REZENSIONEN/REVIEWS

George Dreyfus: Brush Off! Saving The Gilt-Edged Kid from Oblivion. Melbourne: Three Feet Publishing, 2011. 53 pp. ISBN 9781876044732 (pbk. Including a CD 'Correspondence and Newspaper Clippings') **Reviewed by Norbert H. Platz**

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This is the fourth in a row of George Dreyfus' autobiographical books, the preceding titles being *The Last Frivolous Book* (1984), *Being George and Liking It* (1998) and *Don't Ever Let Them Get You* (2009). In his new book the author deals with a legitimate grievance against the Australian cultural system, a grievance that has harassed him for nearly 40 years. As is well known, the early 1970s were characterised by widespread attempts to boost Australian culture in order to move away from the notorious cultural cringe. Film, drama and the other arts profited from this new impulse to create significant Australian cultural products. In May 1969, The Australian Opera invited seven Australian composers to write a one-act opera. The composers were Nigel Butterley, George Dreyfus, Keith Humble, Richard Meale, Larry Sitsky, Peter Sculthorpe and Felix Werder.

In her retrospect Lynne Strahan, the librettist of Dreyfus' opera *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, evokes the 'new' feeling of the late 1960s:

> It was an environment, especially in the run-up to the election of the Whitlam government, in which it was easy to arouse optimism and outrage. […] the Australian Labour (sic!) Party was aggressively promoting values and its Arts and Culture Policy Committee had enshrined the forlorn concept of Australian identity … in its statement of aims which vowed 'To help establish and express an Australian identity through the Arts'. Their special targets were the 'tories' who governed the fund-greedy high theatrical arts of ballet and opera (Strahan 57-58).

Having been invited, George Dreyfus handed in his second opera *The Gilt-Edged Kid*. He was convinced he would create a strong impact with this piece at that time. In retrospect, he writes:

> Lynne Strahan's libretto mirrored my intention, intensely Brechtian, another of my cultural heroes. … Our opera is about a series of contests between the Administrator and the Kid, singing all the time, to decide who's to have the power. There is a strategy game, musical instrument with voice, poker machines, wood chop and archery (9).

In his earlier work *The Last Frivolous Book* he had given a similar description where he also states "what happens on the stage is quite bizarre" (77).

In contrast to Felix Werder's Opera *L'Affaire de Corps*, and Larry Sitsky's *Lenz,* Dreyfus' *The Gilt-Edged Kid* featured

> a confrontation between radical and liberal forces which erupts in a great Australian leadership contest. With a radical dead and the liberal in custody for murder, the forces of the status quo triumph. Apart from the contemporary characters, there was a ragged Greek chorus composed of a *sanse culotte* from Nantes, a medieval martyr from Berne and a bear-keeper from Toblensk, whose task was to interpose a Schopenhauerian view of history (Strahan 58-59).

In the early 1970s, Dreyfus felt that his opera would have well suited the new emphasis on characteristically Australian leanings in artistic endeavours. On the one hand, he would have liked his opera to be received as a significant contribution to the new vogue. On the other, and this seems to have been more important to him, he was convinced that *The Gilt-Edged Kid* was breaking new ground in the genre of opera and might thus deserve acknowledgment for its innovative pursuits. Financially speaking, the requisites would have been more easily affordable and much cheaper than what a traditional European operatic piece would have required.[19]

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[19] 2 Sopranos, 3 Tenors, 3 Baritones, 2 Basses - 2.2.2.2. - 2.2.2.0. Timpani, Percussion (3 players - Side drum, Bass drum, Cymbals, Tam-tarn, Tambourine, Marakas, Triangle, Tubular bells, Campanetta, Xylophone, Vibraphone, Drum kit), Piano, Strings. Reduction for 7

The whole project of new Australian operatic pieces had been initiated with some stimulating enthusiasm, but regrettably nothing happened. In an article titled "Operatic goings-on", David Ahern mockingly wrote in the *Bulletin* (June 24, 1972):

> Once upon a time, there was an Opera Company. It invited with much ado as much money, seven composers to write operas. Time went by. Lo and behold, there were no operas, and there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The disappointment was felt by the public and composers alike because *The Australian Opera* had not lived up to its promise. The whole project of innovative Australian operatic productions with an emphasis on Australian themes was handled in a desultory way by the cultural administrators of The Australian Opera and Australia Council. Decision-making was kept in abeyance for many years.

Dreyfus was getting increasingly angry about that matter. From The Australian Opera and its officials he received plenty of letters of the 'no, but' category, i.e. letters saying politely 'no' but holding out the possibility of having the opera performed at a later time. Yet no date was envisaged.[20] Finally, as late as 29 May 1981 Dreyfus was informed by John Cameron, General Manager of Australia Council, to the effect that *The Gilt-Edged Kid* had altogether been rejected:

> In view of the unanimous opinion of a succession of people who have considered the work, it would be quite irresponsible of the Opera to spend money and resources mounting the production of a work in which it has no faith, just to please you. Can I urge you to let The Gilt Edged Kid sleep in peace and start concentrating instead on realising your own undoubted creative potential in other works for the Opera stage or elsewhere.[21]

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instruments - Clarinet, Bassoon, Trumpet, Trombone, Violin, Double Bass, Percussion.

[20] His correspondence with The Australian Opera and other people who were involved in this project is well documented in the CD which is attached to the book. The footnotes supply many useful references.

[21] Footnote no. 139. Text available on attached CD.

The composer was enraged and appears to have accepted this piece of advice tongue-in-cheek. For, ironically and no doubt to his own advantage, he succeeded in having his operas *Rathenau* and *The Marx Sisters* performed 'elsewhere' (that is in Germany) in the 1990s. Despite his various extended phases of remarkable success, Dreyfus, however, as late as in 2011 is not yet prepared to accommodate to the injustice that had been inflicted upon him by The Australian Opera. He still speaks of "this sorry episode of Australian cultural bastardry [that] started in 1968" (41). The reader gains the impression that Dreyfus still suffers from the sneering bureaucratic condescension which had humbled him. The smug officials had for years stone-walled his justified questioning. His ire is directed against all those people who, in the end; committed what he now calls "operacide", which possibly alludes to the term 'genocide' (41). Dreyfus himself had been lucky enough to survive the holocaust.

On the whole, his book *Brush Off*! is a vexatious retrospection. "Brush Off!" is mentioned not only in the title but occurs ever so often as a leitmotif in this smart little book. It should not be forgotten that the case of *The Gilt-Edged Kid* had been extensively presented already in Dreyfus *The last frivolous book* (82-90). There he declares: "I think, with *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, the Board Members of The Australian Opera are all guilty of breach of trust. There can be no greater crime than that in the arts. My God, how can it be good for the arts in Australia, not to play my opera?" (89). In *Brush Off!* Dreyfus attempts to give a both abundant and accurate account of the many negotiations he conducted with The Australian Opera. The CD attached to the book contains more than twenty letters written by Dreyfus himself and more than forty letters whose recipient he was. His letter to The Australian Opera of 27 January 1975 may be worth quoting: "I can only reiterate that I regard my treatment by The Australian Opera as discriminatory, and that this whole incident has brought no credit to the Board and Management of The Australian Opera."

Being shunted aside in a rude and unfriendly manner by the Australian Opera did not only deeply wound the composer's psyche but alerted his admirable combative spirit as well. Living in his eighties he is still not yet prepared to forgive what happened to him. At the end of the book he defiantly declares: "I can wait out the operacide which Opera Australia is perpetrating against *The Gilt-Edged Kid*; I am not dead, yet!" (41) For him the case is not dead and buried but still has an irksome presence in his mind.

The well documented minutiae of *The Gilt-Edged Kid*'s offstage career are worth considering because they exemplify the perennial conflict between the freelance artist and the cultural institutions on whose favour he depends. There is yet another dimension. The question arises as to whether this opera was refused because of its submerged political implications. Lynne Strahan provides some important clues: After all these years [i.e. in 1984], I realise that *The Gilt-Edged Kid* "… was subversive. […] For its theme … is that the capitalist state will always act swiftly to suppress any threat to its continuance and that history is on its side. [The opera] was almost pre-scient (perhaps the gilt-edged kid was Whitlam and administrator in the story was Sir John Kerr)" (Strahan 67-68).

Sir John Kerr as Governor dismissed Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975, which led to a constitutional crisis in Australia.

The reader of this book is impressed by the author deftly assuming the role of a Juvenalian satirist holding up a mirror to various people (whose photos are compiled in his *Rogues Gallery* on the first two pages). Comparable to the Roman Juvenal, Dreyfus presents himself as an upright man who is horrified and angered by the corruption and incompetence of the cultural system. As a keen observer of the social set-up around him he succeeds in making some of his major opponents the target of his scathing exposition. Having been the victim of their 'brush offs' for four decades he at long last gives them a powerful 'brush off!' of his own. His major weapon is ridicule. As a reader one cannot but enjoy this civilised satirical trick of retribution and revenge.

Works Cited

Dreyfus, George, 1984. *The Last Frivolous Book.* Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.

Strahan, Lynne, 1998. "The Long and Winding Road", in George Dreyfus, *Being George and Liking It!* Richmond: Allans, 1998, 57-68.