

LSE

the opera



The opening of LSE's new student accommodation, Grosvenor House in Drury Lane, on the very doorstep of the Royal Opera House, marks an exciting departure in the life and identity of the School. LSE has often been dismissed as too narrowly social scientific, without the wider cultural and intellectual character that is part of preparing young men and women for the modern and post modern worlds. The charge was, of course, never true. Even the somewhat puritanical Beatrice Webb was well aware of the limitations of raw, unpasteurised social science and, determined to widen her experience of life, starting with an appreciation of music, asked a friend to provide her with an appropriate reading list. Less intellectual seekers after self-development might have gone to a few concerts, but our founders understood the importance of a theoretical approach to things.

More recently, with the acquisition of the Peacock Theatre, the rich weave of the School's life has been put on display for all to see. The use of the theatre as both lecture space and performance space has sometimes led to confusion, it must be admitted. Students arriving for Advanced Leadership in Management a short while ago were initially a bit surprised to see the stage occupied by some strangely dressed men and women. 'Professor Proactive didn't used to wear a frilly skirt. And why is he leaping around like that?' one bemused student was heard to murmur. But they knew all about bonding exercises and the importance of thinking the unthinkable, so within a few moments, they were all up on stage, tottering on their toes. Tomorrow's leaders were not to be phased by novel ways of conducting a workshop, and they joined in, if not with grace, then with loyal enthusiasm. It was only at that point that the security guards removed them, as other, outraged members of the audience demanded that this anarchic interruption of *Swan Lake* be brought to an end.

With the opening of Grosvenor House, a mere flute's trill away from the orchestra pit at Covent Garden, the engagement of social science and the arts can be taken even further, and deliberately so, not as the result of early evening confusion. If the School can bond with ballet, how much greater are the opportunities provided by opera. Opera and cinema are after all the two great comprehensive art forms, with image, music, plot, poetry, and prose, and each provide a vibrant world of social analysis and description.

Opera is a rich source of political insight, as Anthony Arblaster long ago pointed out. And it was the revolutionary communist servant

in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* who, while condemning opera in general as a bourgeois frippery, admitted, or insisted, on a liking for *The Marriage of Figaro*, 'for the class analysis'. The use of music to underscore scientific messages has already been used to great effect by departmental adaptations, with the Sociology Department's *Orpheus in the Underclass* going down particularly well with the traditionalists. We now have a thrilling new production of *Carmen*, brought up to date, with Escamillo recast as a quality assurance adviser, while *The Management Consultants of Penzance* has given a subtle new twist and imaginative insights to Gilbert and Sullivan's comic original.

This blossoming of the eclectic interplay between academic and artistic cultures has not been a merely one way affair, with social science infusing the performing arts yet getting nothing in return. The once dry academic business of the School has in its turn been infused with the dash and vigour of the arts. The Academic Board has been addressed in verse, while a previously dry series of lectures in Government has been transformed by the sonorous trombone notes and urgent drum rolls which herald the arrival on stage of Dr Hound. Meanwhile Professor Pangloss of the Department of Intercultural Studies has been seen to embellish his arrival with a few tentative pas de deux, a rare treat for first year undergraduates.

In the United States, some student associations garnish their feasts with a song called the Beaver Call. But at LSE, the Beaver has moved on beyond mere community singing. The Beaver is all singing, all dancing. Bring on Beaver the diva. ■

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