

Classical & Opera

Budding talent



Love boat: there's a romantic triangle at the heart of this production

A new production of 'Billy Budd' brings sexual politics to centre stage, reports **Malcolm Rock**

'Billy Budd' will be outed this month in a radical revival of Benjamin Britten's all-male, seafaring opera. While audiences around the world have come to terms with the gay love triangle implied by EM Forster's libretto about a stammering sailor who accidentally kills his provocative master-at-arms, it remains a sensitive subject for singers questioning just how far they can push the psychosexual subtext.

Currently wrestling with the dilemma are South African baritone Jacques Imbrailo and British tenor John Mark Ainsley, who appear in De Nederlandse Opera's production as Billy and Captain Vere, respectively.

The baritone and tenor reprise roles they played in last year's acclaimed Glyndebourne staging that was helmed by gay director Michael Grandage. Ironically, Grandage's traditional treatment was criticised for *underplaying* the homoeroticism. 'All I could have wished for was a little more imagina-

tive playing-out of the repressed erotic tension – the essential queerness – between Billy, master-at-arms Claggart and Vere,' wrote *The Daily Telegraph's* Rupert Christiansen.

The DNO production is directed by another Brit, Richard Jones, and

sets the story ashore, inside the dormitories of a boys' naval academy. According to Ainsley, the spotlight falls on the arousing effect the underage Billy has on his dual superiors, now schoolmasters. While the older men never act on

their urges, instead spewing forth their guilt in aria, the relocated opera inevitably flirts with the issue of paedophilia.

'Adolescents have a particular beauty that stirs all sorts of feelings in people,' says Ainsley, whose morally dithering Vere spends the duration of the opera lusting after young Billy. 'They're neither adult nor child,' he continues. 'They look like one, but still have characteristics of the other. It's why they

were sculpted by the Greeks and the reason Shakespeare wrote his sonnets.'

In Jones' production, Vere is married, wears a wedding band and has a photograph of his wife on his desk. Meanwhile, the hard-hearted Claggart, who also yearns for the unwittingly alluring

Billy, is filled with self-hatred that ends in his death and the lynching of the title hero.

'Both their lives are thrown into uncertainty,' says Ainsley. 'They have learnt how to exist and are surprised and fearful of their sudden feelings

for this charismatic boy.'

Imbrailo has had to alter both his appearance and mindset in order to play two versions of the magnetic youngster. For Glyndebourne, he boasted a salty straggle of shoulder-length hair, but across the Channel, he's opted for short back and sides to elicit the disciplined appearance of a starry-eyed student.

'At Glyndebourne, I imagined that Billy was already a hardened sailor of

about 22,' he recalls. 'But here I'm playing him as a hyperactive 14-year-old sharing a dormitory with other kids. He's more childlike, more naïve and even more convinced that righteousness is everything.'

The 32-year-old says that his formative years spent at a boarding school in Hennenman have assisted him in this latest approach to the role. 'I enjoyed my time at boarding school,' says Imbrailo, 'and I can relate to the innocent and kind-hearted Billy who believes in goodness above all else. It's not such a stretch.'

Imbrailo has previously sung roles in 'The Rape of Lucretia' and 'Owen Wingrave', which makes 'Billy Budd' his third Britten opera. He confesses to hearing an underlying anguish in all of Britten's compositions.

'His operas sound tortured,' observes Imbrailo. 'It's easy to find parts of Benjamin Britten in several of the characters of "Billy Budd". He's the regretful Vere, the malevolent Claggart and the blameless Billy, all at once. I think it makes the tragedy all the more moving.'

'Billy Budd' plays at Het Muziektheater, Waterlooplein, 7-28 March. See listings for details.

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