

" THE BEACH OF FALESÁ "

The composer **Alun Hoddinott** talks about his new opera with **A. J. Heward Rees**

A.J.H.R. : This is your first opera, but not by any means your first dramatic work in the literal or perhaps stylistic sense. Nevertheless opera is a rather specialized field, is it not? Do you see **The Beach of Falesá** as a logical step for you, or even a culmination, or as a kind of side-venture into a new and stimulating area?

A.H. : I think this is a rather complex question, because I've always felt I'd like to write opera, but I've been asked or paid to write other things; and this is the first time I've been commissioned to write an opera as such. If I had been commissioned to write one sooner, I'd have written one sooner. As a matter of fact, I have felt, in a way, more at home in writing a work of this kind than most other pieces, and although I've waited a long time, I think that this is where my writing is going to lie in the future.

A.J.H.R. : That is extremely interesting, and we must return to it in a moment. But how did you come to choose the subject itself,— how did the whole project take shape in fact?

A.H. : Well, I must say, first of all, that the initial impulse for an opera came from Sir Geraint Evans; but one doesn't undertake writing a piece like this unless there is to be a performance at the end of it. I'd been discussing a possible subject with Geraint over a long period of time, so when this chance came along I already had about five opera subjects ready and waiting. In fact, Falesá was ...

A.J.H.R. : The head of a short list, possibly?

A.H. : No, it was the second,—the first opera I wanted to write was **Rawlins White**.

A.J.H.R. : Ah, yes, I have heard something of this, it was to be in collaboration with Jon Manchip White, wasn't it?

A.H. : Manchip White, yes. This was an opera about the first British martyr to the Inquisition, who happened to be a Cardiff sea-captain. We started working on this some six years ago, and we got a few rough drafts of the libretto done; then suddenly Jon went to America as Professor of English at El Paso, and we lost touch and didn't pursue the matter. I've recently been working with him again, because his mother, who lived in Cardiff, had died, and he returned. So actually Rawlins is now being written — that's on the way. But Falesá was definitely a subject I wanted to do. I knew as soon as I read the Robert Louis Stevenson story that this was an opera, so I went ahead with it. And, of course, the other thing was that the principal role in it was ideal for Geraint.

A.J.H.R. : So the concept was largely around a main character, who was also the singer whom you could imagine in the part, and who would therefore stimulate a great deal of the creative process around this?

A.H. : Yes.

- A.J.H.R. : On the face of it people could say that this is a very remote scene. Do you feel an attraction for the exotic, particularly, or is it (when pared down) the drama of good and evil, and so on, that appealed to you in the first instance?
- A.H. : No, I think that even in the Stevenson original the setting is not crucial to the central argument of the story. I mean, you can take the story in one respect as a straightforward entertainment; and I think if we had stuck to the Stevenson it would have remained at that. But we've just taken the Stevenson as the basis of the thing, and I think we've got more out of it than was there originally. So it can be taken on many levels.
- A.J.H.R. : Above the level, as it were, of the exotic trappings, this is a tale with a moral implied, isn't it?
- A.H. : Absolutely.
- A.J.H.R. : From the story this seems to revolve around — to me at least — a kind of colonial compromise with moral issues, as well as the over-riding question of good and evil, and also the — perhaps you would agree — demoralizing sense of doom which (because of the past) hangs over the island, and menaces its newest inhabitant in particular. Can we take it from this that you have perhaps a message or a point of view to express?
- A.H. : Yes, perhaps; but I don't think that this is the central point of the moral of the opera. I see it as several questions being posed, if you like. Basically, what one has is Nature affording an easy life, — a corrupt life, even. You know I think this is a crucial philosophic point of life today: there is an easy corrupt life to be had; and in the opera this is symbolized by Falesa,— the island, and by a number of characters like the natives, and Randall — the old sea-captain — who has given in to it. And you think at first that Case has succumbed too, but you realize that he hasn't as the opera proceeds. You see, if you are not going to allow yourself to be taken over by the easy life, you have to dominate it, which is what Case has done. When it comes right round to the end, he says to Wiltshire, in effect: " If you're not going to be like Randall you must become exactly like me, and dominate the whole thing." So that's the special twist to the story — Case is not the villain. Right at the beginning you think, well, obviously Wiltshire the newcomer is the hero, and Case who rules the island is the villain, and so on; but it's not as simple as that at all. It is Case, eventually, who is the hero, because he has turned away from the easy life and has mastered his environment. So you see I think it's very much an up-to-date morality in that particular respect.
- A.J.H.R. : This has travelled some distance away from RLS, hasn't it?
- A.H. : It has, absolutely, I agree.
- A.J.H.R. : And from Dylan Thomas's script also, of course.
- A.H. : Well, I think Dylan failed with the script; because, if you notice, he goes up to halfway, and it's very good; then he either couldn't resolve the story himself or he lost interest in it, and the second half is no good at *all*.
- A.H.J.R. : To me the happy ending was improbable.
- A.H. : Yes, indeed. This was one of the first things Glyn Jones and I had to decide on: what kind of ending we were going to have. The happy ending is just like

something out of Gilbert and Sullivan, and wouldn't do at all — and I don't think the Stevenson story is logical either from that point of view.

A.H.J.R. : Incidentally, since we've mentioned Dylan, have you ever considered setting something original of his? You've never toyed with — to me an unlikely idea — a setting of *Under Milk Wood* (I know it has been done in Germany, but personally I can't see it as an opera at all) — you've never considered that?

A.H. : I'm a great admirer of Dylan's poetry — I love it very much, but I think there's too much music in the actual poetry itself, so I don't find any musical response to it at all.

A.J.H.R. : As people tend to find with Keats for the same reason,— the lyrical resonance of the words themselves.

A.H. : There's too much music in them! This is a special kind of poetry of imagery, isn't it? Mind you, I had the same problem with Glyn's libretto : when it came to me it was full of poetry, which I had to cut out altogether; because if you have poetry in the words you don't want poetry in the music — in fact, you don't need music at all.

A.H.J.R. : It has to be bare bones then?

A.H. : Bare bones, yes.

A.H.J.R. : Writing an opera has obviously meant a certain difference of approach, if only in the different routines involved in writing such a bigger work, and the separate demands of collaboration with a librettist and so forth: do you find this has brought about any particular change, or shift of emphasis, in your style or technique?

A.H. : No. What I think has happened in this piece is that all the different and the varying aspects of my style have been drawn together into one work. I think many people will find it a surprise! After all, if you are writing something which is going to last for two and a half hours you must put in as much variety as you can. And this is the whole point with an entire sort of extremely dissonant style: after a certain length of time your ear gives in; it's had enough of it. So I've tried to exploit a range from extreme dissonance to the softest consonance. You see, I've drawn together all sorts of threads, and I would even say that it has, in a way, been a good thing for me to have waited so long to have written this piece. I know it seems a silly thing to suggest, but to me all that's gone before is almost a preliminary to writing this major work. Though, you know, I don't suppose many people would claim that five symphonies are a preliminary!

A.J.H.R. : Indeed not!

A.H. : Anyway, I'm glad I've done it all before tackling the opera; in fact, I don't expect to write many more symphonies.

A.J.H.R. : No? You feel then that you have already completed most of your contribution to the symphonic field?

A.H. : At the moment, yes. The other thing I've found, of course, is that writing an opera is such a physical labour. The amount of work that one had to put into it is quite staggering — I hadn't quite expected it; but it really is an enormous

amount, so I think if you write operas it leaves very little time for anything else.

A.J.H.R. : I was going to ask you — did you take time off, shall we say, to write other works?

A.H. : Well, let's put it like this : the libretto itself took two years to prepare, from the beginning to when it was actually ready for setting; in the meantime I had lots of musical ideas, but I did not in fact start writing the music. Once I started, there was no time for anything else — the music has meant well over a year's solid writing. So you can say that from the start of getting down to it, it has taken three years.

A.J.H.R. : I was thinking rather on the lines of possible light relief, but, as you say, the complete spectrum of your style has been absorbed into the opera in any case. I had in mind the example of Beethoven, who, during work on the *Ninth Symphony*, wrote dances for the Viennese court — for payment, of course. I take it this is not something you would have considered, then?

A.H. : No, I simply couldn't have done it! The only piece which I wrote while engaged on the opera was the one for the University at Austin, Texas. That was a small choral work with piano duet accompaniment, a fifteen-minute piece.

A.J.H.R. : What about the forces used in the opera? Obviously for a composer such as yourself who has been known to use large forces frequently, — wide sweeps of sound, — there might have been certain problems. Have you ever felt constrained by the prospect of the orchestral pit in the theatre?

A.H. : Yes, — yes, indeed! There are many places where I felt I needed eight horns and six trumpets, and so on . . . or six flutes, or whatever, you know . . . but you couldn't do it, of course.

A.J.H.R. : At least not for a Cardiff performance. Do you regret this very much, or have you found it a stimulating discipline?

A.H. : No, I find it an irritating discipline, because when I know exactly the kind of sound I want, and when I know it can only be got when the six or eight horns are there, it's a pity that it can't be achieved. But, of course, this is not a question of writing it for Cardiff, it's simply modern conditions, if you like — we just don't have these facilities today. I think you'll find that many composers don't get their pieces played because they write for difficult combinations of instruments. I mean, there were places where I would have loved to have had an alto flute; but if you write for an alto flute I think it must be in a very specialized small combination of instruments.

A.J.H.R. : One thinks of certain Britten works, the Church Parables, and so on.

A.H. : Exactly.

A.H.J.R. : Do you have any misgivings about the comparative lack of control over the end-product in performance — a sort of aleatoric possibility, almost? Most composers obviously don't have final control over the interpretation of their pieces; but it seems to me that in opera there are so many more imponderables, — the visual element in particular. Does it trouble you that your own vision, if you'll permit the term, of the scenes, the action, and the general setting, is likely to be so very different in final realization?

A.H. : Well, I suppose that I am very fortunate in this respect, in that what is going

to be seen will correspond with what I have in my mind. I think I'm very lucky in getting somebody like Michael Geliot to produce, because, again, we are close friends and live near each other, and the same applies to Glyn Jones. Glyn envisaged the whole as a Gaugin-type setting, and we both said to Michael: "This is what we want, not steel tubes . . .", and so he said: " Right. I know exactly the designer for you." And the sets are beautiful, — I mean, they're even more gorgeous than I imagined, very romantic and beautifully coloured — so that's all right. The other thing is this: notes on paper are not very sacred as far as I'm concerned — they never have been — and I want the performer to bring them to life. He can take any liberties he wants with them, as long as the main outline is right.

A.J.H.R. : You feel perhaps that a piece of music you've written is launched on a kind of career of its own, do you? Rather like some ideas of the French symbolist poets, now very popular; you obviously have a certain very strong connection with it, but it develops and gathers associations and a momentum of its own, as it were?

A.H. : Yes, well, you see every piece that I write is a piece for performers, and I am perfectly happy that they should inject their own ideas and personalities into it, unless, of course, it should become diametrically opposite to what is written. You see, I don't write the sort of music that is split up into tiny and carefully-described fragments which leave no room for any kind of interpretation at all.

A.J.H.R. : On the aural level, you presumably 'heard' *Trader Case* in terms of Sir Geraint; how far does this apply to the other protagonists in the opera?

A.H. : Oh, quite a bit. To me there's an interesting point here: one certainly has the sound of the thing, and especially of certain people's voices, in one's mind; but, of course, you hope that others are going to perform the opera, so you can't allow yourself to write a piece so directly aimed at one person that no one else can sing or perform it. I think one has an example of this with Peter Pears's voice singing Britten's music: you associate that voice with the particular piece, so that when you hear someone else singing it you get something of a shock, and I think it has taken many different productions of *Grimes* or *Budd* to dissociate that special quality of voice from the work.

A.J.H.R. : This is perhaps the greatest danger from a close association between a composer and a particular interpreter.

A.H. : It's a danger, I agree, but obviously the association has considerable advantages. For example, when one writes some pieces for, say, Martin Jones, or for a certain other kind of instrumentalist, one takes a level of difficulty as a norm; then other people find the music difficult, and I can't think why. So the advantages and disadvantages can be equally balanced, but I prefer writing for someone; and if other people then find difficulties they've got to learn to overcome them.

A.J.H.R. : That is perhaps why collaboration at a distance over an opera would be unattractive to you?

A.H. : Yes, I would find it unworkable; that is why I couldn't get ahead with *Rawlins*

White — the librettist had gone so far away. I like physical contact; I can't do things by letter or telephone; I like to go to the chap concerned and work things out. But, of course, different people work in different ways. I've had some interesting results in this opera as a consequence. I've been able to say to Geliot: " I rather fancy doing this or that . . . will it work? " and he would say : " Not quite as you imagine it, but don't abandon the idea, as it's a good one, — I should like to take this as a challenge, and see if I can solve it myself . . . " so that although the end might be slightly different from your initial thing, the advantage of being able to talk to the man who is going to be doing it physically means that you've got enough left of your original idea to make it worthwhile.

A.J.H.R. : What is your present opinion of opera and opera-composers? Do you now find that you have a different attitude towards certain composers in this field, an increased respect even? Dare I ask if you have a particular model whom you admire all the more, now that you have, as it were, fully come to grips with the medium yourself?

A.H. : Well, of course, you see, the opera composer I've admired more than anyone else is Puccini — every time.

A.J.H.R. : For a period a very unfashionable composer.

A.H. : Still! I think that Puccini is still not thought very highly of in intellectual terms, but if you look at the scores you can see that he does the right thing at the right time, and in the right way, and also at a very high level. Strauss is another composer I have a great admiration for, and Britten too, of course.

A.J.H.R. : Does the theatre mean a great deal to you?

A.H. : If you're talking in terms of the straight theatre, as plays and drama — no, I don't like it very much; I prefer reading it.

A.J.H.R. : Reading does, obviously.

A.H. : Yes, — and, you know, this seems to be one of the things that happen to one as a composer: if I'm reading anything, I immediately wonder if it is settable, if it can be used. It's a kind of vulture attitude.

A.J.H.R. : And you are decidedly a man for whom the visual world exists, are you not?

A.H. : Indeed, yes, very much so.

A.J.H.R. : Then this will presumably be reflected in the music of the opera — I mean the special visual stimulus of *Falesá*, as opposed to a possible British or Welsh setting?

A.H. : I think the visual element has tempered some of the score, in that it is very romantic music. But then *Rawlins* is, I think, visually exciting, and it ends with an *auto-da-fe*. Most of it is, however, set in dockland and cathedral, and so on, so the music for that is somewhat more austere.

A.J.H.R. : Have you felt any pressures to choose a Welsh subject for your first opera?

A.H. : Well, that's a difficult one, because *Rawlins*, of course, has a Welsh setting, but I think that's an accident in a way. It was Manchip White's book which he called *Chariot of Fire* that attracted me to *Rawlins*, and, again, I knew him and had read a lot of his work. No, I think that what attracts me to an opera

subject is just the dramatic situation it offers.

A.J.H.R. : Let us say, then, that you are a Welshman who writes an opera. This is in itself sufficient, isn't it, for a national basis?

A.H. : I feel that the business of national characteristics in music is much more complex than it appears on the surface, because if you take the composers we think of as being ' national composers ', we only think so because we know a great deal of music from that country, and it all then becomes a sort of chain of association. Would you say that Bach is a German composer?

A.J.H.R. : In retrospect perhaps, yes, and in view of the German tradition.

A.H. : In retrospect, you see, and because of what we now know. They say Elgar is an English composer, but is he? I find him much closer technically and stylistically to German composers of the late nineteenth century. We think of Bartok as a Hungarian composer: what other Hungarian music do we know? Well, a certain amount of folk-music possibly, and so we draw conclusions from that.

A.J.H.R. : Possibly an obvious example is Chopin, since everybody tended to assume that Polish music had to be Chopinesque, until Szymanowski came along, at least.

A.H. : But then you play the John Field Nocturnes . . .

A.J.H.R. : And you seem to have ' Polish ' music?

A.H. : Yes! — and John Field was an Irishman who lived in Russia and influenced Glinka amongst others . . . So then what exactly does this national element mean? I have a feeling that there is an underlying, unspoken, kind of attribute which one just feels. But as yet there is not enough Welsh music, or music by Welsh composers to enable us to find out. You know we need at least a hundred years of it. After all, when did your English music really start? In the middle of the last century; so there's been a hundred years of it, and you can speak of an English tradition in music. And then they had Purcell already, and all the others before them. We haven't really got that; so I think that if somebody asked in a hundred years time what Welsh music was, there might well be an answer.

A.J.H.R. : And somebody might point to **The Beach of Falesá** as an example — why not?

A.H. : Who knows, who knows . . . ?

A.J.H.R. : Given the right circumstances and conditions then, you would be happy to see yourself as an operatic composer, at least to the extent that we think of Britten perhaps as one?

A.H. : I would, indeed.

A.J.H.R. : The term ' operatic ' is sometimes used by intellectuals with a slight sniff, at any rate until certain years of this century, — but the position has changed now, hasn't it, in that respect?

A.H. : To some extent. I think you'll find that many so-called intellectual musicians look down their noses at opera, because you have to take into account the broad effect in this medium, in a way you don't have to in the string quartet. I'm not saying that there is an intellectual difference between them; I think a composer who achieves success in any medium that he chooses has simply succeeded in

what he wants to do — there's no argument with that at all. Somebody who writes a small successful piano work is as good in that sort of way as a composer who writes a successful symphony or opera is in his way. I have the greatest admiration for any composer who achieves success in the pieces that he writes, no more, no less.

A.J.H.R. : You have moved from the field of the symphony to that of opera. Mahler spoke of each symphony as having an universe within it. To pursue this on a metaphorical level, does the operatic medium attract you more with its possibility of a broader 'vision of the universe' or with its opportunity of expressing a more concrete and precise view of things?

A.H. : Well, an opera is more explicit in many ways because after all you have the word there. The thing I find interesting in opera from a musical point of view is that very often the music carries on — purely musically — where the word finishes, where the singer finishes. Then you have, you know, just music — an orchestral bit, in fact. You have to carry on the thoughts that lie in the minds of the characters. This has been a fascinating thing. You've got to live the characters, and this is what has made it so exhausting to write.

A.J.H.R. : Have you resorted to any traditional devices such as *Leitmotiven* in this work?

A.H. : Oh, yes, they are there.

A.J.H.R. : And have you used to the full your technique — I may say your particular technique — of using textural devices such as palindromic forms and so on?

A.H. : I must confess I couldn't resist writing one palindrome! But that's in one of the orchestral interludes; and it has a curious sort of psychological point as well, I think, because the palin-drome comes in the interlude between Scenes I and II of the Third Act, where Wiltshire has left his store, and he's going to destroy Case's voodoo temple. It begins just as he sets out, but the palindrome suggests that he's just basically turning in on himself, because at the end, instead of going from point A to point B in a straight line he is, in fact, going round in a circle, and by the time he gets to the beginning of the next scene he's arrived back at the point where he started from.

A.J.H.R. : So the palindrome is a kind of psychological interpretation here, and more than a textural feature?

A.H. : Yes. Mind you, a lot has been written about my palindromes, but I simply use them, let us say, as Beethoven used recapitulations. And I've always liked an arch form, so that seems logical. You know you get a lot of fun out of seeing how things work in reverse.

A.J.H.R. : Now let us take newcomers to opera — newcomers even to your work — what would you advise them to expect in **The Beach of Falesá**?

A.H. : Well . . . I think that visually at least, from the stage they should get a strong and colourful impact. There's plenty of action going on — the Stevenson is a good story. To me, anyway, there are plenty of good tunes in it, but what I think of as tunes and what other people think of as tunes may be two different things! But I think they'll find that there's plenty of musical

variety in it. Basically it seems to me that the opera composer has to bear in mind that he is presenting a whole night's experience; and the worse thing that can happen is for somebody to say after half an hour : " Well, I've had enough of this! " and off he goes.

A.J.H.R. : You would, perhaps, describe it as an instructive experience as well as an entertaining one? — again I refer to the possible message or moral of the tale.

A.H. : Well, of course it can be, depending on what you're looking for in it. Some people don't want to find a moral in an entertainment; many go to the theatre just for sheer entertainment.

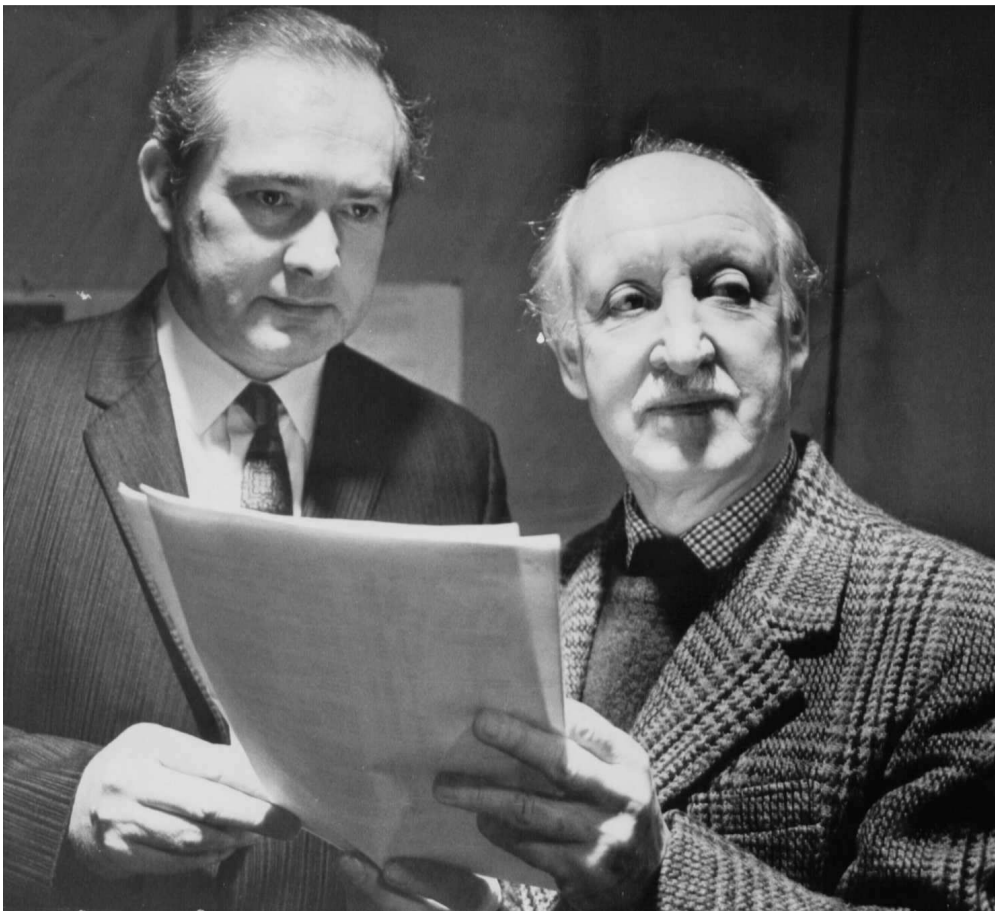
A.J.H.R. : This is a particularly British trait, isn't it? I mean, to think in terms of the theatre as a place to see *Flower Drum Song*, or *The Mousetrap*, or whatever . . .

A.H. : It's not a Welsh one though. I think the Welsh, well . . .

A.H.J.R. : Want to be moved?

A.H. : Yes. I think that I would be very unhappy not to see a tear in some eyes during the final aria . . . That's very Puccinian, isn't it?

A.H.J.R. : Well, why not!



Alun with Glyn Jones, librettist for **The Beach of Falesá**