Lessons from the Field

Royal Opera House
London, England
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In the midst of a major renovation, faced with a projected $30 million accumulated deficit, and public calls for an end to the organization, the new executive director of the Royal Opera House faced a seemingly insurmountable array of challenges. A reinvention of public perception and a targeted fundraising strategy were needed to restore the health of the world famous institution.

Simply told, the story of my becoming Executive Director of the Royal Opera House goes like this: I heard the job was open through an article in *The New York Times*, I sent a letter to the Chairman asking to be considered and I was asked to a series of interviews after which I was offered the job.

This account, though accurate, leaves out many illuminating details. After I read *The New York Times* story that Mary Allen had resigned as Chief Executive, I happened to bump into Lady Deborah MacMillan and David Watson in the ABT lobby. Deborah, the widow of the great British choreographer Sir Kenneth MacMillan, was on the Board of American Ballet Theatre. David, the agent for the MacMillan ballets, had become a friend and colleague. I mentioned that I had heard that Mary was leaving and Deborah said that she thought I would make a good replacement. While I was, of course, flattered, the possibility seemed incredibly remote at the time: I was American, I had never run an opera house, and I was an unknown, in both Great Britain and the "opera world." Deborah suggested I write to Sir Colin Southgate, the new Chairman of the Royal Opera House, and express my interest. She said she would call him to recommend me.

I wrote to Sir Colin, who had been Chairman for about one month and who also served as Chairman of EMI, expressing my interest. Quite honestly, I did not expect a reply.

A few days later I received a call from Sir Colin's office. Would I have time to have lunch in New York with Lord Eatwell, a member of the Opera House Board? Of course I would.

Lord Eatwell and I were to meet in a small Italian restaurant in lower Manhattan. I expected to meet the older, stiff, upper-crust lord portrayed in costume dramas, maybe not in a powdered wig but not far off either. Instead I encountered a young, handsome, energetic man filled with good will. We had a long talk about the organization, especially the Royal Ballet. Lord Eatwell was the chair of the Ballet Board, a sub-committee of the Opera House Board, and a long-time dance enthusiast. He had chaired two dance organizations in London and was anxious to discuss the contemporary ballet scene. He also discussed the current mess at the Opera House. In recent months, the Opera House had gone through three chief executives, and the resignation of a Chairman, faced possible bankruptcy and was a national joke.

I was right at home discussing dance and I gave my normal turn-around speech. We got on famously and while I knew that did not mean I would even make it to the finals for the job, I felt that I had put on a good show.

A few weeks passed and I received a call from Colin; would I meet him at his apartment above the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan? By the time Colin arrived, we had only 20 minutes or so before he had to leave for the airport. Colin, a large bear of a man, was direct and friendly. He started by saying that he thought the Royal Opera House should be managed by an Intendant, a mixture of administrator and artistic director favored by European opera houses. Since most Intendants are more versed in music than in administration, he thought this person would need a good supporting administrator: would I be interested in that role? I explained that I thought the financial and administrative problems of the Opera House were so critical that someone at the highest level and of the greatest expertise was needed to sort them out. I thought the team approach, with an artistic director teamed with an executive director, was a more suitable model. I explained what I had done in my career and how this team approach worked at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and American Ballet Theatre (ABT). I also made it clear, though I knew this was risky, that I was not interested in a subordinate role. If I could not work directly for the Board, I would not be interested in coming to London.

We had a good productive talk and Colin did not rule out the possibility of changing his mind on the management structure. I left his apartment and went back to work at ABT. I knew that he had a major decision to make: if he wanted an Intendant, I was out. If he liked my partnership model, I felt I had a very good shot at the job.

But then a deathly silence descended. This was mid-May. I expected to hear something very soon since the organization was in such a mess and had an interim executive from PriceWaterhouseCoopers, without arts management experience, at the helm. But I heard nothing. I wrote a standard letter to Colin thanking him for the interview. Back came a form letter, "We have registered your interest in the Royal Opera House." I called Deborah; she said she thought I was a very strong candidate but that the Board was waiting for the review of the Opera House by Sir Richard Eyre commissioned by the government. No appointment would be made until his report was released. I should be patient.

The summer came and went and still no word from the Opera House, just horror stories emerging in the press. While I was getting less and less optimistic that I would be going to London, I still had not given up hope. During the last week of August, I received a call from Colin, he had decided he liked my management model and wanted to hire me. He wanted to hire Sarah Billinghurst from the Met to be the Artistic Director. Would I come to London over Labor Day weekend and meet the full Board for a pro forma final interview. We would announce my hiring that week and I would start as soon as possible.

To use a useful British expression, I was gob-smacked. I had not had but 20 minutes with Colin and a lunch with Lord Eatwell. I had not heard from the Opera House in three months. Now I was being offered the job. But I was not complaining.

I went to London on a cloud. Here was my opportunity to enter the opera world, and to manage the great Royal Ballet as well. Here was my opportunity to work in a huge, world-class organization that I had first visited 20 years ago on a holiday in London. And here was an opportunity to use my turnaround skills in the most visible and most problematic situation in the world of the arts.

My first meeting in London was with Pelham Allen, the PriceWaterhouseCoopers consultant who was running the Opera House on an interim basis. Pelham is an intelligent and sweet man. He also was anxious to turn the reins over to someone else; the problems facing the Opera House, both externally and internally, were mammoth and exhausting. He was as gracious as he could be and began sharing with me the details of the current situation at the Opera House. The organization was in a serious financial crisis and had to downsize. A huge renovation and expansion was underway but the funds needed to complete the project had not yet been committed. There was a big fight brewing between three of the most generous donors to the new building and the government. The donors said that if the government did not increase annual funding, they would not make good on their pledges to the project and the construction would cease leaving a huge hole in the ground of Covent Garden.

The donors had a valid point. Subsidies in Great Britain, while far larger than in the United States, were substantially lower than in the rest of Europe. It put arts organizations in a difficult position. The level of subsidy forced arts organizations to charge high prices for tickets and to seek private contributions. Yet the press and public believed that the level of subsidy already on offer should result in low ticket prices and no special favors for donors. Arts organizations were always open to the charge of elitism but without the high prices and private sponsorship they would be bankrupt. The donors to the new Opera House wanted the government to address this problem openly.

But the mood of the country was not to raise subsidies, certainly not for the beleaguered Royal Opera House. The vast majority of the population believed the Opera House was an ineptly managed club for the elite and that government subsidy was not justified. A television series on BBC, *The House*, had helped to create this impression; the problems during closure only made things worse. The closure period had been a disaster and the Opera House had lost many more millions of pounds than had been projected. This did not surprise me in the least. A member of the fundraising staff had visited me at ABT one day a few years before and I was incredulous when I heard the closure plans; they seemed to ensure a disaster. In fact, the organization's deficit was now projected to grow to some $30 million by the time the House was re-opened 15 months later. Some members of the press were calling for the end of the Royal Opera House as a producing entity and many suggested turning the Opera House into a receiving house for other arts groups. It was a mess and, naturally, hugely enticing to me.

After briefing me on this list of challenges, Pelham took me to see Colin in his office at EMI. Colin was welcoming and enthusiastic; he was convinced that we could successfully address each of the central problems facing the Opera House. He briefed me about the members of the Board I would be meeting with that afternoon but clearly believed that this was all for show; the job was mine if I wanted it.

I reiterated my great interest in coming to work in London but wanted reassurance that the management structure he planned to implement was the one I had proposed. After my sobering discussion with Pelham, I was convinced, more than ever, that I would require great flexibility and authority to solve the problems of the Royal Opera House. Colin assured me that we were in total agreement, as was Sarah Billinghurst, who would be my partner as Artistic Director. Pelham was not so certain. He believed Sarah, who was in New York at that moment, was expecting to be my boss. I insisted that Colin contact her and get her agreement before we

proceeded any farther. Colin tried to reach her in New York but she was unavailable. He arranged to speak with her after our Board meeting.

My first meeting with the Board of the Royal Opera House was not the formal experience I had anticipated. Including Colin and Lord Eatwell, there were seven members of the Board at that time. Vivien Duffield, the Deputy Chair of the Board, was also the Chairman of the Royal Opera House Trust, the central fundraising arm of the institution. (British institutions typically have separate organizations that do the fundraising. It is not clear to me why this separation is considered desirable, as I was to learn all too well, it can lead to huge disruptions). Vivien was strong, direct and rich. She was one of the Opera House's most generous patrons, and also one of the most challenging people I have ever met. At this initial meeting, she was courteous, but outspoken. After I left the meeting she said that no one in England could do what I did and she endorsed my candidacy.

Sir David Lees, a leading businessman, was a kind and respectful man who saw to the financial management of the Opera House. Carolyn Newbigging, the Chair of the Friends of Covent Garden, was a sweet, supportive person who was always on my side. Michael Berkeley, a leading British composer, was interested in my artistic views. And Stuart Lipton, a British developer who was running the redevelopment project, inquired about my views on marketing.

It was a relatively easy, informal meeting and I felt I had answered each question as well as I could. I was sent from the room and a few moments later Colin came to me and officially offered me the job. I was in. I was the new Executive Director of the Royal Opera House. I was thrilled.

I had less than a few hours to celebrate. While I eagerly anticipated moving to London and working with Sarah to restore the good fortune of the Royal Opera House, I was soon called down to earth. In fact, Sarah was shocked by Colin's call. She believed that he had promised her the top job. She was not willing to share authority with me or with anyone. She was livid. She sent a very direct fax to Colin withdrawing from consideration. Unfortunately, her anger was conveyed to several colleagues and some members of the press. We were left without the strong artistic leadership we had anticipated.

While I was disappointed about Sarah's decision, Colin was more sanguine and was confident that we could take our time to look for artistic leadership. There were more pressing, short-term concerns. Colin and Pelham had devised a plan they hoped would satisfy the major donors to the building project, the government, and the fiscal requirements of the Opera House. Simply put, the donors would continue to make their payments to the Appeal if the government would increase its annual subsidy substantially and if the Opera House would reduce the size of the staff considerably and win serious concessions from the three major unions: BECTU, that represented the stage crew, ushers and office staff; Equity, that represented the dancers of the Royal Ballet and the chorus of the Royal Opera; and the Musicians Union, that represented the orchestral musicians. These concessions involved canceling most of the performances scheduled for the remainder of the closure period, accepting new work rules and shortening each performance season for the foreseeable future. It was all easier said than done.

The first step was to announce to the unions that the Opera House would close permanently if new contracts were not agreed upon within a six-week period. This announcement was to be made the day after my visit to London. If the unions were willing to renegotiate their contracts, the donors and government would need to agree on the new size of the government subsidy. If any one of the three sides to this *tri-partite* agreement failed to come to terms, the entire agreement would fail and the Opera House faced the serious threat of closure. I might have the shortest tenure in the history of arts management and lose my job before I actually started!

Colin and I agreed that my appointment would be announced after the union meetings and that I would start work two months later on November 12. I would return in October for a one-week visit to find a place to live and to meet senior staff.

Before leaving, I had two important experiences. John Seekings, the Director of Operations and the staff leader of the construction project, gave me a tour of the building site. He was proud of the design and enthusiastic about the capabilities of the new building. All I saw was a mass of concrete; it did not seem possible that the building would be completed in little more than a year.

The night before I left London, Lord Eatwell took me to dinner with Deborah Bull, a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet, and a key player in the British arts scene. Deborah wrote books, a monthly newspaper column, sat on the Board of the Arts Council of England and the Southbank Centre, and danced with the Royal. She was smart, articulate, and charming. Lord Eatwell laid out the plan for the unions and the donors and the government. She was clearly supportive yet not optimistic about the reactions that the Board would encounter when the announcements were made.

While I was in New York, the Opera House announced the restructuring plan. Not surprisingly, the staff, artists and the press went wild. There were accusations flying in every direction. The following week, my appointment was announced. *The Times of London* had learned that Sarah Billinghurst had been a candidate for the artistic director job and the lead story in the *Times* was "Opera House Gets Half of Dream Team." I was pleased that I was considered part of a "Dream Team" but surprised that the press knew so much about the discussions with Sarah. It was the first important bit of education I had about the British press: they learn everything. Despite the fact that every employment contract at the Opera House prohibited direct contact with the press, several staff members and artists seemed to have direct links to the press. I never worked in such a leaky ship.

Richard Morrison, then the culture editor for *The Times of London*, was sent to New York to do an exclusive interview with me. He could not have been more courteous or written a nicer article. He was later to become one of the Opera House's harshest critics but for a few days at least, he was on our side. Judy Grahme, our head of marketing and press, felt that the Morrison piece should be an exclusive. She allowed one other British journalist, Norman LeBrecht, to "ask me three questions on the phone." I was to get to know Norman well and, in retrospect, was not surprised that his "three questions" took 45 minutes to ask and answer.

All in all, the press response to my appointment was positive. Someone uncovered *The Chicago Tribune* article that dubbed me the "Turnaround King" and the title was used liberally. Norman was pleasant though he said his calls to "the music establishment in New York" suggested that

no one knew who I was. He obviously did not speak with anyone at the Metropolitan Opera or the New York City Opera. The nastiest comments came from *The Financial Times*. The journalist wrote that my appointment was "the worst disaster to hit Covent Garden since the bombs of World War II." The writer believed that the shortened seasons the Board was proposing for the first few years following re-opening were somehow inspired by my being American.

I read this bleak assessment on my trip to London during October. I was ostensibly there to find a flat to rent. Pelham had so loaded my schedule with meetings with staff, government officials, artists and Board members, however, that I had less than one hour to accomplish this task, ending up with a large but depressing apartment within walking distance of the Opera House. It was not a happy trip. As I disembarked at Heathrow, I was greeted by headlines that Bernard Haitink, the venerable Music Director of the Royal Opera House, was considering resigning given the terrible financial situation of the House, the severe cutbacks to performances during the remainder of the closure period, and the shorter seasons that were proposed for the re-opening years. Bernard had made it known publicly that he had not been informed of the restructuring plan and claimed that he had been informed by fax by Colin. The press had a field day. Bernard was immediately deified and Colin was cast as the villain.

Unfortunately Colin made an easy target. When he held a press conference shortly after his appointment as Chairman earlier that year, he was goaded by the press to make an unfortunate statement that he would not want to sit next to someone at the opera who wore "a dirty t-shirt and smelly trainers (sneakers)." This injudicious statement, of course, was used to suggest that he was an elitist snob and will forever be associated with him. Throughout my tenure, Colin was cast as the bad guy, against Bernard, against me, against Vivien. He was a very committed and loyal Chairman and deserved better.

During my trip in October, I was fully briefed by Pelham about the progress with the union contracts and the donors and government grants. It appeared that the union contracts would be settled, although there was a strong sentiment among the dancers of the Royal Ballet that a shortened season would not be feasible. While virtually every American company danced, and was paid, for 40 or less weeks each year, the European belief is that a company must work 52 weeks (apart from holidays) to maintain the quality of performances. The dancers were threatening to secede and to start their own ballet company. I was certain there was a way out of this controversy.

A bigger challenge, however, would be to get the government to increase the annual subsidy enough to satisfy the major donors to the redevelopment appeal. It was not at all certain this would happen. If not, there was the distinct possibility that the Opera House would go bankrupt.

I returned to New York and prepared for my big move. During my last month in New York, Judy Grahme resigned. This became front-page news in London. She had felt unsupported by the Board. After spending so much time with her on the announcement of my appointment, I felt a bit betrayed.

On November 4, the moving men emptied my New York apartment. At exactly the same time, a big meeting was underway in London; the major donors were sitting down with the government

to hear their funding plans. As the last piece of my furniture was being taken down in the elevator, the phone rang. It was Pelham. How did the meeting go, I inquired. Pelham had but two words for me, "Not well." I sat in my empty apartment and wondered whether I should have the moving men bring all the furniture back upstairs. I was in the process of shipping everything I owned across the ocean when there was a very real possibility that the Opera House would be closed before my possessions hit British soil. Pelham could not advise me. He, like everyone else, had no idea how this drama would play out.

I decided that I had gone this far and must play my role until the end. I was, after all, the Turnaround King, and I could not escape now. On November 8, I had my last ABT performance on November 10, I flew to London, and on November 12, I started my tenure at the Royal Opera House. Paparazzi were at the door of the Opera House offices to document my first day on the job; *The Daily Telegraph* ran a headline "Chaos Reigns as Kaiser Enters Opera House." It all felt a bit surreal.

While chaos was *not* reigning in our offices, my first day coincided with a march on 10 Downing Street by the staff and artists of the Royal Opera House demanding an increased subsidy. I do not think the march had any impact apart from emptying our offices on my first day at work.

Despite this show of defiance, the staff of the Royal Opera House was always extremely open and welcoming to me. In most troubled organizations, the staff will support your work once it is clear that you bring hope and excitement. This was the largest organization I had ever run, however, and getting the entire staff to understand my plans and my optimism was difficult. I spent the first several weeks holed up in my office with my senior staff but I did make an effort to meet every employee, traveling around London to every workshop and theater where our employees were scattered during the closure period. In my third week, on Thanksgiving Day, the mailroom staff cooked a turkey for me so I would not feel homesick on this most American of holidays; it was a tremendously gracious thing to do and is just one indication of the kindness I received from my staff.

While the staff was uniformly welcoming, the press was not. There were daily calls for the closure of the Opera House and great skepticism that the new Opera House would be completed on time. I was unfailingly optimistic in public; this seemed to disconcert the press who were used to dealing with more sober British arts managers.

The press attention spurred numerous members of the public to write to me suggesting how the problems at the Opera House should be remedied. I learned that British people love to write letters, on virtually any subject. (I once got a two-page letter complaining that we only served one plastic spoon with each small serving of ice cream; the writer wanted a second to share with a friend. We sent him a small silver spoon for future use.) The most chilling letter I received that first week was a simple post card: "Please let the patient die. Its death screams are disturbing the peace of Gloucestershire."

Disturbing my peace were the unfinished negotiations with the unions, the donors and the government. Pelham was fantastic; he worked tirelessly on the government/donor *detente*. Mike Morris, our head of Human Resources, worked on the union negotiations. I tried to develop a plan for the future; not certain there would be one. The first thing I needed to do was

to get Bernard to retract his threatened resignation. We met in his office. He was sweet and supportive and exhausted by the traumas of the past year. I explained that I was there to support the artists, to find new resources and to put an end to the constant high drama. Bernard was impressed and agreed to stay. He asked me to restore the performances of Benjamin Britten's *Paul Bunyan* scheduled for the following spring. These performances were cancelled as part of the Board's strategy for cutting the losses during closure. He wanted the chorus to have an opportunity to work before we re-opened the Opera House. I promised to try.

The first two weekends of my time in Great Britain were spent not in London but in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Royal Ballet was on tour for two weeks, bringing the company to Belfast for the first time ever. It was great fun to meet the dancers and to see performances of MacMillan's *Manon* and an all-Ashton program. Less fun was dealing with the decision of five male dancers to leave the Royal to create a new company. Given the weakened state of the organization and the delicate union negotiations, these defections were very untimely. Naturally, the press had an absolute field day and predicted the imminent demise of the entire Royal Ballet. I was convinced that these defecting dancers could be replaced by better performers; the male ranks of the Royal Ballet at the time were nowhere near as strong as their counterparts at ABT. But it was impossible to suggest this publicly during this tense period.

Fortunately, following the tour, I was able to sit down with the dancers and their union representatives and work out a new contract. We did not reduce the number of weeks of work but we did radically simplify the work rules.

While putting out these fires, I was, as always, working on a longer-term plan for our turnaround. The plan focused on the programming for the new building, an expanded marketing program, increasing educational programming, reducing the size of the administrative staff and increasing private fundraising. The key to expanding fundraising was to begin to create a new image for the Opera House. We had to convince the government and the public that we were well managed, poised to present great programming in the new facility, and able to meet the needs of a diverse nation. The key to creating this image was clearly to focus on the imminent opening of the "new" Royal Opera House. As I was working on this plan with the senior staff, there was a breakthrough in the donor/government negotiations. The government was willing to increase our subsidy to levels that were acceptable to the donors. On December 17, the new plan was announced. The immediate threat of closure was removed and we could get back to raising money for the appeal, to completing the new building, to restructuring the staff and to mounting those few closure performances still on the schedule.

While our focus was squarely on completing the new building and preparing for the re-opening, there were still performances by both the Royal Opera and the Royal Ballet at theaters throughout London. The Royal Opera performed new productions of Smetana's *Bartered Bride* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel* at the new Sadler's Wells theater. Neither production was especially distinguished and proved difficult to sell. The Royal Ballet performed *Cinderella*, *La Fille mal Gardee* and *Romeo and Juliet* at Royal Festival Hall. These performances sold well and were critically well received. While I attended most performances, it was difficult to get to know the dancers and the musicians when they were performing miles apart.

I would spend all day at the office and every evening in the theater; not an uncommon pattern in the arts but a challenging schedule to maintain in the pressurized environment in which we were working. Every day, it seemed, there were stories in the press attacking the Opera House, our Board and our artistic contribution. We had to change people's minds and we did not have a lot of time to do so. But with so few performances available to the public, there was little we could point to with pride.

It was obvious that the remaining year of closure was not going to be filled with artistic highlights. While a few operas and ballets were scheduled, most had been cancelled. I had managed to salvage the *Paul Bunyan* that Bernard wanted reinstated but that was the only opera performed in 1998 before the re-opening in December. The Royal Ballet had more performances planned (and tours to China and Japan) but nothing that would generate substantial press attention. We simply had to turn attention to the re-opening. This meant detailing the very exciting programming we could offer in the new House and reminding people that re-opening was going to happen, on time and on budget, on December 1, 1999, less than a year away.

The programming challenge was not difficult to meet. The new Opera House would have three performing spaces: the main auditorium, the Studio Theatre and the Studio Upstairs. The main auditorium is one of the most beautiful opera theaters in the world. It was built in 1858 and maintains the advantages and disadvantages of a 19th century opera house: it is intimate, elegant, and problematic with many seats with poor sightlines. The re-opening season included Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, Harrison Birtwhistle's *Gawain*, and Martinu's *The Greek Passion*, all contemporary and challenging. We had Renee Flemming in *Rosenkavalier*, Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorgiu in *Romeo et Juliette*, an all-star *Meistersinger* not to mention a full ballet program. After the opening gala of ballet and opera, we were mounting a new production of *Falstaff* starring Bryn Terfel. Some members of the press were upset that we had only one new production planned. When the Board had shortened the first season, they eliminated a second new production. Since opera schedules are developed years in advance, there was no way to retrieve this production. In fact, the first few seasons at the new Opera House were planned, in large part, by Nicholas Payne, who had left the Royal Opera House to run the English National Opera. I loved the seasons he planned for us and told him so. For future seasons we were able to increase the number of new productions to seven, a high number for international opera houses.

While the number of new opera productions was limited in our first season, the Royal Ballet had a more adventuresome season planned. The initial set of performances would include new works by two British choreographers: Siobhan Davies and Ashley Page and also include a series of smaller works by noted choreographers. I had suggested this element to Sir Anthony Dowell after a third British choreographer had dropped out of the opening program. I felt that Anthony used a small group of young choreographers too often and had invited too few of the world's great choreographers to work with the company. This festival gave our audiences the opportunity to enjoy the work of Peter Martins, John Neumeier, Twyla Tharp, Maurice Bejart, Nacho Duato and several others. The ballet season also included a remounting of Dame Ninette de Valois' production of *Coppelia*, an all-Ashton program and a Diaghilev Program that included four works commissioned by that great impresario.

The first year in the new Opera House also included a two-week season by the Royal Ballet in the Studio Theatre, intended to be a festival of new work by emerging choreographers. The Studio Theatre was a new 450-seat theatre that was first designed to house the rehearsals of the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House. As the planning for the building was completed, it was decided to build a proper small theater to house performances of opera and ballet on an intimate scale. When the Board was announcing the cutbacks to the initial seasons and the need to reduce staff size, they also announced that the Studio Theatre would not house any programming when we opened the Opera House.

While this seems ridiculous in retrospect, it seemed reasonable at the time. It would have taken millions of pounds to produce opera and ballet in the Studio Theatre and we simply did not have the money. I believed that using the Studio Theatre would be a clear signal that we were committed to new programming and to arts education. I had to find a way to use the theater without spending a great deal of money. My proposal included introducing some low cost programming, such as weekly free concerts on Monday lunch hours, programming a series of educational activities, and offering other arts organizations the use of the Studio Theatre, at no rent, if they bore the cost of production. This allowed us to offer hundreds of performances and serve the needs of the arts community, while not increasing our budget.

The Studio Upstairs was a large ballet studio that had bleacher seating and the capacity to be used as a "black box" dance theater. Deborah Bull had been asked to program this space and she and I discussed a number of ways to bring edgier choreography and performance art to the Opera House.

While I was certain that announcing the new season would generate a great deal of interest, there was still a good deal of skepticism about our ability to re-open on time. I felt we could combat this doubt by announcing detailed plans for the re-opening celebrations. This was especially important since the press was ready to pounce if we opened the new House with an "elitist" gala. I was challenged to develop a series of opening celebrations that gave everyone a chance to celebrate. I proposed a series of events: a private dinner on stage for the major Appeal donors, a children's performance in the Studio Theatre, open days for our patrons at all levels of giving, free performances for the arts community and the obligatory gala. But we decided to perform the gala twice, once for the donors, a second time for the public. And we got BBC to televise the gala so everyone in the nation could see it. Taken as a package these events gave so many constituencies a chance to celebrate. But I wanted one more event to suggest that we did believe this was an institution meant to serve the entire nation. I decided that the very first performance in the new House should be a "hard hat" performance, a free performance for those men and women who had built the House.

The announcement of this performance suggested a new outlook at the Royal Opera House. It was announced at the same time as we announced the first season of opera and ballet and the new ticket pricing at the Opera House.

Ticket prices were a major issue. Because the government subsidy is so much lower than in other European countries, and the theater has far fewer seats than American houses, the Royal Opera House had ticket prices that were very high. This was a constant source of controversy. How could the government support an institution that charged so much for its seats? I

completely sympathized with this viewpoint though I also knew we had to balance our books. The increase in government subsidy announced in December gave us some pricing flexibility and we lowered prices substantially in most sections of the House. As it turned out when we re-opened, we made several pricing errors that were addressed during the first season.

Ticket availability was also a problem. In the past, our major donors and our Friends of Covent Garden, a group of supporters who each gave 55 pounds annually to join, were given an opportunity to purchase tickets before the box office was open to the public. Because we had over 20,000 Friends before closure, the tickets to the most sought after events were sold out before the public had any chance to buy. I felt this was unfair and wrong in light of our government subsidy. I promised that at least 20 percent of the tickets at every price range for every performance would be held for public sale. (For the less popular performances, there was a much higher proportion of seats available to the public; on average, sixty percent of the seats for an entire season were sold through the regular box office channels.) While this was a huge improvement in accessibility, some of the press wrote that the 'elitist Opera House' was only allowing the public to buy 20% of the seats and that "the rich" were getting the other 80%. Our Friends were hardly a group of rich toffs; they represented the entire spectrum of society. Our Friends, too, were angry with my new plan since they now had an opportunity to purchase fewer seats. I was the villain to everyone, but I still think the decision was correct.

While the ticket pricing scheme and the accessibility plan were widely covered in the press, I was disappointed that so little attention was paid to the programming announcement. Rodney Milnes, writing in *The London Times*, suggested that the programming was a bit more adventurous than he had feared it might be. The ballet press seemed more excited than the opera press by the planned season but there was relatively little comment. After the bashing we regularly took in the press, we took that as a good sign. The public was more effusive and expressed a great deal of interest and excitement in our re-opening plans.

While it was wonderful to turn a corner with the public, there was still skepticism about our ability to complete the building on time; there was also a general lack of knowledge about the various facilities we were adding to the building. We decided to create an event that suggested the building was progressing well and that gave the press a look at the new spaces in the Opera House.

We held a "topping out" ceremony in the Floral Hall, the architectural centerpiece of the new development in mid-February, just two weeks after announcing the season. Chris Smith, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, gave a wonderful speech that lauded what we had accomplished in the past three months. It was the first governmental endorsement of the Opera House in years. Hundreds of journalists, donors and artists came to the ceremony. It was truly electric. We released computer-generated renderings of the new spaces at the Opera House. Every newspaper printed them, in color, and a very positive feeling was generated.

The only blot on the day was my appearance on "Newsnight," a daily late-evening program on BBC television. The interviewer ignored the excitement of the day, grilled me mercilessly about the past problems of the Opera House and played a video of many people criticizing the House including two members of the Chorus who said they wished the Opera House would be torn down. It made for a depressing end to a great day.

But despite "Newsnight," the tide had turned and people were developing more confidence in me and the Opera House. Norman Lebrecht, arts columnist for *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote a front-page story titled, "Miracle at the Garden." It outlined the progress we had made and revealed that we were poised to eliminate our entire deficit. I was so proud that my staff was recognized so publicly.

They had been working incredibly hard during this period, to complete long-term financial plans, to create programming, to finish the building and to develop the systems that would operate the building, from catering to ticket sales to security. It was a vast undertaking made more challenging by our need to reduce the size of the staff. We had to eliminate over 150 staff members in order to achieve a balanced budget. This was a sad and depressing process. Every administrative department lost staff; in some cases this was beneficial but in most cases some very wonderful and dedicated employees had to go. I had to fire an entire department, a custom software development group who were talented and helpful but a luxury we could no longer afford.

Of course, I have never believed that one can "save one's way to health" in an arts organization. Cuts are often necessary for back office activities but my focus is always primarily on revenue generation through programming, marketing and fundraising. And at the Royal Opera House, some of the fundraising was very glamorous. Prince Charles, the Patron of the Royal Opera, agreed to host a benefit for the Royal Opera at Windsor Castle in the Autumn of 1999.

Windsor, of course, had been devastated by a fire and this was an opportunity for our gala participants to see the refurbished Castle. We took an advance trip to the Castle and were awed by the splendor. It was an ideal place for a major fundraising event.

The evening began with a cocktail reception for our 300 guests in the grand reception room, all gold and white with a huge malachite urn that had not been damaged by the fire and, indeed, was too heavy to be moved during the restoration. A concert followed in the ballroom.

After the concert I introduced the Prince to all of the performers. It was my first opportunity to meet Camilla Parker-Bowles who was charming and lovely. All in all, it was a hugely successful event and raised over 300,000 pounds, enough to pay for the refurbishment of the orchestra pit in the new Opera House, the stated purpose for the event.

The Windsor gala did not just raise funds, however. It was a spectacular prelude to our reopening and convinced our major donors that we were back, for real. The Opera House had nothing to be ashamed of anymore and we were going to be the source of elegant entertainment in the future.

If this sounds elitist, it is not meant to do so. Any arts organization that relies on a variety of funding sources must satisfy many masters. One has to be open and accessible to the general public but also be available to cater to the needs of those who will help pay for this accessibility. This balance is easier to achieve in the United States where the benefits accorded to donors are not resented as they typically are in the United Kingdom. The government grants given to the Royal Opera House and other British cultural institutions unquestionably bring obligations for strong public programming and openness. But, unfortunately, these grants are not large enough

to cover all costs, and growing arts organizations must rely upon private donors as well. The British press tends to make villains of those arts organizations that raise funds and even of those who give them. This does not make raising funds any easier.

The negative press reaction seems absurd. How can anyone expect the arts organizations to flourish if they are criticized for high ticket prices, large government subsidies *and* increasing contributed funds? I never received an answer. Cutting budgets was certainly not the answer. The Royal Opera House was already the most efficient international opera house in the Western world. The budget per performance was lower than in New York, Paris or Berlin.

As we became more successful, many of Britain's great and good wanted to come for a visit. Former Prime Ministers, royalty, Members of Parliament and other ministers came in large numbers. But as exciting and invigorating as these visits were, there was too much work to be done to spend much time entertaining VIPs. Getting ready for the opening meant re-evaluating every system and every element of the operations of the Opera House. We had to redesign a box office booking system, develop catering arrangements, redesign tickets, and establish emergency procedures among many other things. It would be impossible to explain the amount of work that had to be accomplished and to over-praise the staff that did the work.

The first big test was opening our new box office on September 27, 1999. We had installed an entirely new computer system that had to accommodate the hundreds of performances in both theaters and the Studio Upstairs, as well as backstage tours and lectures. The opportunity for a disaster was great and the press was out in force to see if one developed. Would the new systems work? Would our guarantee that there would be seats available to the public for every performance be honored?

A huge line of people waited patiently for the box office to open. Several had spent the night to assure themselves of tickets. I arrived at five in the morning and walked up and down the line talking with the hopeful ticket buyers, especially five young foreign students who headed the line. So much for our elitist audience! While several of those on line had complaints, they were generally positive and supportive. At ten o'clock, Darcey Bussell, prima ballerina of the Royal Ballet, opened the doors and the Opera House started selling tickets. The entire process ran amazingly smoothly.

We had decided to keep our telephone lines open for two and half days without a break to accommodate the demand we anticipated. The calls never ceased, even during the middle of the night. It was astonishing how many people wanted to see performances at the Royal Opera House. While there were inevitable complaints about the waiting time on the telephone, we simply could not afford to staff up enough to provide instant service to everyone who wanted to buy tickets. While we wished to provide better service, I was pleased that so many people wanted to come to the new House despite the years of negative press attention.

Most of the credit for this high level of interest must be given to the artists and the artistic leadership who had created programming that was so in demand. But I also must acknowledge the tremendous work of the marketing and press staff. They had created an awareness of our opening that was broad and deep. It was a huge accomplishment.

While each new system was being developed, a serious black cloud was becoming increasingly apparent: the very sophisticated new stage equipment was not being installed and tested on schedule. While most building projects are subject to unforeseen delays, we had a special problem. There were several important building projects underway in London that were meant to be completed in the same twelve month period, among them were, the Millennium Dome, the Jubilee Line subway extension, the British Museum renovation, and the Tate Modern. The construction workers, particularly the electricians, had all of us over a barrel. We were forced to endure periodic walkouts and slowdowns to force us to increase wages to obscene levels. But the British press' obsession with opening new buildings on time placed a pressure on all of us that cost the project large amounts of money and created havoc with completion plans.

The first indication that we had a serious problem emerged shortly after we were scheduled to occupy the stage in the beginning of September. The crew was meant to complete technical rehearsals on several exiting productions before we re-opened, freeing up time during the first season to mount the numerous ballet and opera performances that had been scheduled. It was very clear that these technical rehearsals were not proceeding as planned.

It took entire days simply to move some of the sets into place. The crew had little idea how to work the new stage equipment and less idea about how to determine whether a problem existed, where it existed and how it could be fixed. It was incredibly frustrating for the crew; these were men used to getting a show on the stage no matter what the challenge. They simply stared as technicians tried to get the sets into place.

In traditional theaters, sets are built in two ways: some pieces, typically flat "drops" are hung from bars that ascend into the fly tower when not needed. The larger dimensional pieces are rolled onto the stage and locked into place. In more advanced theaters, stage elevators allow some pieces of scenery to move up and down.

The new Opera House was designed to utilize the most advanced technology. The fly system was controlled electronically. The stage elevators were incredibly flexible. Most important, rather than pushing large set pieces onto the stage, the floors backstage at the new Opera House were "moveable." Sets were built on large wooden palettes that were embedded in the floor. When one wanted to move the set pieces, one simply lowered the floor in front of the palette and small conveyor belts slid the set piece where it needed to go. It was a marvel when it worked. But it did not always work.

Exactly what was going wrong was something of a mystery. Some days it was a software problem with this state-of-the-art equipment. Other days it was simply a bad fuse. Or user error. Or electrical problems. Determining the source of the problem could take hours; the remedy time depended on the nature of the problem. But in the beginning, it could take a full day to identify and fix a problem. And we did not have any time to waste.

By the time we reached mid-November, it was clear we were in deep trouble. Not one opera had been completely "teched." To make matters worse, the new production of *Falstaff* was so large and cumbersome that it tested every piece of new equipment. We literally had no idea whether we could get the show on the stage or run it as it had been designed. We also had to get the

opening gala staged, the new ballet program prepared and the productions of *Nutcracker* and *Le Grand Macabre* ready as well. And we had about three weeks to do it all.

On Monday, November 22, we had the first performance in the new house, a recital by the Royal Ballet for school children in the Linbury Studio Theatre. Cherie Blair attended. I did not. As the Prime Minister's wife, whose pregnancy had been announced the previous day, was opening the new Opera House, I decided to stay in my new office trying to figure out which production to cancel. The most "helpful" production to cancel would be *Falstaff* since it was so large and so difficult technically. Without taking the time we would need to prepare this production, we should have been able to get everything else on stage. Bernard, however, announced that if we cancelled his *Falstaff,* he would quit. This was his new production and he had been waiting for it patiently throughout the closure period. We simply could not afford to lose Bernard and looked for another way out.

The only other production we could cancel was Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*. The great producer, Peter Sellars, had been rehearsing our cast and the production was all ready to go. But we simply would not have the rehearsal time on stage if we mounted *Falstaff*. With no option, we cancelled *Le Grand Macabre*. It was a great shame since it was an opera that had never been performed at Covent Garden and Mr. Sellars was a favorite of mine. While he rehearsed with the singers, Peter kept abreast of our stage problems. He was not surprised when I told him our bad news. We discussed options including mounting the opera in the Linbury Studio Theatre but none of them proved practical. I have never encountered a more gracious man. After I told him of our decision, he saw my level of upset, hugged me, and told me not to worry. He then went to tell his cast.

The cast, understandably, was none too pleased. They knew the work, they were ready to perform and they did not understand why their production was sacrificed. They believed we were canceling this production since ticket sales were weak. They demanded to see me and I met with them in the rehearsal room. I explained how we could not find enough technical time to put all of our scheduled productions on stage safely. They were angry and unpleasant. It was one of the most difficult moments in my life.

But there was worse to come. We had to announce the cancellation to the public and press. We sent out a press release and the earth shook. The press finally had a good juicy story: the Opera House would have to cancel a production before it opened. I did interview after interview. I was pilloried in the press. I received nasty letters and was greeted with pity by everyone I encountered. It was a nightmare.

It was impossible to communicate accurately the problems we were facing, and the impact of lost rehearsal time on future performances. The schedule of an opera house is amazingly complicated. Operas and ballets are rehearsed during the day and different shows are performed in the evening. Rehearsal time on stage is needed to get the lighting and technical changes perfect. Safety is also a major concern; one has to evaluate every bit of each production to make sure that the performers and the crew are safe. While many staging rehearsals can happen in rehearsal rooms, the technical rehearsals must happen on the stage.

The new floor moving equipment was designed to allow sets to roll easily from rehearsal room to stage and then off stage when another opera or ballet was performed in the evening. The ballet needed a special floor, made of sprung wood to protect the dancers joints when they leaped, and that floor could also be rolled on electronically. When it worked, the system was remarkable. When it did not work, it was hellish. Not only were we nervous that we could not get the sets on the stage in time for the evening's performance, we were also nervous that rehearsals would not start on time.

And if they did not, the producer of the opera or the choreographer of the ballet would come to my office demanding more rehearsal time, something we literally did not have. They then threatened to delay the opening of the production. Given the huge public drubbing we took for the cancellation of *Le Grand Macabre*, this was something we wanted to avoid in the worst way.

This backdrop of fear and sadness affected all of the opening ceremonies at the new Opera House. The gala re-opening of the Royal Opera House should have been a remarkable event. We had spent so many months planning this evening, and so many weeks dreading the possibilities, that the evening itself seemed an anticlimax. We were all so tense, and battered from the criticism resulting from the technical problems that, despite the grandeur of the event, it was not the happy celebration that I had hoped for.

We had opened the House, everything had worked, the television cameras had shown the celebration to the nation and, for a few moments, I could not have been more relieved. But the continuing stage problems did not allow us to relax, even for a moment, nor could we build on the excitement of the opening to change the public's perception of the Royal Opera House.

I lived in fear. Every time the sets had to move, I lost a year off my life. Every morning I would watch to see if the rehearsal could happen. Every afternoon I worried that we would not get the rehearsal set off the stage and the set for the show on the stage. And during every performance I worried that the stage equipment would not perform as planned. We also had constant problems with our surtitle projector. We had a new, very expensive projector that would stop functioning midway throughout a performance. This was especially problematic during the Kirov season when the audience was much less familiar with the Russian libretti. We finally realized the problem lay in the projector itself, not the surtitle computer system, and a new projector was purchased. We had no problems thereafter.

The fear of technical failure never left me. I was worried from November of 1999 until the day I left the Opera House over a year later. Every day. Seven days a week. When I went away on holiday in August, I would read *The London Times* every day online to see if a disaster was reported.

In the end, almost every show did happen. After the opening, we realized that we were still behind and that we needed to cancel six extra performances to make room for cancelled rehearsals. Once again the press went crazy. One performance we cancelled was a student matinee of *Gawain*. We called each school, explained our problem, and asked if the students could come to another student performances. Virtually all of the teachers were sympathetic and kind. They had been bringing their students to the Opera House for years and wished us well. One teacher, however, decided to launch a personal anti-Opera House offensive and went onto

many radio and television shows and spoke with numerous newspaper reporters. She had a very willing audience. Another teacher had her students write essays on the theme: Why We Hate the Royal Opera House. These were bound in an album and delivered to me. One essay began, "Dear Mr. Kaiser, we wish you were dead." We were all devastated, especially Darryl Jaffray, our Director of Education, who spent her life trying to bring the arts to new audiences.

We were very late on one *Falstaff* matinee and we did not complete one ballet triple bill, when we simply could not get the stage equipment to effect the change into the last ballet. (I was taking a rare night off and was awakened by a distraught Anthony Russell-Roberts, the administrator of the Royal Ballet. Needless to say none of us slept any more that night.) Apart from these major problems, however, the incidents of performance interruptions were limited to individual moments on stage: the tree did not grow on schedule during the opening of *Nutcracker*, the door did not retract during the opening of *Gawain* (why did these things always happen during openings when the press was present?), and the floor would not move during a performance of *Tosca*. Compared with the problems suffered by several other new opera houses, our list of catastrophes was quite short but that was of no interest to the public or the press.

There were many problems the audience did not see. The Act I set for one *Rosenkavalier* performance arrived on stage only 15 minutes before the performance was to begin. These performances featured the great American singers Renée Fleming and Susan Graham and the talented conductor Christian Thieleman—one of the great productions of my career. One performance of *Boheme* was almost stopped when we could not change from Act1 to Act 2 for a few scary minutes. The worst experience by far, however, was the opening of *Die Meistersinger* in April. We had had a few weeks of clean performances and the public believed all the technical problems were sorted. We knew better. In a system this complicated, there would always be problems. The trick was improving the diagnostic equipment to find the problem and solve it rapidly. We knew we had a wonderful *Meistersinger* production and superb cast. Bernard was conducting magnificently. It was to be one of the highlights of the opening season.

The performance started and everything was working beautifully. Until the second interval when we could not get the system to work. The second act set simply would not "fly" and we had no way to bring the third act set in. This would not have been a catastrophe; we could have performed the third act on the second act set. But it was opening night and the press was there and I knew that if we had to announce the problem we would be front-page news, yet again.

I implored the crew to keep trying and they did but to no avail, nothing would budge. We made a desperation call to the company that installed the system; they were monitoring a West End musical down the street. They rushed over and fiddled with some knobs. But nothing worked. I got ready to go before the curtain and make my speech. As the curtain was being paged, the sets started to move. It was a miracle. I collapsed into the arms of Terry Edwards, our Chorus Master

A similar problem affected the dress rehearsal for *Billy Budd* in our second season. Francesca Zambello's wonderful production utilizes a ship's deck that moves hydraulically during the performance. There are also a few hanging pieces. At the beginning of the dress rehearsal, the hanging pieces refused to enter. They simply would not move. We did the entire rehearsal without them. This was terribly upsetting to the directors who wanted a chance to see and perfect

the complete show and to us since we thought the worst technical problems were behind us. It turned out that one simple cable had not been properly attached. This seems to have caused most of the flying problems since reopening; it never emerged again after we learned how to properly connect that blasted cable.

This list of problem days is, of course, incomplete. There were at least three times a week when something was wrong. I would watch the stage from a window placed outside my office. Whenever I saw a huddle of technical experts on the stage I would realize something was wrong. It never seemed to end.

But the fear, the constant concern about movement, the hourly trips to my special window that allowed me to view the stage, took their toll. I was so frightened that the only public performances I saw in full from the audience were the opening gala and the last night of my tenure. At all other performances, I stood backstage. I was there so often the crew renamed stage right the "Kaiserstrasse." The artists seemed to enjoy my presence but they had no idea I was simply too frightened to sit in the house.

To this day, I cannot sit happily in a theater and watch a performance. I am convinced that something is going to go wrong. Some fear is normal in the theater—things do go wrong. But the level of mistrust I have developed for stage equipment is unhealthy and unproductive. It is a lasting scar of my time in England.

But despite all of this fear and upset, the Royal Opera House was making great progress. We completed the new House on time (barely), raised all of the private funds required to pay for the new building, built the best fundraising effort in Europe, rationalized the staff, diversified our audience and our artistic programming, built the largest educational program in Europe and erased the entire accumulated deficit of the organization.

Yet despite this remarkable success, the Royal Opera House was still criticized mercilessly. Some of this criticism was fair; but much was also unfair. The elitism charge resulted primarily from high ticket prices. These prices had more to do with the lack of funding than the desire to keep people out. Indeed, the marketing staff did everything possible to build audiences. While it was true that many of the ticket holders in the best sections of the house were well to do, this is true in virtually every major opera house.

With the new programming in the Studio Theatre and the Studio Upstairs, the reduction in ticket prices, and the physical openness of the new building, I had hoped to create the image of a far more accessible Opera House. But immediately after opening, there were a series of complaints about many aspects of the new House ranging from sight lines to pricing of certain tickets to the food service to the youth of our ushers. The press recounted many of these complaints and published numerous letters from disgruntled patrons. One remarkable series of letters in *The Times of London* included a series of attacks about our refusal to sell crisps (potato chips) at our bars. The prime time consumer show, "Watchdog," did a ten-minute segment about the pricing of about 60 seats in the side of our orchestra section. It seemed like overkill. In truth, there were some pricing mistakes made, mostly as a result of selling tickets before the seats were actually installed. We also had to de-bug several operations including bar service, coat check, and pre-

performance announcements. But the number of complaints fell to a very few after the third month of operation.

The complaints about these operational problems paled in comparison to the press complaints about the continuing technical problems that usually implied that the staff of the Opera House was incompetent. Why we were blamed for faulty equipment is beyond me; it is the vendors who deserved the public derision. But the notion that the Opera House staff was incompetent pre-dated my tenure and was difficult to overcome. When I arrived at Covent Garden, the press had created the impression that the artists of the Opera House were victims of an incompetent staff. The belief that "the art is wonderful but the administration is a disaster" was a mantra that was shared by many. From the outset, I realized that this was simply incorrect. While any organization has its weaker links, and while the Opera House staff was dispirited and not unified, the quality and dedication of so many was obvious.

The problems of the Royal Opera House lay not with these individuals, but with the governance structure in which they had to function. I reported to eleven different Boards in my role as Executive Director! While several of these Boards were very focused and took little time to service (e.g., Pensions Board, Benevolent Fund Board), others were more difficult. When I arrived there were separate Boards devoted to monitoring the activities of the Royal Opera and the Royal Ballet. The members of these Boards had the impression that they were meant to comment on the artistic choices of the two producing entities at the Royal Opera House. This was a recipe for disaster and these two Boards were eliminated shortly after my arrival.

The biggest problem lay in coordinating the activities of the main Board of the Opera House and the Board of the Trust, our central fundraising arm. The problems that emerged at the Opera House before my arrival set a tone of conflict between the two entities. The absence of experienced arts managers before my arrival had encouraged Board members to become overly involved in the operations of the organization. The lack of a clear job description for the Board members added to the problem. And the strong personalities of many of the Board members made conflict resolution more difficult to accomplish. I spent so much time negotiating between Board members that I had too little time to implement the changes needed.

This had a big impact on the success of our fundraising activities. While the Royal Opera House ran the most successful fundraising program in the performing arts in Great Britain, we needed to do better if we were to succeed in building the programming of the Opera House. I remain convinced that the Royal Opera House can increase its fundraising revenue substantially. But it would take a concerted effort of both Boards and a well-supported professional staff to do so. Jane Kauffman, the interim Director of Fundraising, who had done a marvelous job managing the Redevelopment Appeal, struggled daily to build a solid program. Her efforts, and mine, were consistently undermined by a governance structure that simply does not work.

Despite our difficulties, there were numerous donors who were so gracious and generous and who do not receive their due in Great Britain. Vivien Duffield and Lord and Lady Sainsbury were the most important patrons. But there were many others who gave freely and in good spirit. But the Opera House could raise so much more if it sorted its governance issues.

Before I left London, Colin proposed a new structure for the many Boards of the Opera House, dramatically simplifying the governance structure. I was a solid supporter of this plan and believe that the future fiscal and artistic health of the institution depends, in good measure, on achieving a better Board structure with clear job descriptions for all participants.

One central role of the Board, of course, is selecting the leadership of the organization. Both Bernard Haitink and Anthony Dowell had decided upon their retirement dates prior to my arrival so finding new artistic leaders was an issue from the beginning of my tenure.

The search for a new Music Director was the first to be addressed since conductors tend to work with a very long lead-time, just like opera singers. Bernard was scheduled to retire following the 2001/2002 season so we did not have much time to waste.

Colin and I met with many of the "finalists," usually in his office. We met with Antonio (Tony) Pappano and his wife Pam early in 1999. They were both delightful and insightful and Colin and I quickly decided that he was the right choice. I spent many weeks talking with Tony, giving him the information he needed to decide whether the Royal Opera House was the right choice for him. With a thriving conducting career and a very successful recording career, this was obviously a huge decision for him. As part of the discussions, Tony asked me to confirm my intentions of staying at the Royal Opera House and asked me to plan on staying until 2004. This was the first time I had to make a commitment to stay in any organization and I did not know what to say.

Colin agreed to increase my compensation marginally if I agreed to stay, which I eventually did. But it was not a pledge I made easily or happily and, unfortunately, not one I honored.

The announcement of Tony's appointment was treated very favorably by the press. While he was certainly not a household name, the music press knew his work and he was a dream interview, charming, sweet and funny and extremely knowledgeable about music. He was also respectful of all the various constituencies we needed to address. Tony went to work immediately to plan his initial seasons. Some of the happiest times I spent during my tenure were devoted to discussing his opening season. He always treated my ideas with respect and, yet, was clearly the leader in this endeavor.

The hiring of Ross Stretton as Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet was a far more difficult process. While there are a number of great conductors who could fill the role of Music Director, there are not a large number of experienced ballet artistic directors. One either chooses from the small group of directors who have led major companies or one takes a chance on a ballet dancer or independent choreographer who wishes to make the transition to management.

Most people do not understand the nature of the job of an artistic director of a ballet company. The artistic director is responsible for numerous activities including hiring dancers, selecting choreography and casting, managing the career development of every dancer, hiring and training staff, working with outside choreographers and designers, etc. It is a difficult and complex job and I believe that for a large ballet company it requires someone with experience. There are too many examples of important dancers failing as artistic directors simply because they lacked any managerial training or experience when they were given the reins of a major ballet company.

Kevin McKenzie's success at American Ballet Theatre, I believe, resulted in great part from his training at the Washington Ballet before he took over at ABT.

So while the search committee looked at a variety of candidates, I believed that an experienced artistic director was the most likely winner. But selecting someone with experience was not as easy as it sounds since the world is not littered with artistic directors of major ballet companies.

Very quickly a short list was established and we met with a large number of candidates. The most convincing candidate was Ross Stretton, who I had known briefly at ABT and who had done a good job of running the Australian Ballet for the past three years. He was more of an unknown quantity to the British press. But he had the British training, he had danced several works by Ashton, he had worked with Sir Kenneth MacMillan, run a major company, was committed to outreach, had attracted major choreographers to Australia (no mean feat), and had a sense of energy and maturity. It was to be a difficult transition for both Ross and the company. Whether it was that Ross was the first director of the Royal Ballet not to come from the company, or that he made bad decisions, his tenure was very brief and Monica Mason, the remarkable assistant to Anthony Dowell for many years, was named the new Artistic Director.

We had the opportunity to begin the process of creating new programs and ideas at the Opera House. The Back Garden Project was one of the most interesting and innovative projects we created. Deborah Bull and Graham Devlin, originally with the Arts Council of England and then a consultant, approached me with an idea: the Royal Opera House could give free rehearsal time to small dance companies during the month of August when the Royal Ballet was on holiday. Each small company could be given a short season in the Clore Studio Upstairs in September. We would help the dance companies mount the season.

I suggested that we add an arts management training component and teach the companies how to produce the season, not unlike the Make a Ballet program at ABT, but with adults. I volunteered to teach these sessions since I missed teaching my university classes. It was the first time in six years that I had not had a class to teach. I would work with the dance companies to create budgets and plans, develop a marketing program and implement a fundraising campaign. The fundraising element would address one of my Board's concerns: they did not want the Opera House to lose money on the Back Garden Project.

Deborah publicized the program and accepted four participants: three choreographers and a dance photographer. Deborah had the inspired idea to ask three Royal Ballet dancers to act as administrators for those Back Gardeners who did not have one. Bruce Samson, David Pickering and Philip Moseley were eager to participate.

We met every second Wednesday morning at 9 a.m. in my office and discussed the elements of running an arts organization. The classes, while including some theoretical material, were aimed at giving the skills required to mount the season in September. We discussed missions and goals, budgeting, marketing and fundraising. Each administrator had to develop a plan. Each also had to begin to solicit the funds needed to support their projects. Given the small size of the Clore Studio Upstairs, the four projects, with budgets totaling about 100,000 pounds, would only generate 15,000 pounds in ticket sales.

The artists involved were learning about the activities they needed to pursue to build successful on-going companies. The Back Garden project gave me a chance to involve myself with talented and dynamic young people at a time when the Opera House was struggling with the stage technology and adverse publicity that was deeply disturbing. I counted on these sessions and relished them as much as did the participants.

The Back Garden project got very good press and one journalist wrote that unlike others who have given their notice (I had resigned by the time the Back Garden Project was completed), I was still working and creating. It made me very proud and pleased that my efforts had been noticed, although the true payoff was the excitement and joy of the participants when they realized they had the knowledge required to build a successful dance organization.

Deborah and I worked on another important venture. A constant theme in my career has been the search for new ways to encourage the creation and dissemination of new works. But the high cost of creating works has reduced substantially the number of new works created in the recent past. We have experienced inflation in the fees paid to choreographers, designers and composers and the cost of building sets and costumes. But the largest cost, for most dance companies of any size, however, is the cost of rehearsals. The payroll for dancers, teachers, pianists, and coaches can be very high and can easily take the cost of a new work to the hundreds of thousands of dollars. This is far different from the costs when the great 20th century choreographers were in their prime. Balanchine, Ashton, Ailey and others would frequently create four, five or even six new works in a year. Many of these works were soon forgotten, others were masterpieces. But the cost of experimentation was low, and the risk of poor ticket sales was also much less since ticket prices were low as well and the competition for entertainment expenditures was minimal.

This means that dance companies today commission far fewer works from their in-house choreographers or from free-lancers and the chances of creating a masterpiece, or even developing one's skills, are far less than in the past.

The Linbury Studio Theatre and the Clore Studio Upstairs gave the Royal an opportunity to showcase new works at a fraction of the cost and risk of presenting them in the main auditorium of the Royal Opera House.

In our first season, the Royal Ballet mounted a two-week season of new works in the Linbury. While everyone applauded the concept, the actual implementation was a bit of a disappointment. Bad luck forced the cancellation of two of the new works that had been scheduled to appear, and one of the first works to be presented was rather weak. As a result, the critics did not respond to the season as we had hoped and ticket sales were low.

I cannot help but think that the problem lay entirely with marketing. It is hard to believe that we could not sell 400 tickets each night to performances featuring the best dancers of the Royal Ballet, regardless of the repertory. In fact, we had not quite figured out how to sell the Linbury performances for any company. It pointed out the hard fact that the main auditorium, with its red and gold elegance, is a major draw for even our most loyal and knowledgeable audiences.

The Clore Studio was the site of some exciting dance performances, however, and one presentation of a new work by Wayne Macgregor had the audiences and the critics excited about the potential for new work. Wayne's piece, *Symbiont(s)*, went from an ADI project in the Clore to the Royal Ballet season in the Linbury.

If we are to develop audiences for new works of dance and opera, it is essential to increase the number of people exposed to these art forms. One of the most important accomplishments of my time in London was the establishment of a new relationship with the BBC. There is far too little ballet and opera on television around the world; the costs of filming and broadcasting are simply too high and the audience is far smaller than for other entertainment programs. We developed a four-year deal with the BBC that would bring substantially more coverage on television and radio; to do this we had to get the unions to agree to a one-time annual payment for broadcasting rights that did not change with the amount of work that was broadcast. This new relationship allowed five full productions and a host of specials and short documentaries to be broadcast on television in the first two seasons in the new House, a huge increase from recent seasons.

We were also able to solicit sponsorship to recreate a pre-closure activity: placing a huge screen outside of the Opera House for periodic free screenings of live performances. The first of these was the opening of our second season, a performance of *Tosca* with Roberto Alagna and Catherine Malfitano. Thousands of people stood and watched the entire show. I was surprised at the number of people who joined the mass after emerging from Covent Garden pubs and hearing the music. At the end of the performance, the entire cast came outside and were greeted enthusiastically by the crowd. I am convinced a few opera lovers were created that evening.

These attempts to create new programs and new accessibility should continue to bear fruit for seasons to come. But it became apparent to me during the conclusion of the first season that the Opera House needed someone with fresh energy and ideas to lead it to new levels. I was simply exhausted by the efforts to stabilize and re-open the Royal Opera House. Despite my pledge to Tony Pappano, I knew that if I stayed, I would not be the right person to lead the Opera House. I was too affected by the stage problems and too tired to work effectively. And, despite press comments to the contrary, the turnaround was completed. We had paid off the entire deficit of the Opera House, we had paid for the new building, we had established an endowment fund, we had restructured the staff, we had re-opened the House and debugged most of the problems. It was time for a leader who had not suffered through the lean years, someone who could come in fresh and stay for a decade.

I told Colin of my decision to leave early in 2000 so that he would have a long lead-time to find my successor. He asked me to speak with Culture Minister Chris Smith who was not happy with my decision to leave. He was relieved that the Opera House was functioning smoothly and did not want anything to rock the boat. I was flattered by his faith in me but it was not enough to keep me in London. I wanted to go home.

The announcement of my decision to resign was big news. The press was kind to me at the expense of Colin and others. This was unfair. My decision to leave had to do with my own personal needs, not any particular problem with my Board, the government or anyone else. One newspaper reported that I was leaving because I found the Opera House "too elitist." Another

reported that I was leaving because there were not enough good arts managers in England. How absurd was all this speculation? I left because I was tired, and spent and I wanted to go home.

Between the announcement of my resignation and actual departure, a great many happy performances and programs were mounted. Perhaps the highlight was the summer season by the Kirov Opera and Ballet. For eight weeks, these great artists astonished the London audience. In the process, I became great friends with Valery Gergiev, the Artistic Director and Music Director of the Kirov. He is truly one of the most astonishing arts figures of our age: a hugely gifted conductor who is so passionate about his organization that he sacrifices personal comforts for the benefit of his great company.

The Royal Opera also mounted a great revival of *Billy Budd*, marred only by press complaints about our use of surtitles for an English language opera. We had made a promise to the deaf community that we would have surtitles for all productions and honored that commitment. Many in the press found this abhorrent and wrote in exaggerated tones about our desecration of opera.

Our new production of *Tristan und Isolde* was also hugely criticized, particularly since in this production, the two protagonists do not touch each other. While there were elements of the performance I would have liked to see improved, I found this interpretation entirely valid and interesting. In too many performances of this great work one sees two fat singers pretending to hug each other; I hardly need that image to appreciate this love story.

But our revival of *Tales of Hoffman* was universally praised, as was most of the season by the Royal Ballet. I was also gratified that our production of *The Greek Passion*, in our re-opening season, won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Opera Production, and that *Symbiont(s)*, the collaboration by the Random Dance Company and the Royal Ballet, choreographed by Wayne McGregor, won the Time Out Award for Best New Dance. As always in the arts, one takes risks; some pay off and others do not. We must accept failure if we are going to be creative. Unfortunately, too many members of the press saw doom in any artistic failure. They assumed that one bad production implied an endless string to come.

As each new production opened and closed, my tenure was marching towards its conclusion. My last week at the Royal Opera House was a blur of parties and farewells. I was meant to have dinner with my Back Gardeners on the Saturday before I left. Deborah Bull, Philip Moseley and David Pickering were taking me out to thank me for my work with them. We went to a beautiful club, the Home House, for dinner and I was so happy to be with these good friends. Deborah had access to this club since her partner was the personal trainer for Mick Jagger. I felt like a member of the "in crowd." After dinner they suggested we go down to the bar for coffee.

When I entered the bar the entire Royal Ballet was gathered for a surprise good-bye party. I was truly gob smacked. Virtually the entire company was there. I was so honored and touched at this remarkable gesture. Philip had made sure that no one told me, and indeed it was the first surprise party in my life that I had no inkling about. Philip had also arranged for Barbara Windsor, the star of my favorite soap, "EastEnders," to attend. It was grand.

On Monday night, the Board gave a dinner for me at the National Gallery. I had been dreading this affair since there had been so much tension in recent weeks and I was not certain what I would say in my speech. The prologue to the dinner was unusual. The Search Committee for my successor had had a difficult meeting just prior to the event and small groups of Board members were canvassing each other in the galleries off the main gallery where we had our dinner. It seemed like a stage set: a group dinner in a long gallery with pairs of "conspirators" heading off into the side rooms. The dinner itself was lovely. The Board was there as were members of the senior staff. I made my remarks and was as gracious and optimistic as I could be. I mentioned that the meaningful thing about that gathering was that everyone in the room had been instrumental in a remarkable turnaround. And I meant it.

The next day we had the general rehearsal for our new production of *La Cenerentola*. It was a brilliant performance and I was so pleased that my last productions were so successful; a mixed ballet bill had uniformly superb reviews as had *Traviata* and *Ondine*. I was leaving on a high.

Thursday night Lord and Lady Sainsbury gave a dinner party for me following a performance by the Royal Ballet. It was a lovely gift; virtually all the principal dancers of the Ballet attended.

Friday was the staff party. I took Eleanor for a lunch at the Savoy and the staff gathered in Floral Hall to say goodbye. Deborah Bull read a remarkable letter that she had written to me. I was given several gifts, a model of the new opera house, a piece of the old curtain and a book of photographs taken of the entire staff. I was also honored with a permanent plaque placed at the window overlooking the stage where I had spent so many worried hours. The plaque read:

A Window on our World
Michael Kaiser
Executive Director
From 1998 to 2000
In recognition of his outstanding contribution to the re-opening of the Royal Opera House

I spoke about my affection for the staff and listed what they had achieved. I was truly proud to be cared for by so many people.

Then the Royal Opera chorus, with a few other volunteers, sang "You'll Never Walk Alone." It is a song that has always made me cry and this was no exception. I was pretty wasted by the end.

Saturday, my last day at the Royal Opera House, was spent getting ready for the opening of *Cenerentola*. I was given the honor of moving the set into place, the last wagon movement of my tenure. I gave a lunch for the stage crew in the Crush Room. We had been through so much together and I wanted to do something special. Mash, one of the nicest of the crew members, made a brief speech and gave me one of the Nomad controllers that (sometimes) moved the sets. It will always be a reminder of the challenge of Covent Garden.

That night we opened *Cenerentola*. It was a huge success and the performance went brilliantly. After the performance we had a cast party. I stayed for only a brief while and left quietly. I simply did not want to say another string of goodbyes and slipped off to the hotel.

The next morning I went to the airport. Deborah Bull was flying to New York as well and we spent the day on the plane. It was a gradual transition from London, her world, to my world in New York.

Years later, the Royal Opera House still feels like a central part of my life, but also a mythical kingdom off in the distance. Something like my personal Brigadoon. I know that I will miss it deeply, that the fears I developed there will begin to evaporate over time, and that the lasting impression will be of a huge accomplishment and a special, magical time in my life.