

## George Dreyfus

**How come a good little Jewish boy from Camberwell writes not one but two operas for Germany?**

It is a miracle, no other Australian composer has ever achieved anything like it. There was G.W.L. Marshall-Hall's *Stella*, a truncated version, which was massacred at London's Palladium Theatre in 1913, between the balladeer and fire-eater, driving the composer to the brink of suicide, and then his *Romeo and Juliet* was slated for the Nürnberg Opera in 1915, but Intendant Hofrat Bader had committed suicide and by that time everybody had declared suicidal war on everybody else anyway, and that was the end of that.

But miracles hide deeper things.

Comedians are in reality tragedians. Just look at my face on Matcham Skipper's sculpture of myself. The suffering expressed is exactly the opposite to the public image I have tried to project as an entertainer, you will know what I mean if you have been to *George Dreyfus Live*, *A Dollar for the Autograph*, *Open House with George Dreyfus* or whatever else I have called the various versions of my "Show" over the last twenty years.

I do not dare to confront my catastrophes directly, they are so traumatic that I need a detour to get at them, and this I do with great caution.

An early catastrophe for me, I was 23 at the time, was the premature death of my father. A second degree victim of Nazi persecution, he was able to save his life, but could not survive the separation from his German cultural environment. After the war he wanted to return, firstly in 1948 by way of London, and then directly in 1951, but his reluctant family made it impossible, and inwardly the fear of being unwanted in Germany, his mother Paula's suicide in 1942 — the year of the great deportations — all these conflicts were too great for him. He just died and I retained a deeply buried guilt feeling, I retained a wound. Perhaps I should have gone back with him. It is all somewhat unclear, but certainly mirrored in my own relationship with Germany which is equally unclear. One moment here, one moment there,

always backwards and forwards, just like the waves of the ocean. At ten years of age I was torn away from Germany, but in my cultural soul have always remained there.

Like my father I had terrible anxieties to return completely to Germany. I had to take being unsuccessful there into consideration and to take my family here into consideration, I had to take my local success as a film composer, which gave me an income, into consideration and to take my two 'Australian' operas which were completely irrelevant to Germany, into consideration, *Garni Sands*, unsuitable with its story, *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, unsuitable with its music. Very much like my father I did not want to sit alone in a room in Cologne or Berlin and fear that no-one would take any notice of me.

I could not work directly about my father. The personal guilt problem that I did not help to save his life was too traumatic for me. It is my way to encircle, to circumvent, in a sort of Till Eulenspiegel way, but not to confront problems directly.

In the case of my father, the problem which slumbered deep within me, could not be dealt with in my usual superficial, if enthusiastic, show-biz manner.

I needed to write indirectly about him, concealed in the guise of Walther Rathenau, the German-Jewish foreign minister, assassinated by proto Nazis in 1922. I needed to write about the traumatic conflicts in his being, but not about his death, for which I could have had some responsibility. This would have been far too direct for me.

Like Rathenau, my father loved Germany, was a through-and-through Germanophile, "die Tieck und Schlegel Übersetzungen sind besser als das originelle Shakespeare", may I quote him. He accompanied Schubert Lieder beautifully, but in 1951 he just died suddenly, of his unsolvable problem.

I, on the other hand, did not want to die of it, not as a young, not as a middle-aged, not as an old man. No, I want to die of my own problems, not those of my father. I did not want to grapple with this "minefield of belonging" so directly. Nor did I want to grapple with the problem of having anything to do with Germany at all. "How could you, George, after what they did to my family, your family, one million Jewish children", or Avraham Cykiert, who does not even get off the plane during a Frankfurt stop-over, a deep-seated trauma it is for all of us, all round.

Being a cunning, crafty, wily person, I could not confront this problem directly, but rather had to creep around it stealthily, like in the world of German fairy tales, even had to outwit myself.

I disguised the fundamental father problem by playing pass-the-parcel,

unravelling the wrappings one at a time, quite unlike young Jonathan ripping open his birthday presents in fits of furious expectancy.

There was the overt aim to have a project suitable for gaining the *Don Banks Award* money, which I needed, as my film world had collapsed around me. There was the overt aim of overcoming the trauma of the 'rejection without reason', let alone performance of my opera *The Gilt-Edged Kid* by the Australian Opera in Sydney, and there was the overt aim to contribute something significant to the history of opera, something I dreamed of in *The Last Frivolous Book*, often hoped for but never really expected and held for nigh-on impossible.

For a fact, over four hundred operas have been written in Australia, but till now they have never made world operatic history, like *Melba*, *Austral* or *Sutherland* have. For this to eventuate, the performance has had to take place in Germany, the nation with a culture that still takes the future of opera as an art-form seriously, where its future is still a major discussion point, just see the massive reviewing in press, on radio and television that followed the Uraufführungen of my two operas there.

Into all these traumas of fatherdeath, of hiding from oneself what one really wants, of not knowing where one wants to be, my two opera protagonists fitted perfectly, *Rathenau* with his trauma of wanting to remain Jewish, but at the same time wishing to fit snugly into German society, showing off his money of which he had more than enough, and *Marx*, with his trauma of rejecting his Jewishness, hated by German society, railing against money and always needing more.

With *Rathenau* and *Marx*, both of them, I was on the right track. Personal stories could be told, personal feelings could be revealed, all in a round about way, without ever declaring to oneself or others, openly.

It started on the surface, quite well. I had come across Ernst Schulin's paper on *Rathenau* to a conference in Sydney. I went to see him at his University in Freiburg, he was lukewarm about the idea of turning the major figure in his own public life into an opera, after all, he is the editor of the *Rathenau Gesamtausgabe*. Schulin wrote despairingly about the final result after attending the Uraufführung in Kassel, but he did give me a stack of relevant books at the time, and I set to, sketched a scenario, quite hopelessly old-fashioned, and through contacts approached August Everding in München, who passed it on to his Betriebsdirektor, Gerd Uecker, who had libretto pretensions behind him, who stated, just like composer Siegfried Matthus in Berlin, who did have opera successes behind him, "Da steckt nichts drin" unanimously, leaving a traumatic experience for me in far off Melbourne behind me.

But miracles do happen. In 1989 I had heard Volker Elis Pilgrim speak at a Sunday afternoon German get-together. He had impressed me greatly. I did nothing. Three months later, at a similar function, a third force propelled him back into the room after he had said goodbye to the gathering. I offered to drive him to his destination, we stopped off for a coffee at Tamani's Restaurant in South Yarra, our fate was sealed, just like in the Bible, for the next seven years. Pilgrim offered to look for a librettist while in Germany, of course returned empty-handed, was resolute that he was going to do it himself, wishfulfillment, and the good little Jewish boy from Camberwell, without knowing it, is on his way, writing not one but two operas for Germany.

We matched perfectly, even if the traits of our character were diametrically opposed to each other. Our two operas, *Rathenau* and *Die Marx Sisters* are filled to the brim with simultaneously delivered multiple texts, much to the despair of the majority of the multitudinous German critics who came to the Uraufführungen in Kassel in 1993 and Bielefeld in 1996 respectively, and whose writings Pilgrim discusses endlessly to this very day.

In the simpler scenes the libretto looks as set out below — heaven protect you from the more complex ones — and I have adapted Pilgrim's layout to list our characteristic traits of differences.

#### *Dreyfus*

is adaptable  
is pragmatic  
is realistic, lives by the world.  
circumvents evil  
practices hybrid in art,  
Jews are adept at mixing  
claims money allows you to be an artist  
answers every phone call,  
it may be Hollywood  
manages without money  
just wants to survive

#### *Pilgrim*

uncompromising  
is fanatic  
is idealistic, lives by the unconscious  
confronts evil  
practices purity in art,  
Germans are forbidden to mix  
claims money destroys an artist  
pulls plug out of the wall,  
it may be Hollywood  
manages without women or is it men  
just has deep convictions

At first I doubted, Pilgrim had nothing to show, no credentials, no operatic experience, a book scribbler, what did he know about opera?

In 1991 he rang from Germany, the opera was a third finished at the time, and

he had it with him. "You can't imagine the interest in *Rathenau*, it is phenomenal". I still doubted, but he was right. "Wir sind neu" and to our detriment in our own lifetimes, "Wir sind zu früh".

Pilgrim was correct on other fronts as well, if I had returned with my father in 1948 or 1951 I would have been burnt out by the sheer effort of simply keeping up with the ever changing German cultural trends, but no, I made it, late in life, in my sixties, a real survivor, again I did not perish, and this is how the good little Jewish boy from Camberwell wrote not one, but two, operas for Germany.

Mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Autors aus:  
Westerly 4 (1996): 97-101.