In these sacred halls

The secret life of ushers.

by Benjamin Poore 10 March 2021

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We rarely pay full attention to the ushers. In his Natural History of the Theatre, Theodor Adorno writes eloquently about everything that is somehow connected with going to a concert - but the ushers are only mentioned in passing. For a writer who otherwise knows how to analyse the contradictions of the music world on the basis of thousands of small details (from the applause storms to the finger food buffets in the foyer), this is a missed opportunity. For a long time, I didn't pay much attention to the ushers either, apart from the usual interaction that politeness demands of me as a concertgoer. It is in the nature of their work to remain unnoticed. That changed in 2018, when my partner and I went to see From a House of the Dead at London's Royal Opera House. In the middle of the Janáček opera, she suddenly felt dizzy. She apologised, insisting it was nothing serious - I should stay and enjoy the performance. After a moment's hesitation, however, I followed her. An usher had brought her a glass of water and a cold compress. She was feeling much better and it was explained to me that she should best continue watching the opera from an empty box - whether I wanted to join?

The ushers look after us, ensure our safety. This was particularly evident in the UK in concert under Corona conditions. The ushers made sure that the necessary distances were kept, they organised the staggered entry and exit of the houses. The audience humbly followed the gentle instructions on who should sit and who should move and when. But the ushers were also among the earliest pandemic victims of the industry. In the first wave of redundancies at the Royal Opera House in July 2020, all temporary staff were made redundant - including the ushers.

In English, the usher is called an "usher", a variant of the French word "huissier", which in turn comes from the Latin "ostiarius", the "guardian of the doors". The role of usher was invented by the early modern theatre; Randle Cotgrave's dictionary of 1611 also refers to him as "audiencer". The "gentleman usher" was one of the most active figures at aristocratic houses, where he looked after distinguished guests at performances, courtly masquerades or other forms of entertainment.

In their book on Shakespeare's prologues, Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann suggest that these famous opening speeches were delivered by ushers. These distributed excerpts or summaries of the plays in early modern theatre - just as they do today - and played an essential role in setting the mood for the coming performance: they guided the audience both to the right seats in the auditorium and into an imaginary world on stage.

Bruster and Weimann see the usher as a mediator between the stage and the outside world. There is undoubtedly a touch of drama in the elegant outfits and eloquent utterances. Alex Akhurst, an usher at English National Opera, tells me that he particularly enjoys working outside, where, dressed in a dark, thick coat, he greets guests in the grand foyer of the London Coliseum. The ceremonial nature of this welcome is a foretaste of what is to come. At the Royal Opera House, ushers used to wear red suit jackets, a nod to both the plush red seats inside and the royal flair of the institution. In 2018, the design was revamped as part of the building's extensive "open up" renovation (with casual glass and marble that would also fit well in a hotel lobby). The ushers are now dressed in sleek navy blue suits, with green shirts and gold-trimmed lapels. More accessible, practical and understated, but also with less character.

Ushers have to be as attuned to the drama's momentum as they are to that of the audience. Director Paul Higgins, who worked as an usher at the National Theatre years ago, remembers with admiration former colleagues who could coordinate the discreet opening of doors just enough to allow latecomers to scurry into the auditorium at the exact moment of the end of a great aria, when the enthusiastic applause breaks out. Here, too, the ushers mediate between the artists and the audience. And they must be able to sneak like a cat of prey, be elegant like a courtier and act in secret like an assassin.

Bruster and Weimann describe ushers in terms of liminality, as "endowed with authority, but an authority that is neither permanent nor easily given". Managing a restless audience is no easy task. The usher's admonishing torch can blot out the bright screen of a smartphone or silence a chatting couple. At the same time, the condescending treatment of ushers, especially by wealthy opera-goers, reminds us again and again of the precarious situation of this professional group.

Most of the ushers I interview, however, speak of the audience with benevolence.

Eleanor Strutt, a graduate of the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, who also used to work as an usher at the Royal Opera House, remembers the "Chocolate Lady" who always brought her and her colleagues sweets. But there are also experiences such as Marcin Kokowski's with a guest who refused to return to his assigned seat. "He simply refused to move," Kokowski says. "He reacted very curtly and rudely. I felt put down."

Aggression by theatre-goers seems to be on the rise, at least in the London theatre world. A 2019 Daily Telegraph article reported an usher at the Royal Albert Hall being spat on by a patron and angry patrons wishing death and doom on the usher who refused them entry. (The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union called on management to act, and the Society of London Theatres even introduced body cameras for ushers at the entrance). The behavior of these patrons would not be acceptable in any context, but seems doubly cruel when you consider that - as Kokowski explains to me - for many ushers the theatre is like a second home. "I literally wrote my dissertation in one of the rehearsal rooms," he says.

Despite all this, the ushers still take people to their seats. Today, the instructions usually come from the tape. Technology has supplanted the role of the usher as a kind of herald (one of the more mysterious aspects of the profession). That is a pity. Announcements from the tape like "Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. The performance of La traviata will resume in two minutes" exude the charm of an airport waiting hall.

In many houses, however, ushers still walk through the foyers and corridors and call you back into the auditorium by waving a bell. In countless cultures, ringing bells evoke the supernatural and signal to the community that it is time to gather. In theatre, too, they call the audience together and create that strange, almost alchemical atmosphere that is a live performance.

Watching over the doors is still taken very seriously by ushers. Mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly was once prevented from entering the stage for Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius by a group of very eager ushers. (In the end she stormed past them to get there in time for the performance). Today, for the sake of the outsourced catering operation, her duties also include inspecting guests' bags, looking for sandwiches that have been smuggled in. It is precisely because of these bag checks, ordered at the English National Opera by CEO Stuart Murphy, that there have been repeated disputes with guests in recent times.

From time to time, ushers also achieve a certain notoriety. Milly Forrest, a Master's student at the Royal Academy of Music in London, made headlines in 2017 with a fairytale story: At the last minute, she stood in for a prevented singer at her workplace, the Wigmore Hall. As a result, she was booked for her first solo concert - at the same venue. Forrest tells me about the joys, but also the responsibilities of ushering. The Wigmore Hall, like so many houses, has largely older regulars, some of whom come several times a week. "For some of them, it may be the only opportunity they have to meet other people during the week," she says.

Tact and grace are crucial for this job. When a sleeping patron snores - who among us hasn't felt sleepy at a concert? - the usher gently approaches, "Excuse me, sir, may I suggest you go to the bar and get a coffee?" Time and again, however, audience behavior presents ushers with greater challenges: In a 1995 documentary on the Royal Opera House, head usher Ivel Arnold discreetly described how guests "use the boxes for activities they are not intended for" - he once reminded a couple he caught in flagrante delicto of the box's actual purpose. Eleanor Strutt tells of a toilet where excrement had been smeared on the walls.

Forrest took a lot from her time as an usher. After a certain period of service, one can train as an usher at the Wigmore Hall and get up close to the artists on stage. She also learned a lot about audio recording and microphone settings. And if you sit at the back of the hall during a concert, you get a free program booklet - great, Forrest says, for learning song lyrics and getting inspiration for new repertoire. It is also instructive to watch the performers make mistakes; this is an excellent corrective to the destructive perfectionism in the rehearsal room.

Young musicians often work as ushers. Compared to other types of casual work, this is a relatively well-paid job that can just about support a London living. It also offers a lot of intellectual and artistic stimulation - and very rarely, special opportunities like Milly Forrest.

Seeing great singers is one of the highlights. Eleanor Strutt was the usherette in the Royal Opera House's 2020 production of Fidelio, starring a terrific Lise Davidsen. Strutt gave up her breaks so she could stay in the hall and listen to Davidsen. Alex Akhurst tells me that, close to the stage, the voices aren't dulled or rounded out by the hall's reverb. "They sounded... like me," he says. Hearing the drier sounds of the singers without the soft cushion of orchestral sound boosted his confidence, he says.

Such experiences can ground young singers who suffer from their own practice regime and a very self-critical tunnel vision. The job also gives them a better sense of how opera works. Ushers come from all walks of theatre life, Strutt says, meeting "video artists, designers, stagehands, directors and instrumentalists" among their colleagues. You could, she jokes, realise an entire production with just the ushers.

And Strutt is not exaggerating: one of the first operas performed after the reopening of the Royal Opera House's main stage in autumn 2020 was Hannah Kendall's The Knife of Dawn - with baritone Peter Brathwaite, who used to work as an usher. Marcin Kokowski recalls a staff party on a boat in 2007, where a pianist, a singer and a director from within the company performed their own mini-opera about the various travails of ushers.

While for some ushers the job is just one station of many, others spend decades at "their" house. These legendary ushers often work for the sheer love of the job and have an incredible knowledge of art form and repertoire. "There are ushers who know the ballet dancers by name," Strutt says. Some have worked so long that they notice changes in costume design when productions are revisited and can reel off countless stories of performers and performances from the FF.

In a play from 1613, Bruster and Weimann write, a character addresses the audience: "We ushers usher in the play to you wise men; / then the prologue may well be read by us!" Why not? Ushers often have a veritable treasure trove of unusual wisdom at their disposal and also know the mysteries of the houses. Kokowski tells of secret shortcuts in Covent Garden that ordinary visitors never get to know. In Gaston Leroux's Phantom of the Opera, box attendant Mme. Giry knows much better about the creepy goings-on at the house than the opera management. It is she who satisfies the Phantom and prepares his box for him - which can prevent incidents for a long time. Nevertheless, the novel does not cast Mme Giry in a good light. She appears smug, unsophisticated, gullible - despite her passion and knowledge, which comes to light, for example, in the fourth chapter in a conversation with the opera management:

"Mame Giry was simply speechless at such ignorance. At last she decided to enlighten these two pathetic simpletons: 'Well, gentlemen, there sat that evening in the first tier box Mr. Maniera with his wife, the jeweller from the Rue Mogador, and behind Mrs. Maniera her intimate friend, Mr. Isidore Saack. Mephisto was just singing 'Seem to be asleep you in the parlour' when Mr Maniera hears a voice whispering from his right - his wife was sitting on his left - 'Ah, ah, Julie is not asleep at all!'"

Here Giry quotes a passage from Gounod's Faust, while director Moncharmin seems to care little for the art itself. The management dismisses Madame Giry because of her ghost stories.

In Leroux's novel, however, the management ends up losing out - Mme Giry is reinstated. Perhaps this should be a lesson to us: We should appreciate the ushers and their wisdom, for they know how to truly satisfy guests - both the real and the supernatural.