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Jonathan Miller: interview

By Caroline McGinn. Photography Phil Fisk

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In the UK's major theatres, opera houses and TV studios, Jonathan Miller has spent a lifetime building a reputation for both brilliance and bruising causticity. So what sort of man is he, Renaissance or nuisance? Neither, finds Time Out's Caroline McGinn

Jonathan Miller

Jonathan Miller is a difficult man to define. That's not just because of the unusual breadth of his professional and personal interests. Famously, after earning his first degree at Cambridge and his medical diploma at UCL, Miller sprang to comic prominence in the '60s in 'Beyond the Fringe'. Not content with juggling comedy and medicine, over the subsequent four decades he went on to write, act, direct, produce, sculpt, photograph and wittily sound off (with varying degrees of brilliance).

On top of this extraordinary collage of a career, he's firmly resistant to being confined by cultural classifications. Take atheism. Miller is scathing and hilarious when it comes to 'cuckoo notions' like intelligent design. He produced the first ever history of disbelief for BBC4 (an excellent three-parter, accompanied by extended interviews with the likes of Richard Dawkins and Arthur Miller). A plain spoken, secular dissidence seems integral to his career: whether you recall his 'I'm not really a Jew, I'm Jew-ish. I don't go the whole hog' joke, as so many 'Beyond the Fringe' fans do, or his stinging criticisms of the lavish, unnatural pomp of the opera world, with sets that can reflect the audience's affluence more than the story and the music. Call him an 'atheist', or even a 'humanist', though, and he recoils politely. 'No, no. I have no name for what my belief system is. I don't believe in witches either, but no one would call me an "a-hexist".'

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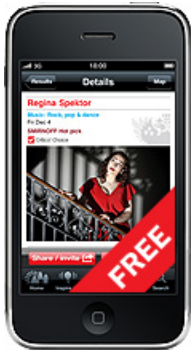

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Try countering that atheism needs to be defined in opposition to the powerful institutions it challenges, and Miller doesn't demur. But his remains a fiercely individual thinker's objection to the first principles of belief even 'before it gets housed in the institutions that give it its dangerous edge'. Throughout such debates he is courteous, intelligent, wry, funny and exceedingly well informed – giving the lie to his occasional portrayals as a curmudgeon and his lampooning (in Private Eye and 'Spitting Image') as a pseud. So why is he such an emphatic cultural loner? Even towards the end, Miller has not put his feet up in any of the schools of thought or cultural houses which, at one time or another, would have been delighted to have him as a leading member.

Yet it's as difficult to rule him out of categories as it is to fully include him in them. Despite umpteen revivals of his classic ENO productions (such as 'The Barber of Seville' and the '20s-set 'Mikado') and his international profile, he hasn't had a new opera production in London for a few years. Indeed in 2004 it seemed as if his career in opera was over, after he told newspapers he was 'bitter and angry' that the big opera houses had turned their backs on him: 'England is obsessed with the cutting-edge… and if you're as old as I am, you're assumed to be dead.' But he plans to return to the London stage in February with a new production of 'La Bohème' at the Coliseum – one reason why he's sitting in the drawing room of the townhouse in Camden where he and his family have lived for the last 50 years, treating my journalistic attempts to pin him down with hospitable tolerance.

In the press he's often called a 'Renaissance man'. What does he think of that? He replies he can't bear it 'because it's so ignorant and vulgar. My father was a painter and a sculptor in addition to being a psychiatrist and a founder of child psychology, but no one would ever have called him a Renaissance man. One usually gets called a "Renaissance man" by people who are entirely unacquainted with the Renaissance.'

You feel Miller's objection is not simply an aesthetic one, to the mock-Tudor aspirations of the phrase, but also to its portrayal of desire for education as something heroically antique, rather than a universal duty and pleasure. His conversation and his home are equally well-furnished with relics of his creative interests: both indicate a continuity of the life of the mind that his parents enjoyed. The bust of his mother (novelist Betty Spiro) on the mantel was sculpted by his father, Emanuel Miller. And on the other side of the room there's a more profound visual echo of father and son's scientific and artistic capacity for observation. Look at the sketch his father made of a patient, slackly unconscious under hypnosis, and you see that the twisted angle of the head is repeated in the sculpture beneath, which his son based on an autopsy.

At 74, Miller is rangy and energetic: his mind is penetrating; his diary is full (a programme on death for Radio 4 and an exhibition on Italian architectural modernism for Islington's Estorick gallery are forthcoming). Through the megaphone of the media, he is still a regular and (he says) often distorted voice from the wilderness. Take, for instance, his complaint that 'rather commendable' productions like his 'Hamlet' for Bristol's Tobacco Factory can't get a West End transfer because they lack a bankable TV star. This was interpreted as a criticism of David Tennant as much as of the RSC which, far from remaining aloof from cultural mob-rule, went and cast 'that man from "Doctor Who" '. Tennant, who is a Miller fan, will be relieved to hear that the Doctor's comments were 'misreported': he was concerned that people would flock to Tennant's 'Hamlet' not 'because he is a very good actor – which he is – but because he is a television star'.

Miller's suspicion of TV (the medium which brought series of his such as 'The Body in Question' to a national audience) has developed in a period in which the BBC has embraced more commercial, populist principles. His suspicion of stars probably stems from the prima donna-ish world of opera: his 1998 production of 'Le Nozze di Figaro', for New York's Metropolitan Opera was marred by an imbroglio with its star, the sensationally popular Cecilia Bartoli, who wished to sing two rarely performed arias composed under sufferance by Mozart to showcase a previous diva. The 'Beyond the Fringe'-er retains his talent for mimicry which, like his outspokenness, stems from his well-developed powers of observation, and he uses it to illustrate similar rows with what he d calls the 'Jurassic Park' breed of big stars. ' "No, Gionathan," ' he protests in plump and languid Italian accents. '"I don't think Alfrrredo would do that." "Why? Alfredo is a fictional character who we bring into existence in every production." "No, no, no, Gionathan, do not make jokes." '

Miller is so enjoyably caustic that it's easy to take this at face value – as a debate between vanity and sanity. When it comes to the politics of compromise in general, though, the reality is probably more nuanced. It's impossible not to chuckle and sympathise when Miller improvises on the subject of Beeb commissioning and 'Strictly Come Wanking' – but you can imagine the suits having a more implacable reaction. Miller is too sharp a gadfly, stinging contemporary idiocy, to become a national treasure like the other intellectual 'Fringe'-er (and his neighbour in Camden), Alan Bennett.

Critics would argue that his elitism is partly responsible for his not having settled into a familiar role in public life commensurate with his achievements. Grammar-school boy Bennett, like the late Harold Pinter, found so much of his poetry in common speech. Miller, on the other hand, dislikes wilful ignorance and ruffles luvvie feathers by being trenchantly dismissive of the trivialities of the medium in which he's spent half his working life. Celebrity is 'exorbitant and vulgar'. The theatre is 'being corrupted by conceptualism of which symbolism is a pendant'. And 'arsing around in public skilfully and being approved for what one does is very nice. But it's not all that interesting.'

If he has 'affirmative values', they're something which he finds out only by reflection (like Winston Churchill) on discovering 'the things up with which I will not put'. Those include 'rudeness' and 'greed' as well as vulgarity, and

probably sound deeply patrician to the ears of cultural managers who've risen under the banner of New Labour. But it's unfair and unedifying to dismiss Miller as a snob – like his wife, he would have spent his life serving patients had he not 'yielded to invitations' such as George Devine's suggestion that he direct 'Under Plain Cover' for the Royal Court – gigs which, like 'Beyond the Fringe', were 'less arduous' and/or more lucrative than 'the life of a junior hospital doctor'.

In a career he has often described as a circumstantial series of assents to invitations, the lack of requests from British institutions rankles. 'I've not worked more than once with the RSC – the last time was 30 years ago and I've never been invited back.' The crony-ish manner of pitching and pushing oneself forwards through networking is anathema: 'I have no time to be present at every premiere to mwah-mwah people. I'm at home having scrambled eggs or trying to keep one of my several grandchildren quiet so I can listen to the news.' He feels angry about not being approached despite being demonstrably a world-class director. 'I think, what in fuck's name are you doing not asking me to at least come and have a talk.'

Before his return to the ENO this year, Miller said that there were few remaining operas that he'd like to direct. However there are several plays he'd like to return to. 'I would like to do "Danton's Death" again but I gather that Grandage is about to do it at the National so I'm out.' It's said without spite or ire: more a wistful perplexity – 'the thing is, I am rather heavily acquainted with the history of eighteenth-century France.' Still, Miller is the first to admit he left the National 'slightly in a huff 30 years ago because I couldn't bear working with Peter Hall. There he was, in his awful safari suit and his shoulder bag. I thought: Oh God, really, this is not someone with whom I can get on.'

That's exactly the kind of remark that gets Miller branded a snob – his characterisation is funny, but its lofty vantage point raises hackles. Worse, it comes before the more substantial differences Miller had with Hall (Hall's 'mandarin old-fashioned attitude to verse', his 'preoccupation with fame') and vividly obscures them. Ever the nonconformist, the director is 'not in favour of cathedral policies for the arts. If you can have an NHS going from Newcastle to Plymouth, then why not a National Theatre? Peter Hall referred rather infuriatingly to the NT as a centre of excellence, and I thought: You are a prat. The arrogance of the idea that you could know in advance that something will be excellent.'

Miller's stinging criticisms reveal him as far too candid and non-consensual ever to be given the position of implementing his commonsensical policies. They make him an indispensable commentator, though: he's refreshingly accurate when he punctures this kind of flagship vocabulary also so beloved of New Labour – where aspirations are inflated and floated as definitions of reality, or 'rafts' are imagined to be wide and inclusive enough to carry all to the South Bank. It's easy to imagine how his intelligent scepticism stimulates the performers he works with to 'remember what they have always known and forget what they ought never to have learned'. Miller trained as a doctor, and his habits of diagnostic observation, which he reels off in the sing-song rhythm of the oft-repeated ('watch how people move, what they do, how mobile or immobile their faces are, how they sit, are they breathing too hard and so forth') are the practical skills he has brought to the stage.

In 'La Bohème', a story about 'a group of rather silly rich boys who decide it would be fun to be artists', there's a climactic tragedy which he has witnessed 'again and again when I was in hospital': the moment when the poor girlfriend of one of the boys, Mimi, dies unnoticed on stage. 'The only thing that notices is the orchestra,' says Miller. 'It's wonderful – that sudden sigh when we who are listening to the orchestra know she's gone and are struck by the fact that she has vanished, unattended.' On the wards, sans orchestra, 'so many times, relatives who had been there for two days would be looking out of the window or having a cup of coffee, come back in and there – she's gone.'

As an opera director Miller has been praised for the thoughtfulness, clarity and naturalism of his settings, even if that means (as in the case of 'La Traviata') 'doing without that awful bit of pretentious vulgarity where the dying heroine is allowed to get up and run around the room in a lap of honour'. His new setting of 'La Bohème', inspired by the seedy beauty of Brassaï's pictures of bohemian Paris in the '30s, as well as by films like 'Withnail & I' and 'Hôtel du Nord', will not embrace a prettified ideal of la vie bohème. 'Like "Withnail & I", these boys have been let out on a leash by rather tolerant rich parents, they're living in a world of dirty plates, just chatting and enduring cold weather. Ten years after Mimi has died they'll be saying, "Do you remember all that?" while sitting comfortably in some suburb and going to Glyndebourne.'

Mimi's death is something else entirely – and death, indeed, is what Miller is now regarding with characteristically rational curiosity. Surrounded by family and interests (his children and grandchildren all live within 15 minutes' travel) his will not be the barren old age suffered by 'so many people surviving beyond an age which couldn't have been anticipated 100 years ago, uncomfortable and badly looked after by the state and sometimes their family'. He has too much common sense for the prospect of a permanent 'loss of consciousness' to bother him unduly. But, while he 'knows enough to know what I don't know, which is a definition of prudence if not wisdom', it is the things that are yet to be learned that he regrets. 'Life loses its surface texture as you get older, acquiring a greater depth at other levels. At my age death is not imminent. But it's not altogether invisible. You are aware of the knowledge that there's less time left to make up for what you don't know.'

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Posted by **piano** on 07 Mar 2009 15:40

I like listening to Jonathan Miller. He is also quite humorous. However, I don't go much on his operatic skills. I don't like his productions much.

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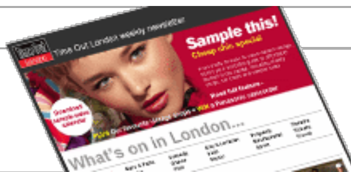

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