

# Tony Hall

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 19 September 2002.

Tony Hall was born in Birkenhead and spent much of his childhood on the move around England. He attended Oxford University and was employed by the BBC as a journalist, working first of all in Belfast. He described this as a challenge, to ensure that he was reporting the news, rather than creating it. Subsequently he worked on the radio with the Today programme and then the World at One with Sir Robin Day. Later he moved to TV, working on Newsnight and the Six O'Clock News. John Birt promoted him to Chief Executive of TV News and Current Affairs, a job he held under a number of different titles. In this role, he oversaw the introduction of Radio Five Live and News 24.

He has been attending performances at the Royal Opera House since he was a student and he has gradually moved seats down the House. The building houses passionate people, who believe in what they are doing. That very day, he had seen the dancers rehearsing waltzes from *Mayerling* in the Ballet Studio, Keith Warner directing the little boy in *Wozzeck*, the props department working on *The Sleeping Beauty* and the stage crew setting up for *Turandot*. In the words of the new Director of the Opera, Tony Pappano, the difficulty is going home.

Tony explained the job of the Executive Director. It is to provide freedom and resources to the artistic directors. He described the arts as "business-like, not a business." The opera house had an annual turnover of £65m. He had experienced a variety of management styles at the BBC, which had equipped him to become an enabler.

He explained the current governance arrangements at the Opera House. The previously separate Boards of Development, Fundraising and the Friends had merged. A single Board of Directors, currently comprising 17 people, met five or six times a year. They acted as a non-executive Board, holding the executives to account on behalf of the public. They received reports from the Executive Director and the Artistic Directors of the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera, they set the

strategy and they judged performance against plans and objectives. This process enabled clarity, empowerment and prompt decision-making. The Board had sub-committees to consider Finance and Audit, Fundraising and Programming. A policy committee, comprising senior managers of the Opera House, met regularly to consider and share matters of corporate importance, such as the website, the use of the big screen and union issues. This committee brought together the separate cultures of the opera, the ballet, front-of-house, the production departments and the stage itself and was an important forum for the cross-fertilisation of ideas.

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Tony Hall meets regularly with the Director of the Royal Ballet to discuss issues of people and money. They plan two to three years ahead, dealing with production budgets, pricing and marketing. The Ballet would prefer to plan six months ahead, but the Opera (with its international network) requires three years' notice. It is the Executive Director's responsibility to ensure that both the Opera and the Ballet achieve a fair share of new and existing resources; but ultimately the Executive Director has the last word in this respect.

Tony Hall was questioned about the large number of new opera productions in the forthcoming season. He confirmed that these were essential for the vitality of the opera company, whether they be shared productions or created in-house. He was particularly pleased that, after a gap of some years, the Royal Opera had again commissioned a new opera, *Sophie's Choice*. There would, however, be more investment in the new ballet productions as well. The forthcoming season would see a new production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. He hoped that there would be more new productions of the classics than in

the Company's recent history.

Asked who decides the split of funding between Opera and Ballet, Tony Hall confirmed that it is the decision of the Board, acting on the Executive Director's recommendations. He presided over some tough sessions with the senior managers of the two companies. Considerable juggling was required with the available resources, but ultimately he believed that fair distributions were achieved. The increasing costs of production and performance led to consequential issues of pricing, fundraising and commercial development. Wonderful things had happened, however, when the House was financially secure. In the context of sound finances, the Royal Opera House produced excellent world-class opera and ballet, with real excitement and buzz.

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He believed in investing in the new and commissioning new works. He had been excited by *Tryst*, created in the last season by Christopher Wheeldon. He hoped he would be persuaded to create more works for the company. In connection with commissioning new works, the Royal Opera House had reached a significant sponsorship agreement with BP for the forthcoming season. Tony Hall always filled up with BP petrol and he encouraged the audience to follow his lead!

Tony Hall was passionately keen to encourage new choreography and new choreographers. The Vilar young artists programme for the Opera, embracing six singers and two others, had got off to a successful start. The Ballet had produced impressive work in the Clore Studio, but the dancers work for little more than goodwill. A small amount of money had been generated to encourage new choreographers and Cathy Marston would be the first to benefit.

Deborah Bull was now in charge of the Linbury Theatre and Clore Studio and was introducing formal programming. The lack of funding for these venues was an ongoing difficulty. The brochure for Booking Period 3 contained booking information about two operas in the Linbury Theatre and other events. In the fullness of time, Tony Hall looked forward to a co-ordinated programme across the three venues.

He believed that broadcasting was a key area of development and he hoped that Radio 3 and BBC 2 would make more transmissions. He also had an aim of broadening the archives, to hold a copy of every cast in every work and to make them available for members of

the public to view.

Access was another issue for the future. It was intended to increase the use of the big screen and in other cities. The Opera House was trying hard to bring performances to the regions. Tony Pappano was hoping to tour concert performances of operas. The Linbury and Clore were too small-scale to receive the main work of the House.

Tony Hall commented on the recent increase in funding to the Arts Council and how it might be distributed. Whilst expressing caution, given the number of competing arts bodies, he set out the principles of the Royal Opera House's imminent application for additional funding. The core theme was more output for more resources. The bid would include structured funding for the Linbury Theatre and the Clore Studio, funding to commission new work and the establishment of a wide archive of filmed performances, available for public viewing.

Although the proportion of public funding at the Royal Opera House (currently 33%) was much higher than in the United States, it was dropping. In other words the grant was increasing, but fundraising was increasing faster. Tony Hall was aware, however, of the current economic climate and that fundraising was likely to be more challenging in the medium term. The ROH was looking at other methods of raising income, such as merchandising and publishing books. Tony Hall was asked about the recent press coverage of the Equity dispute and the disquiet about the Artistic Director's leadership. He confirmed that Equity deputies had met with the ballet management team in mid August. Management were working through the questions posed by Equity. Management would endeavour to provide timelier information to the company about casting and proper rehearsal time for second and third casts. The discussions had gone down well. Tony Hall's intention was to make the working life of the company clearer and better. He was astounded by the commitment of dancers to their work from a young age, a commitment, which he described as "hugely impressive." On the other hand, the organisation had undergone "a change of dynasty" and there were bound to be some uncertainties.

It was suggested that there could be political interference at the BBC and Tony Hall was asked whether he encountered any such interference at the Opera House. He confirmed that he was continually working to build the support of journalists and politicians, as well as growing the 26,000 strong Friends of Covent Gardens. It could be an uphill struggle to persuade politicians of issues, particularly funding, but Tony Hall "was used to that."

A member asked what responsibility the Royal Opera House took for dancers when they leave the company. Tony Hall commented that the ROH had a part to play in the ongoing fitness of dancers and in prepar-

ing them to cope with life after the Royal Ballet. In that regard, he had been absolutely delighted to attend a presentation recently by five dancers of course-work, in connection with a degree course they were following at Middlesex University.

Questioned about the Royal Ballet's limited record of employing black and ethnic minority dancers, Tony Hall advised that the company was addressing this problem, although it would take time, years in fact. In the meantime, positive steps were being taken to reach out to the black and ethnic minority communities. The recent co-operation with the Notting Hill Carnival was very encouraging.

Referring to the Ashton/MacMillan heritage, Tony Hall described it as "fantastically important." Due weight must be given to the heritage repertoire, which should be developed and cherished. It was also important to build new works on the company and to find a "new Ashton." In response, it was pointed out that the current exhibition of designs for MacMillan ballets in the Amphitheatre foyer featured works, which were not being revived this year on stage. Members expressed concern that the costumes for the recent production of *Anastasia* had been sold in the end-of-season costume sale.

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Members asked questions about the scheduling of repertoire. In the last season, there had been fewer ballets in performance, a preponderance of full-length ballets and long blocks of performances, which some of the regular audience found boring. Some members had enjoyed the varied triple bills of earlier seasons, particularly the imaginative theming, such as "Stravinsky," "MacMillan" and "Diaghilev." Tony Hall confirmed that this was a matter of artistic direction. It was necessary to programme a long run of *The Sleeping Beauty*, to free up rehearsal time for new works. The marketing department had been doubtful initially about the wisdom of blocking long series of performances, but there was no evidence that the box office had dropped off.

Members were concerned about the lack of matinée performances and the difficulty of access for the public living at some distance from London. Tony Hall advised that performances were plotted two or three years ahead and it was difficult to make short-term amendments, particularly as technical rehearsals were part of the overall planning. Nevertheless he acknowledged the current dearth of matinée performances

for the ballet. It might be possible to commence some Saturday performances at an earlier time. The ROH would address the issue of more matinée performances within the overall planning cycle.

Concerns were expressed about the paucity of casting information. By way of example, only two names were announced for *The Sleeping Beauty*, whereas in the past the casting for the Lilac Fairy, Carabosse and the Bluebirds was announced as well. Similarly only two names had been announced for *Manon*. Tony Hall confirmed that the Royal Ballet was committed to publishing fuller casting information, in time for the booking leaflets.

A member, who had only recently become interested in ballet, commented on the lack of information available about ballet in general. Other members expressed disappointment that the majority of upcoming Insight Days appeared to be devoted to opera. Tony Hall emphasised the central importance of education to the work of the Opera House and the growing significance of the website in this regard.

Some Members expressed disappointment about the Royal Gala. Tony Hall confirmed that it had been agreed with the Palace far too late to allow the programming of opera. Consequently the burden fell on the Royal Ballet, who had prepared the programme during their Australian Tour. After the Gala, the Queen had written letters of thankyou, both to Tony Hall and to the Chairman.

Questioned about the box office, Tony Hall confirmed that they were looking at the ticket exchange policy. There had also been difficulties with the large number of cast changes. He thought that the box office felt a lot friendlier, but was looking at more ways of improving service.

Tony Hall answered questions about the current booking regime, particularly the long lead-in time between booking and performance. It was difficult for the public to book so far ahead, when they were unaware of other diary commitments. Tony Hall explained that it was necessary to have a long lead-in, in order to facilitate the phasing of bookings between the Friends and the general public. He had been concerned about the number of Friends bookings, which were unfulfilled (as many as 1,000 in one booking period). Under new procedures, the box office had been ringing Friends applicants, where the precise request could not be fulfilled. As a result, only 50 or 60 had been disappointed on the most recent booking period. It was intended to introduce a new box office computer system next year, which it was hoped would improve the booking process.

Members questioned whether it was appropriate to have a separate general public booking by post, before booking in person opened. Tony Hall confirmed that the ROH was looking at this.

A member reported that on occasion she had not

received all the tickets she had requested as a Friend, only to encounter members of the public, who had purchased tickets through a newspaper campaign and received a free programme and champagne as well. Tony Hall confirmed that, now that the Box Office was ringing back Friends whose applications could not be met in full, this kind of difficulty should occur far less in the future. Further comments were made about the discontinuation of standby for Friends, whereas other groups are in receipt of good offers. Members also complained that the spaces on the recent booking form were too small.

Asked about his most embarrassing moment, Tony Hall confided that he had spent an evening selling programmes and had found his till was £5 short at the end of the day.

The meeting was very well attended. Tony Hall took extensive notes of the many issues raised by members. One member summed up the entertaining and informative evening, advising Tony Hall that she felt reassured by what she had heard. Members generally concurred with this view and thanked Tony Hall for his enthusiasm and clear presentation.

Reported by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked by David Bain  
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