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NEW PASSION: Young people participate in the Blackheath Halls Community Opera

Songs from the heart

How community opera can change lives. By **Samantha Whitaker**

Inspired by the HS2 high-speed rail link that's set to slice through the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire countryside, Garsington Opera staged its first community opera, *Road Rage*, in July 2013 at Wormsley. Written by Richard Stilgoe, it told the story of a village divided by plans to build a toll road, and featured a cast of nearly 200. "What's really special is that it was intergenerational," explains Karen Gillingham, Director of Garsington Opera Education. "You'd see a 14-year-old and an 86-year-old having a cup of tea, chatting and reminding each other what they were supposed to do next. They were in it together, on the same level."

Gillingham, who also directs professional operas, really appreciates the journey some people go on: "It's a massive kick when someone who has never done anything like this before ends up doing something extraordinary," she says. And with *Road Rage*, composer Orlando Gough set the cast a real challenge: "Some of them thought it was too difficult," Gillingham recalls. "But over two years, we got them to the point where they were singing three-part harmonies while moving around the stage."

The transformation was particularly apparent in the teenage chorus, made up of students who had taken part in Garsington Opera workshops at school. "They wanted to be there, but it was like none of them wanted to shine. None of them wanted to stand out," she says. But performing alongside Daniel Norman, one of four professionals in the cast, inspired them to raise their game. "A group will always perform to match the person of the highest level," explains Gillingham. During an all-cast rehearsal, a similar effect occurred when it became clear that the local primary school children were far better prepared than the teenagers.

As well as a confidence boost, nearly all the cast experienced cognitive benefits too. The older generation enjoyed challenging themselves to learn words, music and movement by heart – a skill that tends to wane during adulthood. And for the younger children, the unusually long rehearsal sessions of half or even full days resulted in a noticeable improvement in concentration levels, according to their teachers.



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PROFOUND EXPERIENCE: A diverse cast performing in the Garsington community opera, *Road Rage* (above)

One child who particularly benefitted was seven-year-old Tyler, who is autistic. "The team were so patient with all of us," says his mum, Jennifer, who also performed. "They went beyond the call of duty in making allowances for Tyler and motivating him. They even created a photobook of the performance venue to help prepare him, because a change in scenery can uproot everything." On the night, you wouldn't have known Tyler was any different, and he and his classmates, who all played great crested newts, received the biggest applause from the audience.

Road Rage was the culmination of smaller projects designed to introduce Garsington to the local community after the company moved to the Wormsley Estate in 2011. Workshops in local secondary schools continue to open students' eyes to the world of opera. "Sometimes, teachers are astounded to see kids who were on the point of being expelled stand up and perform with tears in their eyes," says Gillingham. Another project model is to create a piece for secondary school students to perform alongside pupils from feeder primary schools, which helps to ease the passage between schools.



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THERAPEUTIC EFFECT: Raise Your Voice, Glyndebourne's outreach project for people with dementia and their carers

At Glyndebourne, there is an equally thriving education department, led by Lucy Lowe. One project that stands out is Raise Your Voice, which is for people with dementia and their carers. "We have an expectation of creativity, so they devise songs and learn movement as well as investigating their voices and singing as a group," Lowe explains. "For many, it's a lifeline," adds Chris Stones, Senior Education Project Manager. "And for their carers, having time to enjoy themselves and the relationship they have with the person they're caring for really gives them energy."

Above all, a common aim for community opera is to make the art form accessible to everyone. In a review of the Blackheath Halls Community Opera, in Southeast London, Susan Elkin commented: "The children are not required in Act 3, and to see them sitting totally engrossed moves me deeply. They're having a life-changing experience. Who says opera is 'too difficult' or 'irrelevant' if you attend an inner-city school or if you have special needs? Don't ever patronise or underestimate children."

Opera encompasses an incredibly wide range of creative skills, from music, drama and storytelling to costume, set design and production, so people from all walks of life can find a role. "We recruit diverse groups and team work is essential," says Rose Ballantyne, Community Engagement Manager at Blackheath Halls. "Being involved in a production of any sort will always bring people together."

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IN HARMONY: Children learn to love opera through Garsington's community work

Africa's first Opera Village

An ambitious new arts village in Burkina Faso is helping to raise the quality of life there, says **Samantha Whitaker**

Although Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries, it is also the centre of African film and theatre. So, in 2008, it was here that conceptual artist and director Christoph Schlingensief decided to build an opera house as his legacy, following a diagnosis of lung cancer. His vision was a platform for cultural exchange between Africa and the West. However, following major flooding in the chosen location of Laongo, the opera house evolved into an opera village as it became clear that this rural community was in urgent need of much more than a theatre.

Schlingensief enlisted architect Francis Kéré, a Burkinabé living in Berlin, who made use of local materials in his plans, combining native building methods with low-energy, sustainable solutions, including wells and solar collectors. Importantly, local workers would be trained to help build and maintain the village.

With support from the German government and the Goethe Institute, work began in January 2010 but, tragically, Schlingensief died just eight months later. Under the leadership of his partner, Aino Labarenz, the project continued and the first phase – a school for 300 pupils – opened in October 2011. Equipped with African musical instruments and Western film cameras, the school includes a sound studio and workshops for cultural activities.

"Already, the pupils have better grades and less absence time than in most other schools," says Christin Richter, Project Manager at Festspielhaus Afrika, the non-profit company that operates the village. "As a result, the Ministry of Education is now considering changing the national curriculum to integrate more arts lessons."

Phase two – a solar-powered medical unit – is now being completed. It will provide vital primary healthcare, as well as education on nutrition and dental hygiene. Since 2012, an extensive programme of workshops and performances has been running, and the final construction phase will include the 500-seat Festspielhaus (festival house) at the heart of the village to host these activities and complete the hub of cultural discovery that Schlingensief envisioned.

AMBITIOUS: The Opera Village in Laongo

