Out of the fire

By Adrian Mourby

Yet another of the casualties of the ongoing 'Summer of Lockdown' in Britain was Longborough Festival Opera's *Ring* cycle. And though Scottish soprano Lee Bissett's debut as Brünnhilde may have been put on hold, her ardour for Wagner has been far from quenched…

Lee Bisset was due to make her debut as Brünnhilde in Wagner's *Ring* cycle at the Longborough Festival Opera this summer, until the coronavirus pandemic put an end to it. Ironically, she had actually resisted the role for some time. 'I love singing Sieglinde, which I'd done in Singapore, in São Paulo, and for Opera North and Longborough in their first *Ring* cycle (2008-13). And I used to think, 'Why would anyone want to sing Brünnhilde when they could sing Sieglinde?' I'd had many conversations saying 'Not really for me thanks. But Wagner casts his spell on you. I always, always used to stand in the wings and watch the last scene of *Walküre* between Wotan and Brünnhilde.'

Then Bissett was asked to do that scene in a concert given by Mastersingers, a mentoring and support organisation for young singers. 'They had supported me financially when I was learning my early Wagner roles. The concert was with Paul Carey-Jones who will singing Wotan in Longborough's second cycle and I found myself thinking, actually I *do* want to do this at Longborough. It's a great theatre in which to sing Wagner. The orchestra is really deep so you're never fighting it. And the audience so close you can show emotion with an eyelash. So in the end I was chasing the role!'

Lee realised that Brünnhilde was coming to dominate her life when last year her three-year-old son Torben burst into the music room singing 'Hojotoho Mummy!' 'That was a funny moment, but I did wonder, What have I done to my son? Once I had landed the role, I took on small Wagner engagements to try and come to terms with Brünnhilde. In fact I realised I was actually learning the role backwards – as Wagner had written it – because I'd started singing the immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung* at home.'

We are speaking on the telephone rather in person – a pity as Bissett seems a very approachable Wagnerian, but lockdown rules are of course in play. Lee tells me that early informal work with Paul-Carey Jones and conductor Anthony Negus had already begun in 2019. 'Anthony's so devoted. He's been living and breathing this music for 60 years. Before Christmas, at the end of last year, the three of us had sung the whole opera through.'

Then – with London rehearsals due to start in April 2020 – Lee received a phone call on 21 March from Polly Graham, Longborough's artistic director, to say that in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Longborough was cancelling its 2020 summer season. 'They held out longer than many of the festivals,' she admits sadly. 'I was still hoping that *Walküre* might *just* happen.'"

The problem for Lee is that because Longborough has contracted artists for its complete *Ring* cycle, all the artists are already booked for Siegfried in 2021. It

Lee Bissett prepares to sing Tosca at the Longborough Festival

As Sieglinde (left) in the Longborough Festival Opera's 2013 Ring *cycle with Rachel Nicholls as Brünnhilde*

CLIVE BARDA

As Sieglinde in Opera North's semi-staged Walküre

isn't just a question of nudging *Walküre* back a year with a knock-on effect for all the other operas. It may be a question of performing *Walküre* out of sequence. 'We just don't know yet if they can push everything on a year,' says Lee. 'On the positive side, a lot of companies are being very generous to performers at the moment. And it does give me another year to prepare for something so huge. Not that I wasn't prepared to sing my lovely Brünnhilde this summer, but there are so many questions. I'm still grappling with how could this woman who loves Siegfried so much agree to him being stabbed in the back in *Götterdämmerung*?'

Born and brought up on the banks of Loch Lomond, Lee Bisset studied at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire, Royal Northern College of Music and the National Opera Studio where she was sponsored by English National Opera. Puccini, Wagner and Janáček have become the core of her repertoire but although she has sung Mimì for ENO and Freia and Sieglinde for Opera North's semi-staged *Ring* in 2016 (available to stream for free at the moment), a lot of her early work was outside Britain. She made her North American debut as Tosca for Opera Memphis and Opera Omaha. Opera Omaha also saw her debut the role of Minnie in *La fanciulla del West*. Tosca has since become one of her staple roles. 'Tosca is a creature driven by her instincts. She rarely thinks things through. In Act II in particular she behaves like a cornered animal. Tosca is rewarding to sing vocally, and makes all my other singing better, but she doesn't offer the same artistic rewards as working on Isolde, Jenůfa or Brünnhilde. Brünnhilde is smart. So smart.'

More Wagner followed, with Lee singing Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* for the Ópera de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, and Isolde in Bern, Switzerland. Her first Sieglinde for Longborough in 2010 was a captivating performance leading this reviewer to wonder where she had been all this time. 'I suppose I'd been working abroad a lot!' she explains.

The good news is that we will see Lee Bisset's Brünnhilde next year and it promises to be worth waiting for, even if *Walküre* ends up being performed out of sequence. 'I have the advantage over some of my colleagues whose productions have been cancelled that I know I *will* do this,' says Lee. 'It's the chance of a lifetime to sing a complete *Ring*.'

For someone who resisted the role for so long, Lee Bisset is now passionate about it. 'I'll use this year. It's always possible this will be my only Brünnhilde. You want to be so prepared!' ON

'I was all prepared to sing my lovely Brünnhilde this summer, but there are still so many questions about her to grapple with...'