



Erwin Stein, Benjamin Britten, Sophie Stein, Basil Coleman and Peter Pears in Venice, at the time of the premiere of *The Turn of the Screw*, September 1954

Basil Coleman: a tribute

BPF Librarian Nick Clark considers the legacy of a remarkable director

Theatre, opera and television director Basil Coleman, who died on the 19 March 2013, has left a considerable legacy of work, part of which arose from his unique professional relationship and personal friendship with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. He maintained his link with the Britten–Pears Foundation up until the last few years of his life when deteriorating eyesight and failing health prevented him from travelling from his home in London to Aldeburgh. Until then he enjoyed regular visits to see his friend Rita Thomson and to attend events at the Red House and Maltings Concert Hall. He was soft spoken and self-effacing but he had amassed a large collection of reminiscences from a career that spanned nearly 50 years and, with characteristic generosity, he offered to share some of his remarkable experiences for the benefit of future research. Happily these were recorded in a series of interviews with director William Kerley in 2005 and are now kept in the Foundation Archive.

Coleman was born in Bristol on the 22 November 1916, three years exactly after Britten, and grew up in what was formerly Rhodesia. He returned to England at the age of 14 to attend school at Frensham Heights where he cultivated his desire to work in the theatre. He auditioned for the Old Vic Drama School in the mid 1930s, in the presence of Lillian Baylis, and it was here that he was introduced to Tyrone Guthrie. Coleman had embraced the strong pacifist beliefs advocated by his stepmother and the outbreak of war saw him register as a Conscientious Objector. He turned to agricultural work, harvesting fruit but later found an opportunity to flex his acting muscles again when he joined the fledgling Pilgrim Players acting company.

Returning to the Old Vic he worked alongside Eric Crozier who directed him in a production of *Androcles and the Lion*. Throughout this early part of his career Coleman met and worked with a host of legendary figures from the British stage such as Alec Guinness, Laurence Olivier and Edith Evans but he also developed an interest in direction. This originated when Guthrie asked him to assist in coaching the speaking roles for performers in Britten realization of *The Beggar's Opera*. The production was mounted by the recently formed English Opera Group and presented at the Arts Theatre Cambridge in May 1948. Coleman first met Britten (who was acting as répétiteur) and Pears during an early rehearsal.

The collaboration between composer and director continued the following year with, what seemed to Coleman, the extraordinary idea of creating an entertainment for young people which comprised a play (*Let's Make an Opera!*) about writing an opera and then performing it. His directorial work on *The Little Sweep* at Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall during the second Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts in June 1949 was highly successful and led to his taking the play/opera on tour. From this time onward he enjoyed numerous visits to Britten and Pears's seaside home on Crag Path where, in addition to enjoying the sea and Suffolk countryside, they discussed possible new projects. Coleman was often struck by the way Britten would plan and develop his work and it was a mark of the composer's faith in his ability that led to a seemingly casual offer to direct *Billy Budd*, the opera composed for the Festival of Britain, and premiered at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in December 1951. A significant outcome of the project was the close and enjoyable working partnership that emerged with the artist John Piper. Coleman recalled how, in their striving for authenticity, he and Piper visited both the *HMS Victory* in Portsmouth and the Greenwich Maritime Museum to research the stage setting for

the main-deck and quarter deck of the *Indomitable*. Opera, by this time, had become something of a specialism and Coleman worked on a variety of productions, such as *Samson and Delilah* and *Don Pasquale* at Sadler's Wells. His work on Britten's coronation opera *Gloriana* garnered praise amid the famously cool critical response to the work that followed its Gala premiere on the 8 June 1953. Coleman pointed out that the reception of the opera during subsequent performances and provincial tour was favourable by contrast, thus heralding recognition of the opera's true worth.

Coleman's last major collaboration with Britten occurred in September 1954 with the successful English Opera Group (of which he was now an artistic director) production of *The Turn of the Screw* at the Teatro la Fenice, Venice. He negotiated the technical difficulties and considerable demands that the narrative offered—eight scenes in each of the two acts—with a great deal of skill. But he was typically modest with regard to his contribution, commenting at length instead on the extraordinary qualities of the music, libretto and design as if they worked independently of his extraordinary imagination. In all truth it was a triumph of collaboration and he was later to write that 'the power with which the work came over to that first audience was unforgettable. They were quite overwhelmed by the experience. This was true of every performance Britten gave of any work'.

In 1954 he left England to work in Canada in both theatre and in CBC television. He returned to the UK occasionally to take up work which included the direction of television opera for the BBC: first, *La Boheme* and later *Billy Budd* (conducted by Charles Mackerras) with a cast comprising Peter Pears (recreating on film the role of Captain Vere), Michael Langdon as Claggart and Peter Glossop as Billy. Happily, this classic example of Coleman's opera work was kept in the BBC archive and is currently commercially available. During the 1970s he worked on BBC drama productions such as *Anna Karenina* (1977) with Nicola Paget and Eric Porter, and he directed Helen Mirren and Richard Pascoe in *As You Like It* (1978) for the acclaimed BBC Shakespeare series.

Differences in approach to staging television opera prevented Coleman from working on *Peter Grimes* in 1969 and *Owen Wingrave* in 1971 when both works were filmed at the Maltings for BBC television, a decision that Britten came to regret as it led to a temporary rift between the two. However, he returned to the Red House and renewed his friendship with Britten well before the composer's death in 1976. Ever keen to explore new things, Coleman turned to teaching

and took an active role in the Britten–Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies (now the Britten–Pears Young Artists Programme), directing and coaching many productions throughout the 1980s and early 90s.

He was a guest at the Red House in late October 2002 when he came to see a Young Artists' production of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* which was designed and directed by his long-standing friend and colleague Colin Graham, producer of most of Britten's stage works after *The Turn of the Screw*. The occasion, the last at which the two men would ever meet, was remarkable for the fascinating, amusing and fond sharing of memories and experiences associated with bringing Britten's opera to life. At the conclusion of his 2005 interview with Kerley he commented: 'I've had a rich life, and worked with and been associated with one genius and at least two other people touched with genius'. We're all grateful for Basil Coleman's own unique genius, which has enriched countless lives.