

a number of items from Barbara Jones's own collection, including the head of a funfair horse, a small openwork dog made from folded cigarette packets, paper flowers and birds, decorated tins and tin toys, and a brown-paper carrier bag from E. Drury & Sons, Doncaster's Popular Butchers, with a vignette of cattle on the front, printed in dark blue.

On the wall are immortelles in wire and beads, memorial decorations for children's graves, and a sales display of fireworks and crackers. There are flat cabinets of documentary material — press cuttings, photos and letters — and another containing mostly paper items from Jones's collection: record labels, puppets, beer labels, cigarette packets, doilies (or dessert papers, as we should perhaps call them), miniature flags, and a marvellous advert for 'Rid-A-Rat', the poison that will free you from vermin. In one frame of the advert, Miss Rat, in a long veil, is admiring herself in a looking-glass, but in another frame her prospective husband lies dead with a tube of poison beside him. The legend reads: 'The Wedding Will Not Take Place — He's Eaten Rid-A-Rat'. Pretty good value at 6d a tube.

There are other exhibitions concurrently at the Whitechapel, most of which I can't in all conscience recommend, but upstairs in the main gallery there's an excellent display of plant photographs from the first two decades of the 20th century by Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932). Here are portraits of elderberry shoots and witch hazel, and the humble sow thistle, as you might not usually see them. The plant names alone are poetry: cat's-ear sage, heliotrope, scorpion-weed, caper spurge, stonebreaker, larkspur, cut-leaf teasel, pasque flower, and the forms are beautiful and extraordinary. Blossfeldt operated at the intersection between Art Nouveau and Modernism, between romance and usefulness. As he wrote: 'The plant may be described as an architectural structure, shaped and designed ornamentally and objectively.' Particularly poignant are the unrolling fern fronds, so like bishops' croziers.

Finally, let me remind you of David Inshaw's exhibition of new paintings at the Fine Art Society (148 New Bond Street, W1, until 9 May), previewed in these pages at the beginning of March. Featuring landscapes from Dorset and Wiltshire, figure and animal paintings, and a splendid series of tree portraits, it is a wonderful show, containing some of Inshaw's best pictures. The Tate has loaned his early masterpiece, 'The Badminton Game' (1972–3), which would be generous of them if it were ever on display. This enormously popular image is rarely shown — why was it not included, for instance, in the current Tate Britain display *Looking at the View?* — so it's a treat to be able to study such a superb example of Inshaw's early work at close quarters. Not to be missed.

Opera

The point of life

Michael Tanner

The Answer to Everything
Streetwise Opera, BFI

Giulio Cesare
Live from the Met

Maria Miller, the new Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, indicated in her first speech on culture that when she hears that word she reaches for her calculator. 'When times are tough and money is tight, our focus must be on culture's economic impact' is already a candidate for inclusion in a *Dictionary of Political Philistinism*, though it is the kind of thing we have come to expect from a politician of any party in the past 20 years or so, when they have gone out of their way to distance themselves from any 'elitist' activity. Even so, such a blatant statement of the supremacy of the economic gives pause, even as it paralyses one's capacity to respond coherently: anyone who can talk and presumably think as Miller does is incapable of grasping any argument that might be urged against them. Such people demonstrate their unawareness of the existence of a vast complex of activities that are, for many people, among the chief things that give living a point and value, and which entirely elude a

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industry'*

cost-benefit analysis. The commodification of culture is no new phenomenon, and if Miller wanted to become an expert on it as well as its crass exponent, she could try reading Theodor Adorno on the 'culture industry'. But that does require thought, so perhaps not.

I wonder how the political powers would respond to Streetwise Opera, which by chance was performing at the BFI while Miller was insisting on the justification by economics of the arts. Streetwise Opera (henceforth SO) gives homeless and unemployed people a chance to work together in a field where one might least expect to find them, and for a decade now has been getting warm reviews for its mixed-media performances. It could easily sound merely politically correct, with artistic considerations the bottom of the list; but that would be wrong, not only cruel but also fundamentally mistaken.

SO's latest production, *The Answer to Everything*, is a superb satire on corporatism, especially timely in a week when a fabulously rich businessman was sent to prison for selling governments worthless bomb detectors that no one had bothered to check. *The Answer to Everything* is a kind of brick, pro-

duced by Locateco Solutions, now 'leading the way in the single person re-homing market, by our proposals to radically re-purpose under-exploited brown-field edge lands and re-direct underactive citizens', etc., etc.; and SO's audiences find themselves delegates at a conference to share Locateco's shared values. If you'd despaired of the possibility of satirising and parodying management-speak and all that it fails to refer to, SO could give you new hope.

The show itself, part filmed, part acted, part sung, is succinct and witty, and even moving: for under the influence of a series of songs, some of them familiar — from Handel, Vivaldi, Schumann and Britten (Grimes's 'Now the great Bear and Pleiades' has never been sung to such striking effect) — some new, by Gavin Bryars, Orlando Gough and Emily Hall among others, the delegates at the conference begin to lose faith in their communal enterprise and to wonder whether there might be a world elsewhere. . . . It's a long time since I've felt so temporarily heartened.

The Met HD season ended triumphantly with a virtually flawless performance of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, his most popular opera but one rarely performed in so full a version (five hours with two short intermissions). The production is by David McVicar, in fact the one we saw at Glyndebourne several years ago, but it has been so modified, partly thanks to the sheer vastness of the Met's stage, partly to McVicar's more mature consideration of the nature of the characters and their relationships, mainly by the far superior casting of several of the roles, as to be almost unrecognisable, apart from the odd kilt and imperial headgear.

The outstanding performance, one of the most complete and accomplished I have seen and heard, was the Cleopatra of Natalie Dessay. She realised the character in all the complexity awarded it by Handel, and then some. She is just as marvellous being skittish and provocative and bitchy as she is plumbing Cleopatra's depths of woe and hopelessness, and her acting includes much demanding dancing, tiring even to watch. Beside her David Daniels's Cesare began rather pallidly, and took some time to warm up vocally, but this is very much a role that he has commandeered while remaining fresh in it. Alice Coote's Sesto, completely masculine in appearance, is a subtle, several-sided account of a character who can easily seem tiresome, and Patricia Bardon as his mother Cornelia was noble anguish ideally realised. The fairly small role of Achilla, in love with Cleopatra but two-timed by his boss Ptolomeo, also emerged as a rounded figure thanks to the subtleties of Guido Loconso, welcomingly adding a baritone to all those high voices which can become wearing after several hours. Harry Bicket got the wonderful Met orchestra to sound both authentic and unemaciated.