

## The Investigation into Opera Funding

From the Memoirs of Jason Briggs.

George and I went off for lunch at Uhuru's - a maize burger and a glass of genuine root beer - and got back just as the next Arts Director was taking his seat and readying himself for his grilling. His Interrogator was a somewhat intimidating figure, 16 stone if an ounce, silver hair and a huge jaw, quite different from the unfortunate Director who was thin, tense and was dressed all in black. He fiddled with the strap on his black Marco Rocco Portapad.

The Interrogator opened his buff file, put on grannie glasses, and stared over them at his quarry for a full minute. The name in front of him read "Theo Galvany", and I recognised him as a crony of the PM's. He started to speak in a great rumbling voice, punctuated with "har".

"I particularly want to ask you about your current production of the, har, 'Rhinegold'. Perhaps you can describe it to the Panel." He looked round significantly at his colleagues. "Well?", he barked.

The Opera Director stopped fiddling with his strap and spoke up confidently, "Das Rheingeld is a Wagnerian opera dealing with-

"Yes, Yes, Yes," interrupted the Interrogator, "That's all very well. Perhaps you are a little hard of hearing. I said I wanted to talk about your production (he emphasised the word 'production') of, har, the Rhine Gold. I believe your production (again he emphasised the word) is, so to speak, a re-production."

"I'm sorry?" said the Director with a bland expression. The Interrogator stared at him and waited. "I suppose," said the Director slowly, "you refer to the fact that it is a reprise of the 90's production."

"Exactly so," said the Interrogator, "a, har, reprise. A re-prise. In fact, the infamous reprise in which Wotan and his wife appear in wedding dress and dentist's smock. In which Freia is dressed in a black suit and carries a blonde haired doll." He turned to his colleagues and explained, "Wotan and Freia, as you may be aware, are Nordic gods. Nordic gods," he repeated with a grunt.

"And I will tell you what other significant features there are in this, har, re-prise. The Niebelungen, a sort of Chorus, have paper bags over their heads, and jig about with bare legs and gold slippers. There are a pair of Siamese twins in business suits, one of whom," he paused significantly, "strangles the other. Is this not so, hard to credit though it is?" he barked at the Director.

"Well, yes." was the reply. And then the Director squared his shoulders and said "I don't see what this has to do with arts funding, as a matter of fact."

"Don't you, as a matter of fact? You will shortly, I can assure you," shouted the Interrogator. The panel jerked their heads round towards him with various degrees of concern on their features. George rubbed his hands together and nudged me with his elbow. "O.K. George," I said, "I'm following it."

The Interrogator continued, his voice still loud and menacing, "In this re-prise, I understand there are also a policeman with a small hammer, another character in a trilby and flippers, yet another in bermuda shorts, and a lady - who I believe is an Earth-goddess - who walks on and off in ballroom dress studying a map." He paused.

“Now tell me, sir, what possible relevance does all of this, har, creative flim-flam have to do with the tax-payer? What possible relevance?”

The Director seemed stunned. The Interrogator continued to stare at him over his grannie glasses and said "The tax-payer is not a fervid consumer of such nonsense is he? And, therefore, we must ask if he should pay for it? And the answer is clearly not!" But the Director seemed to gather strength and the panel, sensing this, leaned forward as a man. So did George and I. The Director straightened his back and said "The production of classic works of art requires that a director take account of changing perceptions among the public and it his duty to seek out new ways of making such works of great human import more relevant to the present day audience-" "With Siamese twins dressed in business suits, one of whom strangles the other on the stage?" bellowed the Interrogator. "What perception is there in that, I demand to know! If you and I were to step out into the street and ask a passing tax-payer if Siamese twins in business suits matched his perceptions of the world around him today, I think I know what he would say! And so, I believe, do you! But you don't seem to care! You are consuming tax-payer funding for your own self-glorification, sir!" The panel looked shocked, whether at the interrogator's fury or at the Siamese twins was not clear. "Your funding is compromised, Mr. Director!"

The Director stood up, his hand shaking on his Portapad and, almost tripping over his chair, hurried from the room, head-down. The Interrogator was giving instructions - a grim smile on his face - to an aide who was nodding his head and talking into his Portapad. "Come and tell me about the world of opera," I said to George. "I'm under instructions to sell ours off."