



What's On Arts & Culture in and around the borough of Richmond upon Thames



'Bohème on a budget!'

A year in the life of Instant Opera

Have you ever wondered what it is like to stage an opera? Every October we present a fully-staged opera at Teddington's historic Normansfield Theatre - most recently, in 2019, with Puccini's *La bohème* which sold out its run weeks in advance. A 'fully-staged' opera demands a large orchestra, chorus, costumes, lighting and scenery as one would expect to see at a major opera house like The Royal Opera House. The challenges are many - even for the ROH with its sizable budget. In our case, it involves a huge planning and team effort managing 77 skilled artists of 18 different nationalities - but with a vastly reduced budget... Here's how we did it!



December 2018

Recruiting a large orchestra and chorus, including kids, is quite a challenge. By Christmas invitations are sent to regular members and others who may be interested. Fortunately, with such a popular piece 'take-up' is strong. We are lucky Richmond and its environs are well served by orchestras and choirs of incredible quality.

January/ February 2019

The start of the year signals a period of intense planning and decision making. The production concept is finalized and 'storyboarded' similar to a film in pre-production. Our production of *La bohème* is set in 1970's Amsterdam, not 1830's Paris - this requires considerable research and leaps of imagination. We discuss scenery and costume design. For scenery we work with Kew artist Lyn Keay, who paints in an obliging neighbour's conservatory, usually working from back-of-envelope sketches and photos. An incredible task in its own right, producing stunning results. For costumes, we make numerous visits to costume hire departments until we find the right look for everyone on-stage. We source an orchestral arrangement and hire the band parts and chorus music - our preferred arrangement came from a festival in France. We place audition notices for the principal singers and reply to over one hundred responses. Time to book the audition venue! Lighting, technical and stage crew are recruited - we simply could not make it happen without these brilliant people.

March

The month of auditions and casting. We were astounded by the quantity and quality of the applicants that auditioned - everyone, it seems, wants to be in *La bohème*! The result was two dream casts of principals representing UK, Germany, India, USA, Brazil, Italy and Turkey - music truly brings people together. Having completed casting, things now move rapidly and simultaneously. Firstly costume fittings for our casts and chorus. Then delivering orchestra and chorus music in advance of the rehearsals. Last but not least, we

develop a detailed rehearsal schedule based around the availability of 77 people over six months – a complex task – 30 iterative versions of this document are not unusual!

April

In April we rehearse and host our fund-raising Spring Opera Gala at The Exchange, Twickenham. A major event planned in parallel to *La bohème*. Galas are essential and help us cover costs for fully staging opera in a small theatre, where the tickets sales alone are insufficient. The evening was a resounding success, but afterwards it's straight 'back to Bohème' with tickets going on sale, marketing and writing the programme, etc.

May/ June/ July

The first rehearsal phase. Our multi-national cast have made extensive arrangements to stay in and around Richmond every weekend – some billeted with family or friends, some staying at budget hotels. Others with shorter journeys will hop back and forth on budget airlines – it's all part of the logistical matrix of rehearsing opera over the months ahead. It takes 150 hours to rehearse a two-hour opera. Every scene is taken apart and rehearsed. First musically and linguistically with coaching in Italian provided. Then we move to a rehearsal stage and simulate the dimensions of Normansfield to block out the all the stage movements. Act 2 is challenging with its *Café Momus* scene during which chorus and principals mingle and interact. Contrary to the popular showbiz maxim of "never work with children.." our kids were wonderfully behaved and have the time of their lives!



August

Summer holidays – time off 'for good behavior' for our hard working casts! Well not quite for all, for this the time when dozens of props are either found or built from scratch including; working fireplaces, enough tables and stools to seat a crowd and a full-sized football World Cup.



September/ October

Second phase of rehearsals commence in earnest now meeting several times a week. This is when we introduce the orchestra to rehearsals – a thrilling moment for everyone to hear and watch Puccini's masterpiece finally come together! Show week finally arrives. Lighting, technical and stage teams are now at full pace with their own complicated rehearsals. English surtitles are added.

Two full dress rehearsals later we are ready to roll, with three sold-out houses to perform to. All we can do now is pray that no-one loses

their voice.. Which of course happens. It's opening night, autumn has struck! One of our *Mimis* can barely speak, let alone sing - a bitter blow for all. Luckily for us the *Mimi* from the other cast proves up to singing three memorable performances back-to-back and three delighted audiences leave Teddington -until next year!

Support us

Our productions would not be possible without the unstinting time and generosity of many talented people. We think the results are worth it. 2020 was to be our most ambitious year to date with a Spring Gala, revival of *La bohème* and a sensational new production for October. All three events are now postponed because of this cruel Coronavirus epidemic. Please check our website for updates: www.instantopera.co.uk

