

A Conversation with Richard Thomas



Before he was off to Australia to check up on *Jerry Springer – the Opera* at the Sydney Opera House, I rang up composer/librettist Richard Thomas on his mobile and we had a chat.

How did you come up with the notion to write an opera about the Jerry Springer Show?

I used to come home from gigs and watch the late night viewings of “The Jerry Springer Show” and I was fascinated by it. You can’t underestimate what an impact it made here. One night there was a particularly violent episode with everyone screaming at each other, but it’s all blipped out. You couldn’t understand a word that was being said and I thought, “Wow, this is opera!” It was a “Eureka” moment.

How did you go about it?

I didn’t ask for the rights because in this country if somebody’s in the public domain you can satirize them, but I started doing public workshops to announce our intentions. Plus, I’m part of the comic tradition of trying things out in public. The first workshop was a lecture titled “How to Write an Opera about Jerry Springer,” a one-man stand-up gig that went really well.

Was that where audience members got a “beer for an idea”?

Yes, it was bribery. For a good idea you got a name brand; for a bad one an “un-brand” that’s like raw sewage. It was fun. I really enjoyed it.

What came next?

I sat down and wrote three or four scenes for the first half and got four singers in. I used to play Jerry and I’d sing a few of the songs myself (terribly) and play piano. After that second one we had some press interest and some investors came in and said, “Let’s do a one-act version with a cast of 12 in a 150-seat theatre as part of the Opera 2001 Festival at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in South London.”

When did your collaborator Stewart Lee get involved?

For the next workshop at BAC, I’d written most of Act One and he helped me out with Act Two. He kind of drifted into directing and stayed with it.

Was it after the 2002 Edinburgh Fringe Festival that Nicholas Hytner asked you to open his first season as director of the National Theatre?

We did Edinburgh and it was a huge hit there, apart from the first day. Day One we had 80 people and on Day Two there were 750 people in line. By now we’d also attracted some problems with Studio USA who owned the *Jerry Springer Show* and thought

we might actually have to stop our show. If someone’s interested in investing you are, by law, required to tell them, “Please put money in my funny show, but by the way there’s a billion dollar corporation wanting to sue our sorry asses.” And then the National rang—we’ll they didn’t ring, they pitched the show—and it was a huge, huge hit in London. And then we went on TV [in 2005] and we had the big massive “hoo-hah,” the big Christian right protest with death threats and all.

Were you caught by surprise when they brought charges of blasphemy after the broadcast?

God, yah! By then we’d been running two or three years because it had transferred to the West End. We’d had amazing reviews, even from a few religious newspapers. The Catholics found it to be a very moral piece. We were all very surprised. No one had an inkling.

Did the legal problems squelch the planned Broadway production?

Yup! Oh, yah, absolutely. It really did. After that we did a [UK] tour but by then the publicity was, “It’s a filthy show about blasphemy.” The competition for the money, well once the lawyers get involved, the whole thing just went crazy and hundreds of thousands were wasted on it.

But ultimately they lost their case, didn’t they?

It overturned an ancient law so, now, no organization—religious or whatever—can take a private prosecution against a broadcaster for blasphemy. If they’d have won, what would have happened is no one would take any risk whatsoever. People would be terrified to say anything. I think it actually has taken its toll—people are much more careful and risk-averse at the moment.

I’m curious, what is your musical background?

I’m a grubby autodidactic. I got some classical lessons when I was a kid—classic piano lessons—and then I heard Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue” when I was twelve and I can safely say that actually changed my life. I never heard something so magic or beautiful in my life and I thought, “What is this thing they call jazz?” I got into that. And then Bach in my mid-teens—Bach, Stravinsky, Sex Pistols, Miles Davis and Velvet Underground.

Were you a theatregoer as a young person?

When I was 17 my twin sister and I went to see *Guys and Dolls* at the National Theatre, the legendary production that Richard Eyre did. People speak of it in hallowed tones. And that got me into musicals. We were in tears, we were laughing. It was so fucking brilliant. I just thought, “That’s it. I want to write a show like this.”

What are you working on now?

At the moment I’m writing a script for the Royal Opera House based on Anna Nicole Smith’s life [with composer Mark-Anthony Turnage] that will be staged in 2011. And I’m going to do a big dance piece next year at Sadler’s Wells. I’ve also got a couple of ideas for musicals that are sort of rooting around in my head. I wouldn’t mind a good old-fashioned book musical, possibly. It’s been a rollercoaster, but I’m very grateful to the show. It’s my calling card that’s gotten me commissions. Since then, I’ve not been out of work.

by Suzanne Bixby