



Yes: From total discord to sweet harmony

Bonnie Greer's television run-in with Nick Griffin didn't just provoke feverish debate – it was also the catalyst for a new opera

Jessica Duchon - Tuesday 22 November 2011

It is not every day that the words of the philosopher John Stuart Mill are sung at the Royal Opera House. "The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race... of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth." This stance is at the heart of *Yes*, the new opera by composer Errollyn Wallen and author Bonnie Greer, inspired by the latter's controversial 2009 appearance on BBC TV's Question Time alongside the leader of the British National Party. The world premiere takes place tonight at ROH2, Covent Garden's Linbury Studio.

Don't expect to see Nick Griffin on stage, though. Although *Yes* has been described as a "docu-opera", there's nothing literal about it. It is based not on the panel discussion itself, but on the two weeks leading up to the event, when Greer found herself the focus of attention that brought forward a kaleidoscope of different and impassioned viewpoints. For Greer as a playwright and an immigrant from the US, all this represented more than the sum of its parts, she says; it was a journey through an iconic moment that she felt she needed to process into a creative work.

But why an opera? "On the day, while I was on the panel, most of the session was given to the politicians and the audience, so I had time to observe," says Greer. "And I felt that the audience, who were really the stars of the show, were not so much making political points as seeking to express their emotions about the whole situation of this country. You could feel they wanted to go on record as having been there to say what they had to say. Couple that with what was going on in the newspapers beforehand, and that's what this is really about: the atmosphere of the UK right before Question Time.

"I was convinced it was something for an opera house, not a musical. It's about what people felt at the base of their being: how they saw themselves, how they saw their country. Whether one agreed with that or not was irrelevant; it was about the emotion. To express emotion – that's the realm of opera."

Greer took her idea to Deborah Bull, creative director of ROH2 (the arm of the Royal Opera House devoted to new works and partnerships) and the company teamed her up with the composer Errollyn Wallen, who was born in Belize, grew up in Tottenham and is now one of British contemporary music's most eclectic and persuasive communicators. This is Greer's first venture into opera, but Wallen's 11th. And it is the first time that two black women have been commissioned to create a new work together for the Royal Opera House.

"I think that's a serious breakthrough," says Greer. "Hopefully it's a message to all communities that the opera is not a white, male, elitist thing and that in this opera they're seeing themselves on the stage. I hope they begin to see opera as something actively to create, something in which they can express themselves." Wallen has a different take: "It's a shame in a way that we have to remark upon it at all," she says. "It doesn't matter what colour we are: in this opera we're debating universal issues."

The opera's characters are fictitious, but represent some of the opinions Greer encountered during the run-up to the programme. Among them are a middle-class black family, a white East Ender who worries over his grandson's future, an Asian city high-flier, a white pensioner with a cat and a Muslim teacher of UK history who discovers that the only thing that can be called truly indigenous to Britain is oats.

Greer and Wallen have aimed to get under the skins of all these characters and present each of them with empathy – so there is not one story but many, evoked in a mosaic of short scenes and choruses. "That's exciting for me, as well as a challenge in terms of structure," says Wallen. "It's my mission to find stories that are relevant to our own time and to place on the stage the people that we see around us. It has to be that way."

But neither writer nor composer was remotely tempted to make an operatic character out of Griffin. "I wouldn't want to watch anyone put the BNP to music," Greer declares. "And as a writer I couldn't inhabit the space that he lives in. I couldn't stand outside and pretend that I understood and could empathise with what he's about. I couldn't do that creatively, and I didn't think it'd be very interesting either."

And the title? "Yes" was of course Greer's response to the invitation from Question Time, but it's also a plain, powerful affirmation that by accepting she did the right thing. "I lost friends over it," she admits. "People were telling me you shouldn't share a platform with the BNP, but my feeling was that this is a nation of free speech. As long as someone isn't advocating violence or murder, people have the right to speak and to say what they believe. It was interesting to hear people for whom I had enormous respect intellectually arguing against a person being able to speak – I found that quite shocking.

"Any organisation or group of people that prevents others from expressing a legitimate opinion, whether in print or in person, are absolute enemies of democracy," she continues. "That's the reason I said yes. I'm the

daughter of a man who grew up under racial segregation and couldn't speak, so there's no way I'm going to be part of anything that won't allow a person to speak his or her mind. I think some of the great and the good were upset that I did this – and they were even more upset that it turned out to be OK. This is about freedom of speech and expression; about saying yes to the tumultuous nature of democracy."

And by bringing such fundamental contemporary issues to the operatic stage, can Greer and Wallen open up the art form to people who might otherwise hesitate to try it? That is certainly part of Wallen's aim. "I do feel things have been a bit hidebound by the powers-that-be," she says. "To try to understand the rapidly changing world we live in, not all things that are out there are brought into our halls when they could be. And there should be no apology for opera. It's a living tradition that reflects so much and brings together words, music, dance, costume – you can tell any story within that form, with any sort of music. I love writing opera and I want to write more and more."

'Yes', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) to 26 November