

Night at the Opera

Roddy Phillips

I'm notorious for slipping into my theatre seat just seconds before curtain up and quite often I'll walk into a concert hall in tandem with the conductor. Which is a fantastic feeling if you can time it just right because you get applauded to your seat and you can bet there will be at least a couple of dozen people in the audience who think it's you they're clapping.

One of the reasons for my timely arrival is that I can't stand hanging around waiting for a performance to start while I pretend to be immersed in the programme. Far better to leave it until the very last minute and then run through the streets like a fugitive and arrive sweating and panting. The main reason I cut it so fine is because it's always later than I think. So last week I set the clock in the car ten minutes fast.

"That's fooling no one," said my wife, checking her watch against the car clock. But for once she was wrong because I arrived at the opera a full fifteen minutes before curtain up and didn't know what to do with myself. Actually there wasn't a curtain at the venue so I could have just taken my seat and amused myself by studying the set for Bizet's Carmen. But I couldn't even do that because I had to hang around in the foyer waiting for my son Adam because I had the tickets.

There's only one thing worse than trying to stand out in a crowd so you won't be missed and that's being conspicuously stood up. I now realise this because several complete strangers sidled up to me and told me as much. I just smiled back then looked suitably forlorn.

"Never mind," consoled one old gent, "I'm sure she's got a perfectly good excuse."

After that I decided Adam had missed his train so I joined the last trickle of people and went upstairs to find my balcony seat. As luck would have it I was on the wrong side of the Hall and by the time I was heading in the right direction the applause had started for the conductor. Perfect timing. I took a bow and sat down. The moment I leaned back in my seat an elderly lady at the end of our short five-seat row stood bolt upright. For a moment I thought we were all on some kind of seesaw arrangement and I had sent her flying.

However, she sat down again after a brief but feverish exchange with an usherette. Then she was up again and peering at the stage, then she was back in her seat and squirming around - handbag up, handbag down. I wasn't sure what was going on but it was fascinating stuff and I almost forgot about the overture, which was now in full swing.

Deciding I should keep one eye on the stage and the other on the elderly lady I angled myself round and draped an arm over Adam's empty seat. Unfortunately the young woman sitting in the next seat obviously thought I was about to get familiar so she leaned away from me as far as she could without falling into the lap of the woman next to her. Then the jack-in-the-box lady was up on her feet again and everyone in the vicinity just carried on as if nothing was happening. Sometimes audiences can be very unforgiving, darting one another dark looks for breathing loudly but this one was very accommodating.

Just as well. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a large figure standing a few feet behind me laden with a jumble of bags and a violin case. Under the rim of a gigantic fur trimmed parka hood there was a familiar smiling face.

"Aha!" he declared, pointing at me with his violin case while tramping up and down on the spot.

Adam had made his grand entrance to the strains of the March of the Toreadors looking for all his might like a member of the North Pole Symphony Orchestra. How he found me I have no idea. Maybe he had tracker dogs with him he certainly seemed to have everything else.

The trouble is you just can't hide someone like that. For a start the parka was big enough to fit a telephone box and since Adam had run all the way from the train station with half his worldly goods he looked as if he had been boiled in a bag. An interesting contrast to the ladies and gentlemen in the rest of the audience who had put a considerable effort into dressing for a dapper night at the opera. Thankfully an usherette came to Adam's aid and laid his bags and violin safely out of harm's way, then Adam squeezed past me and filled his seat with parka. With his enormous hood still up he must have been blocking the view of half the balcony.

So I recommended he put the hood down, but when he did it doubled in size like a giant Frilled Neck Lizard and poked the demur young woman next to him in the side of the head.

Incredibly she said nothing, but she screamed like a banshee a few seconds later when the jumping bean lady shot out of her seat again. I had forgotten about her. But I was delighted to see her back in action.

Adam also got the fright of his life and sympathised with the young woman who rather sweetly I thought, apologised for making such a noise. She was fanning herself with her programme and affording Adam a welcome draft when the elderly lady's accomplice shot up out of her seat. Obviously they were now taking it in turns.

The young woman shrieked again but this time Adam just sighed and shook his great fur trimmed hood from side to side, the soldiers onstage meanwhile played cards self-consciously and sang about the midday heat. Consequently the pop-up lady and her pal now swapped seats and took their coats off. So I told Adam to do the same. By this time the audience were past caring.

Adam's problem however, was finding somewhere to put the big parka, which was more like a sleeping bag. In the end we had to lay it across both of us like a quilt and after a few minutes I felt myself bobbing off.

At the interval Adam decided he would escape so I helped him out with his bags. He was apologising for creating a bigger spectacle than the opera but I reckoned he was upstaged by the antics at the end of our row.

Right on cue while I was carrying Adam's violin case through the crowded foyer someone behind me declared, "oh look, I told you it was bad, even the orchestra are leaving."