

# Birmingham's our city ... and this is our song

## Welsh National Opera in Birmingham

**W**elsh National Opera (WNO) is based in Cardiff but we tour throughout the UK with 60% of our funding coming from England.

Birmingham is of particular importance to WNO – we view it as our home in England – the only other place (alongside Cardiff) we perform our entire repertoire every season (at Birmingham Hippodrome). It therefore has a strategic emphasis on everything we do.

As a touring company one of our challenges is to feel owned by audiences in the cities we perform in – to have an impact and a place. In Birmingham it is more than ever the case that we need to be considered an integral part of the cultural landscape and not just as 'passers-by'. Birmingham has fantastic cultural provision (Birmingham Royal Ballet – based at the Hippodrome, CBSO, Birmingham Opera Company to name but a few). We too need to demonstrate value and position within the city.

A great thing that differentiates WNO from other opera companies is the approach and work of WNO MAX – WNO's enhanced education / outreach department, which also has the brief of maximising the resources of the company.

WNO has a full-time chorus and orchestra – creating significant overheads. MAX's job is to scrutinise schedules to make sure these resources are working hard for us and creating further opportunities. An example is where there is no male chorus in *Hansel & Gretel* – MAX created a show about why men sing, touring to middle/small-scale venues,

reaching different audiences. We were in two places at the same time.

### City Songs

*City Songs* was created by MAX to engage with a wider public beyond our regular opera audiences. It was created with 250 children and young people, representing four Birmingham schools. They worked with a poet to create a text, which was set to music by a composer. Citizenship is a strong part of the piece and exploratory work, which saw them visit different parts of their city (Cadbury's at Bournville, the National Trust Back to Back Houses, the old Rover motor plant, the Canals and Highways agencies, etc). Involving singing, projected animation and speech, *City Songs* was performed by the young people alongside a professional opera singer, the full WNO orchestra and other musicians.

Four months of work culminated in two performances – one matinee for schools and one evening show for the public.

### Taking risks together – believing your own arguments

There was no way of scheduling *City Songs* performances as an additional part of our Birmingham week on top of five mainhouse evening operas. For this project to be given due status, the performances had to take place in the mainhouse.

We decided it had to replace a mainhouse show, taking out one performance of *Carmen* – a popular production which would have achieved considerable shared box office income for us and the Hippodrome.

This represented a choice between short-term income on the one hand and potential positioning, regional profile and new audience engagement for the future. It was not as easy a decision as it might, with hindsight, sound but we both chose to sacrifice the short-term income – demonstrating our commitment.

This decision also required commitment and conviction from Birmingham Hippodrome – they too would lose income (a mainhouse show and secondary ancillary income such as hospitality sales). Both organisations had to believe it a risk worth taking and an investment in the longterm. Both organisations were keen to do more in this area, sharing definable objectives and imperatives – in a carefully planned, strategic way.

### Along the way

Sales for the matinee started well – mainly to participating schools. The evening sales were much slower and became a real concern. Despite thorough, robust marketing and press campaigns the advance was fewer than 100 (*Carmen* was on 1,500 seats a night).

At times we struggled to retain our conviction. The marketing teams of both organisations had several 'why on earth are we doing this!?' conversations. With a low rate of return, the task of selling this performance (with negligible income) was draining marketing resources, diverting energy away from other campaigns with real financial targets. The impact of marketing an additional product to wider audiences as opposed to more similar products to a similar audience was significant.



The bull was photographed for WNO by Johan Persson with kind permission of the Bull Ring

### On the night ...

We had taken a big risk and financial hit, so had to maximise every opportunity afforded us. Following a successful matinee (a full house of school children), almost unbelievably 1,400 people (80% capacity) attended the evening performance.

The audience behaved completely differently to our regular audiences – it was patently evident (and exciting!) how completely new they were to this

environment – not just to opera but to the theatre itself.

Everyone within WNO had expressed how committed they were to this kind of work so it was interesting how some people struggled with the reality. This audience's behaviour challenged some. Audience members moved around the auditorium to take photos, record and film on their mobiles (normally prevented as it would mean

a renegotiation of the orchestra's rights). They talked openly through the overture (like film credits), only stopping to listen to singing.

We held a post-show panel discussion with the city's arts educationalists. Some impacts and outcomes were discrete and we wanted to discuss them and engage in debate with key influencers and audiences. This was well supported with people demonstrating a real

appetite for this kind of work, giving us lots to think about in terms of audience development and engagement. The informal session attracted VIP guests from the arts community and the city council, local press, senior managers/governors and teachers from the participating schools, parents and siblings of some of the children.

### Conclusion

How do we measure impact? Did *City Songs* achieve what we set out to? It is a long-term goal but all the indications are yes. We succeeded in maximising our resources and impact, reaching a new and wider audience and reinforcing the direct bearing opera can have on people's lives – and on budget.

Many of the participants are now involved in other work with the Hippodrome. One school integrated theatre into its 'local curriculum'. We wrote to thank every audience member for their part in its success and continue to invite them back, but it is important to state that repeat business for core programming from this audience was not our objective.

The opportunities *City Songs* afforded us to position ourselves in Birmingham in a different context and to re-establish our brand were significant. We created an image, which associated WNO with one of the city's cultural icons – the bull – used in all our print. A line of text from *City Songs* became the strap line: **Birmingham's our city ... and this is our song.** We achieved fantastic local press coverage (including the exploratory visits, film workshops, rehearsals, etc.). The marketing

included distribution of 60,000 postcards door-to-door in the schools' immediate communities and a further 60,000 city-wide. Some of the schools encouraged their older children to support the marketing effort locally.

This fantastic opportunity to assert our position in the city and engage with a wider public is as much the point as the actual evening attendance of 1,400 people. We continue to target the postcodes that received the door drop, regularly monitoring their attendance. Some have overtaken TGI rates of attendance for opera.

This project will not answer our every prayer – it is a part of a strategy. One of the most important things we've learned is about feeling comfortable taking risks, believing your own arguments, keeping sight of why you're doing things; and we plan another project on this scale for 2009/10. The McMaster report struck a chord – talking about engagement – with the Culture Secretary's introduction acknowledging the constraint of burdensome targets. We need to continue to engage more deeply with a wider audience and I am excited by (and only slightly fearful of) the further lessons ahead of us. ■



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