the-cuff remark about Mozart ended up exerting a powerful influence on what *Flight* would become. 'April and I watched *The Marriage of Figaro*,' he recalls, 'and I remember her analysing it incredibly succinctly as: "Oh I see, a sick relationship is healed by a healthy one."'

The *Figaro*-derived idea of a comedy about couples, one of Dove and De Angelis' earliest thoughts, survived intact as one of *Flight*'s two main plot threads. 'There are three couples,' Dove explains. 'The Steward and Stewardess, who are a kind of resident airport couple; Bill and Tina, who are going on holiday to try to recapture something that's gone astray; and the Minskman and Minskwoman, who are off to start a new life. And I suppose there's an incomplete couple, too, with the Older Woman, forever waiting for her young man to arrive.'

But they hadn't found a context – or, as Dove puts it, 'a way of making it significant enough to sing about'. Not until De Angelis stumbled across what became the opera's second main thread. 'Jonathan and I were going to meet, and the evening before, one of my friends came round



Above: The TWA (Trans World Airlines) Flight Center at John F Kennedy International Airport in New York was designed by the Finnish/American architect Eero Saarinen and opened in 1962.

and asked: "Have you read this?" It was the story of a refugee living in Charles de Gaulle Airport. And I thought: oh my God, that's it! I'm giving that to Jonathan!

The story she had come across was that of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian refugee who – remarkably – lived in Terminal 1 of Charles de Gaulle Airport from 1988 until 2006. And his astonishing situation provided just the context – and the thematic contrast – that they needed. 'It was the combination of the very touching but extraordinary predicament of the refugee,' Dove continues. 'And the whole world of the airport seemed very exciting too.'

And, bringing the opera's two threads together, *Flight's* Refugee represents one half of the work's final couple, alongside the mysterious Controller, an almost god-like figure high in her tower issuing orders and



managing the movements of those down below. 'There's something otherworldly, almost supernatural about them both,' suggests Dove.

Alongside the bubbling comedy of the more earthly couples – Bill and Tina with their marital manual and their attempts to rekindle the flames of their desire; or the Steward and Stewardess surreptitiously sneaking off for a few minutes of lust between flights – it's The Refugee who is the focus for the opera's contrasting, more serious emotions, even its tragic side. Not only as a virtual prisoner in the airport, but also in how he came to be there, and in the mysterious figure he's awaiting, only revealed as the opera nears its close.

Comedy and tragedy: how did Dove and De Angelis go about balancing the two aspects of the opera? 'It wasn't really conscious,' explains Dove. 'It was more instinctive. But we did talk a lot about the story and how it was proceeding, and what emotions it brought up.'

'I'm not comparing myself to Chekhov,' continues De Angelis, 'but if you look at what he does, he'll be funny and sad at the same time, which is a wonderful thing. It's finding a sense of flow and balance between them – if you're going for frenetic farce all the time, then you can't suddenly change direction and still take the audience with you.'

It's also worth remembering that, unlike the vast majority of operas – whether historical or contemporary – *Flight* wasn't based on an existing

Above: Terminal 3 at Toronto's Pearson International Airport was designed by B + H Architects and Scott Associates Architects Inc. and opened in 1991.

play or story, but created from nothing by its librettist and composer. They batted ideas back and forth until the narrative flow, characters and emotional balance felt right, both musically and dramatically.

And right from the start of *Flight*'s creation, Dove felt musically inspired by the opera's airport setting. 'I imagined the whole world of the airport, planes taking off – what would it all sound like?' he remembers. The setting and plot triggered specific musical ideas in Dove's imagination. 'When we knew there was going to be a storm running throughout Act II, we thought: what's that going to sound like? There are a lot of operatic precedents for storms, but I wondered: what would a comic storm sound like?' Dove was also captivated by the idea of The Refugee as an outsider, and how that could be portrayed in musical terms. 'The real refugee was Iranian, but his music is never country-specific in the opera. He's just other, and the countertenor voice is other, too. I think his music hints at other ethnicities – for example the marimba, which has quite an African sound – without specifying exactly which.'

Indeed, the plight of refugees has taken on an ever-increasing significance since the opera's 1998 premiere, a fact that neither Dove nor De Angelis could have predicted. 'Audiences are generally more sensitised to refugees now, and it's an issue that's unignorable,' he explains.

But 20 years on, what do they now think their opera is actually about? 'The airport and the storm are like a forest that people go into,' De Angelis suggests, 'a place where transformations happen. All the characters are hoping for a new life in some ways.' Dove picks up on the theme: 'There's nobody in the story who's making a shorthaul, insignificant flight. An airport represents people's dreams and hopes. You're going there hoping for something – maybe a holiday, or maybe a whole new life.'

Do all of *Flight*'s characters get what they hope for? 'Yes,' ventures De Angelis, 'but not always in the ways they might expect. Some people can move on and change their lives, but others are stuck and can't achieve that transformation. It sounds very serious, but that's what was in our heads at the time. We wanted it to be funny, but not just to be froth. We wanted to create something a bit more gutsy and with a bit more meaning.'

With that in mind, how would they describe the opera's enigmatic conclusion? 'It's a development in the curious relationship between The Controller and The Refugee – you sense that something is going to be different,' Dove accepts. 'But it's not tidy at all. It's as happy an ending as is available. That's the way I look at it.'

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

Musical scene-painting

Flight's airport setting offers Dove opportunities for some vivid musical picture painting. He evokes a plane taking off halfway through Act I – in music that slowly ascends and accelerates from bass grumbings to a magical moment when the aircraft slips from view – and he describes a plane's arrival near the beginning of Act III in similarly powerful musical terms. His turbulent storm music – all rushing, unequal rhythms and sudden flashes of lightning from the brass – underpins the whole of Act II.

Voices portraying character

Dove employs an enormously wide vocal range across *Flight*'s several roles, and uses it to indicate his characters' individual personalities – from the stratospherically high soprano of the otherworldly Controller to the menacing low bass of the sinister Immigration Officer, by way of the unusual countertenor tones of the outsider Refugee, and the world-weary, low mezzo-soprano of the Older Woman.

Rhythmic impetus

There are few moments when *Flight* pauses for breath. Instead, the opera is propelled along by a strong sense of rhythmic energy, whether through seemingly unstoppable, minimalist-style repetitions or toe-tapping, jazzy syncopations. At times, Dove consciously uses this rhythmic impetus to convey the excitement of going on holiday – and his vocal lines, too, follow the natural rhythms of speech.

Tannoy announcements

Dove integrates the airport's distinctive announcement signals into his musical fabric: a quieter, two-note figure that often signals that The Controller is about to speak; and a less specific but very distinctive, three-chord figure that's present throughout, from the very opening to the opera's final sounds.

Couples' distinctive music

Rather than associating his characters with particular musical themes, Dove instead paints memorably contrasting music for each couple, clearly audible as they make their first entrances: jittery music full of nervous excitement for Bill and Tina's holiday expectations; darker, more jazzy music for the Older Woman; breezy, efficient sounds for the Steward and Stewardess; and urgent, serious music, almost like that of a TV news bulletin, for the Minskman and Minskwoman. In addition, The Refugee's modal, non-Western-sounding music indicates his origins elsewhere, and warning brass fanfares and jagged rhythms announce the arrival of the Immigration Officer.

Free-flowing structure

Flight's plot unfolds in real time, and there's an almost cinematic flow between the opera's various scenes. Rather than dividing into clearly discernible sections, arias emerge naturally from an ever-developing structure – for example, the Minskman's brief Act I aria as he and his wife are rushing for their plane, or the Minskwoman's Act II aria reflecting on the contents of her suitcase. The Refugee's Act III song 'New, wondrous' is quickly taken up by other characters as a reflection of their own transformations, and his long, intense solo towards the end of Act III reveals the tragic reasons for his predicament.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

David Parry: Robson, McFadden, Coxon, Plazas, Willis, Glyndebourne Festival Opera/London Philharmonic Orchestra (Chandos)

This live recording from Glyndebourne's premiere production captures all the fizz and wit of Richard Jones' colourful staging. Christopher Robson makes a cajoling but vulnerable Refugee, and Claron McFadden is superb soaring to stratospheric heights as the unearthly Controller. David Parry serves up deliciously bubbling, eager playing from the LPO.

Below: Terminal 1 at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris opened in 1974. It was designed by the French architect Paul Andreu.

David Kettle is a music critic for *The Scotsman*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Arts Desk*, and writes on music and the arts across a broad range of publications.

