

A DIRECTOR'S BOTTOMS LINE THE TIMES



WHEN GERALD THOMAS'S PRODUCTION OF *TRISTAN AND ISOLDE* IN RIO WAS BOOED, HE MOONED AT THE AUDIENCE. NOW HE FACES JAIL FOR INDECENCY. BUT HE WAS ONLY REACTING TO "NAZI" TAUNTS HE TELLS RICHARD MORRISON

We have all been through such days. You are persecuted, unappreciated, misunderstood. The whole world is against you. You feel a strong urge to assert yourself by doing something shocking — something like... flashing your buttocks at your tormentors, just to shut them up.

Most of us resist the temptation, at least while we are at work. Gerald Thomas didn't. That was his first mistake. His second was his choice of location. He lowered his trousers, and a pair of green underpants, while on the stage of the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro — in front of 2,700 people, including the President of Brazil. His third mistake was not saying sorry. "Why should I?" he says. "I was in the theatre. It was a theatrical act."

Maybe. But today, Thomas — 49-year-old stage director, self-confessed controversialist and now the opera world's first accredited "full-mooner" — faces up to four years in a Brazilian jail for committing an act of public indecency.

It happened back in August as the curtain came down on Thomas's new staging of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Though German and Welsh by parentage and American by upbringing, Thomas has been a leading light of Brazil's avant-garde scene for the past 20 years: a theatrical provocateur who believes in piling sizzle on sizzle — the more sensational the better.

So naturally his Wagner production contained the essential ingredients of what, these days, is regarded as a good night at the opera:

"WHY SHOULD I SAY SORRY? I WAS IN THE THEATRE. IT WAS A THEATRICAL ACT"

coke-sniffing, masturbation, and satirical choruses of Muslim fundamentalists and Hassidic Jews. None of which are in the original text. Nor, for that matter, is Sigmund Freud, but Thomas relocated the action to Freud's consulting-room, with the main characters as patients imagining themselves as characters in the opera.

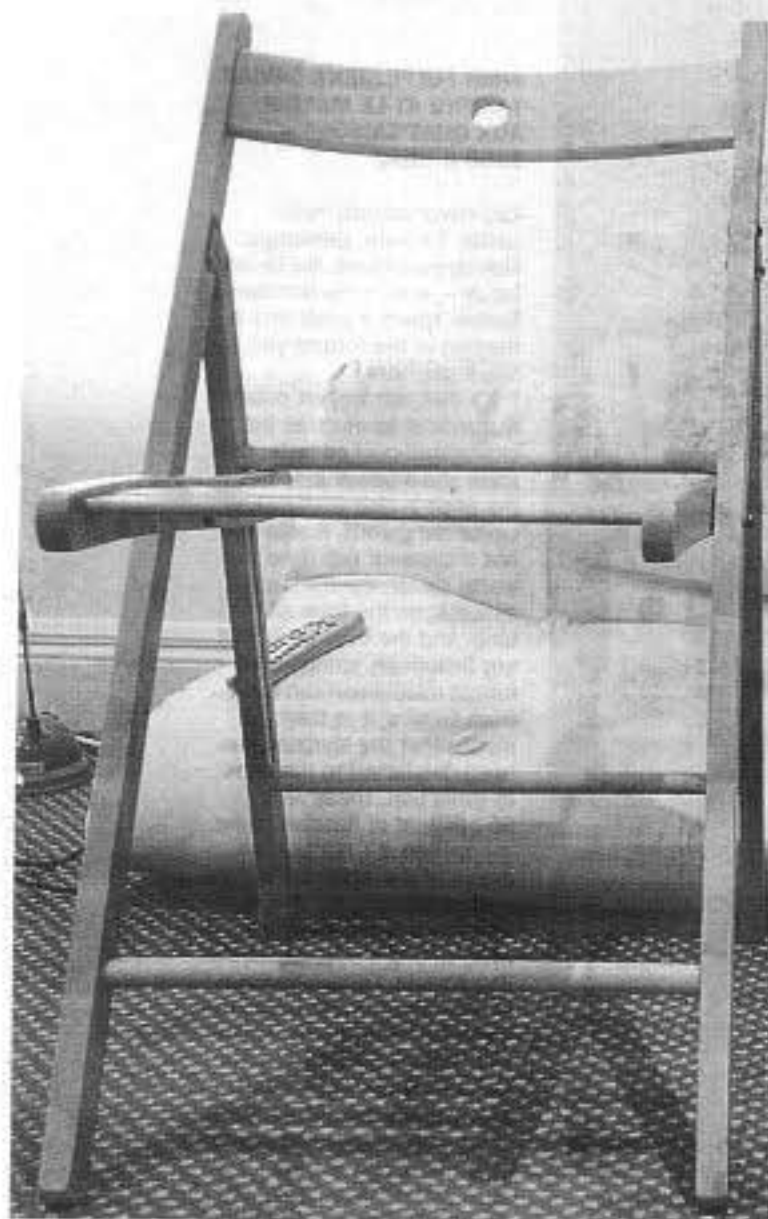
In other words, the sort of production that English National Opera stages so regularly that its patrons are more likely to yawn than gasp. But Rio's opera-lovers are clearly less accustomed to such shock-tactics. When Thomas came out to take his bow, he was greeted by a volley of boos. And something rather worse, he claims. The son of a German Jewish communist who lost several members of his family in the Holocaust, he says that he heard anti-Semitic taunts from visiting Germans in the front rows.

"Booing is OK," he says. "I was expecting it. Anyone who stages opera in a modern way gets it. I honestly think it's a more heartfelt form of expression than clapping. But then I heard those ferocious voices making Nazi comments. Things like: 'you filthy Jew, go back to the camps.'" It was at that point that he turned his back on the audience and dropped his trousers.

He seems to have been the only one in the theatre to have heard the offensive comments. So how can he be so sure, in all that uproar, that they were anti-Semitic? "Because I speak German almost like a native, and because I recognised the faces from the day before."

The day before? "Yes. People had come to

Gerald Thomas: "Booing is OK. I was expecting it. But then I heard those ferocious voices making Nazi comments." Below, how a Brazilian newspaper saw the incident.



Rio from Germany, Buenos Aires and other places for a Richard Wagner International Forum. I had taken part in a debate, and had been insulted enough then."

Thomas says he is not particularly obsessed with his Jewish ancestors or their deaths in the concentration camps. "I even make jokes about it. When I have a show in Germany and call a press conference, I usually carry a full ash-tray in, and say: 'Do you mind if I bring my family with me?' These things happened 60 years ago." So why did these alleged anti-Semitic taunts provoke him? "I just lost it," he says.

His retaliatory gesture certainly silenced the boos. It silenced everything. "You could have heard a mosquito fly past," he recalls proudly. But someone filed a complaint, and Thomas was summoned to a police station the following day. "I was interrogated by a young lawyer who, as it happened, had seen all my productions and was totally embarrassed about having to go through the procedures."

Nevertheless, Thomas was charged with, and convicted of, indecency. He says that the "Christian evangelical mafia" in Rio's local government were out to censor him from the start. Even so, he was offered a plea-bargain: admit his guilt, and get off with a fine of perhaps £200. He refused. "On principle. I haven't committed a crime. If I pleaded guilty, what would that say to my fellow professionals and later generations of artists? Don't do anything risky? As Philip Glass says, this is a freedom-of-speech matter."

"IF I PLEADED GUILTY, WHAT WOULD THAT SAY TO MY FELLOW PROFESSIONALS?"



Glass, the American composer with whom Thomas once staged an opera, is one of 1,000 artists and intellectuals who have signed a petition supporting Thomas. Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco and Hugh Hudson have also apparently added their names. "So has the President of Brazil," Thomas claims. But Brazil's judiciary is wholly independent. What's more, another judge has started separate proceedings aimed at stopping all public subsidy to Thomas's Brazilian theatre company. On what grounds? "That I'm a pain in the ass, I guess," Thomas says.

He rejects accusations that he is seeing anti-Semitic or evangelical conspiracies where there are none, or that his apparent determination to become a minor martyr for the cause of artistic expression is merely a stunt. "I'm nearly 50. Ten years ago, perhaps. But I'm not into stunts any more. My mother, who lives in Brazil, is dying. She sees what's written about me in the Brazilian papers, and it causes her grief."

His fate now depends on an appeal fixed for February. He hopes that his lawyers can get it moved out of Rio to the Supreme Court in Brasilia — which, he says, is "98 per cent certain" to acquit him. He maintains that the Brazilian government is embarrassed by the whole business.

The case certainly exposes paradoxes, if not outright hypocrisy, in Rio's social attitudes. As Thomas argues, if he was committing an obscene act by flashing his bottom for all of five seconds, what of the thousands of naked buttocks on display each day in Copacabana? "Peo-

ple wear g-strings so tiny that they are known locally as 'dental floss,'" Thomas says. "And that's in the street. What I did was an allegorical act in an allegorical space — the theatre. And what about all the explicit sex shows in Rio?"

But isn't there a difference? Sex shows are intended to entertain the public, whereas Thomas's gesture was intended to outrage and insult. And it wasn't part of the show at all.

Thomas stoutly disagrees. "Only the director can say when the show is over," he counters.

One thing is certain: the show isn't over yet. Thomas's lawyers moved a writ of habeas corpus to allow him to leave Brazil until the appeal. He is currently living in London, in Belsize Park where he spent several years in his twenties. "My first job was as an ambulance driver for the Royal Free Hospital," he says.

He is spending his time writing a memoir about Samuel Beckett and preparing a Beckett workshop for the Riverside Studios in Hammer Smith. The great dramatist befriended him more than 20 years ago, and Thomas went on to direct many of his plays.

Beckett, a master of the absurd, might have relished the absurdity of his disciple's present predicament. And, to his credit, Thomas is amused by it too. But the furor, he says, has gone on long enough. "All this stuff, for weeks and weeks, in the Rio media. I feel like saying to Brazilians: look, start taking notice of your enormous social problems, and stop talking about my ass. It was just an opera, for God's sake."