



Eugene Onegin is a tale of two Boyds

Ex-RSC director Michael and his Highgate neighbour conductor Douglas (no relation) collaborate on Tchaikovsky's opera

Music: Michael White



How's this for a coincidence. A road in Highgate has two people living in it by the name of Boyd: the stage director Michael and conductor Douglas. They are not related. Until recently they hadn't even met. But now, by chance, they're working together on the production of Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" that's about to open the 2016 Garsington Opera season. And as things are going well, it can only be a matter of time before they're feeding each others' cats or borrowing cups of sugar (if people still do that in Highgate).

Douglas Boyd is an old hand at opera, and has been Garsington's artistic director for several years. But Michael Boyd – Sir Michael as he now is – comes out of a theatre-world where people speak rather than sing. He used to run the RSC. And his hands-on experience of opera has so far been limited to one production: the Monteverdi "Orfeo" that played last year under the auspices of the Royal Opera but at the Roundhouse.

If you experienced it, you'll know it had the feel of a Shakespearian show, as though Boyd was still clinging to familiar territory. But its effectiveness was undeniable. And as I put it to him when we met at a rehearsal for "Onegin" in South London, it was presumably a good experience - otherwise he wouldn't be

returning to opera for another go.

"Well actually", he said, "it was so good I was afraid it couldn't be repeatable. But I'm loving this "Onegin" too. Pushkin [who wrote the story on which the opera is

based] was passionately fond of Shakespeare and fed a lot of that passion into his narrative. So I don't feel far from home here, even though there are cultural differences. The expressionist element in all opera comes from a place way beyond the naturalism that dominates traditional

British theatre. But I find that liberating".

He even claimed to enjoy dealing with a chorus – who, as I sat watching his rehearsal, were careering into one another through Tchaikovsky's dance routines like dodgems at a fairground. Turning 30 or so chorus singers into an expressive part of a production was, said Boyd, "a satisfying challenge". Which is one way to describe it.

If there's one thing Boyd brings from his spoken theatre

background to a lyric-stage rehearsal it's (in his words) "a respect for narrative". At all times, something meaningful must happen. And it bothers him in modern opera-stagings when straightforward action is replaced by irony: "camp, lazy irony", as he observes it, "that's like bad conceptual art where you're expected to read the footnotes rather than find meaning in the thing itself".

His show for Garsington will not need footnotes. The production

will be strong on story-telling, and include some elements of Pushkin's story that Tchaikovsky doesn't actually set to music. We'll be shown what happens to Onegin in the years between his youthful arrogance and middle-aged regret. And with one of music's Mr Nice Guys, Roderick Williams,

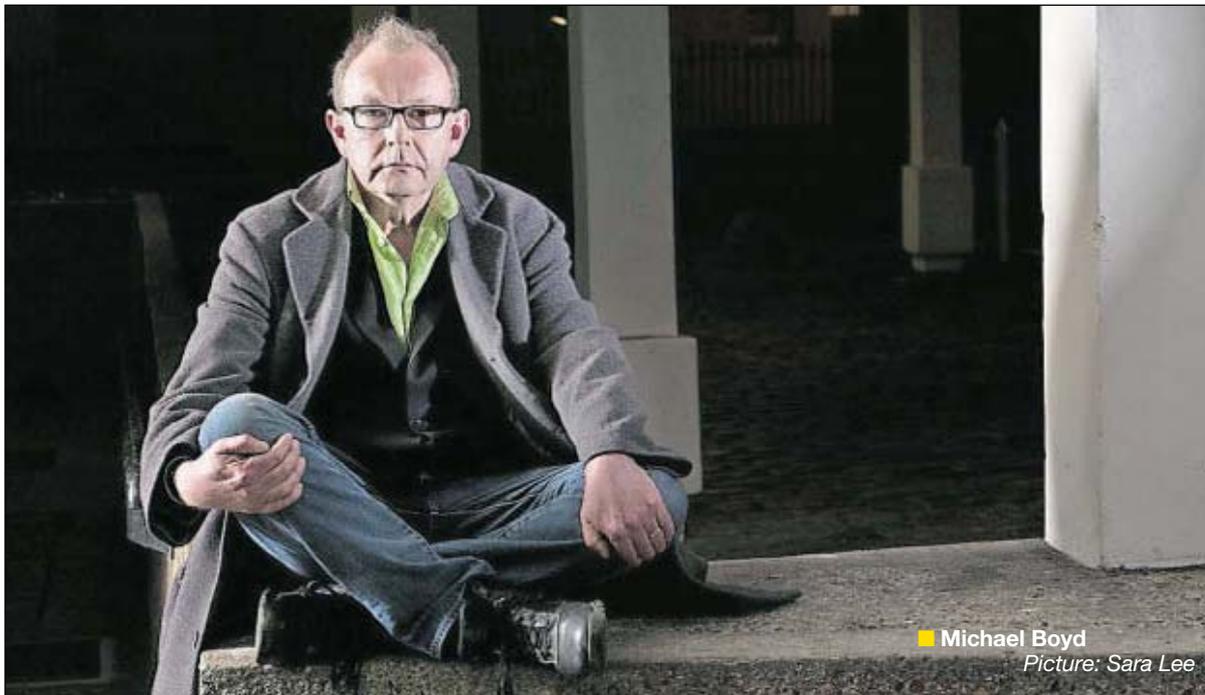
in the title role, it's bound to be a sympathetic reading of a part that doesn't always get the audience onside.

As for relationships between the two Boyds, on the stage and in the pit, they're going fine. Boyd M insists he has no problem with the give and take of working with conductors.

"Theatre is collaborative. If you direct King Lear with a great actor, you listen to what he has to say about it. And the conversations I have with Douglas about how to do "Onegin" are a delight to me. They're part of the discovery of the piece".

Pistols at dawn off Highgate Hill are therefore not on the agenda. And so much has Michael Boyd enjoyed discovering opera that he's signed up to do Garsington again next season, for Debussy's "Pelleas et Melisande". Shakespeare adieu? Unlikely. But the opera bug bites deep.

■ **Eugene Onegin opens the Garsington season Friday 3 June. Season runs to 17 July with Onegin, Idomeneo, L'Italiana in Algeri, and a staging of Haydn's Creation. garsingtonopera.org**



■ Michael Boyd
Picture: Sara Lee