

Bayerische Staatsoper

SPEECH IN MEMORY OF SIR PETER JONAS, BAVARIAN STATE OPERA MUNICH

The spoken word shall prevail.

Dear Mr. Staatsintendant Dorny,
dear Barbara Burgdorf,
dear Monica Melamid,
Ladies and gentlemen,

seeing Sir Peter in these films moves me a lot. An actor was lost on him, don't you think?

How much he loved these appearances, the small ones when he stepped in front of the curtain for an announcement, and the big appearances on New Year's Eve with which he thanked you, his audience. These films by Barbara Burgdorf, Kai Bernhöft and Martin Pfeil remind us of his *joie de vivre*, his joy of acting and his special – coolness.

These films also remind me that Peter Jonas was a great storyteller. I loved listening to him. Sitting with him even in the moments when he silently continued his story.

The older he got, the bigger his fund of stories became, too. He threw *aperçus* into conversations and seduced his listeners with tales of situations in which he had experienced something peculiar or remarkable.

He chatted about one such experience as we walked through Zurich on a sunny spring day. The incident had occurred with none other than Queen Elizabeth, who had been so brilliantly honored by her country in recent days – just last night with the Platinum Party at Buckingham Palace. It would be natural to assume that she had visited the English National Opera and one of its performances. But no, that was not the case. The British royal family – Peter Jonas had maliciously told me – was rather known for its opera remoteness, before he himself refuted his own jibe against the Royal Family with the following story.

He had met the Queen at a reception and had greeted her formally. Of course, Queen Elizabeth knew who stood before her, since Peter Jonas had taken over the post of General Manager of the English National Opera from the Queen's cousin, Lord Harewood. So the Queen inquired which opera would be performed that evening. "The Marriage of Figaro," Jonas answered her, and the Queen in turn replied, "Isn't that the play with the needle?"

With this knowledgeable question, the Queen impressed him deeply, since the "unfortunate little needle," as Barbarina sings about it in her Cavatine, plays a crucial dramaturgical role. Peter Jonas loved the Queen for her question. But he was also deeply grateful to her for her appreciation of his services to the opera.

Bayerische Staatsoper

It was in recognition of his services to this house, to the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, for which Queen Elizabeth years later elevated Peter Jonas to the peerage. This knighthood "for services as General Director of the Bavarian State Opera" meant for him, the son of emigrants born in the harsh south of London, the recognition of his homeland *par excellence*. Peter Jonas received the honor for his services to the house for which he had worked until his death as a privilege, indeed as a gift – and whose staff respectfully called him "*der Sir*".

"Celebrating Sir Peter" –

to this mission – that the celebration, the joy and the gratitude for the time together, not the mourning for the loss of this great man, resound today as a leitmotif – to this Peter Jonas committed his family and friends long before his death. With this request, he demanded a lot of them, yes, possibly even overtaxed some; especially when he invited friends and companions in the fall before his death for the last time to celebrate life and friendship together with him.

Peter Jonas had previously informed his friends, but also the public, about his renewed and this time – it was to be assumed – final diagnosis. He again had to withdraw from public life for treatments:

"If nothing is heard from me, it only means that – immodest as I am – I am fighting. I don't want to end my expiring lease on this earth – yet."

His lease was expiring, but *he, he* did not want to end it yet; that was how Peter Jonas saw his situation. He had borrowed the image of "our lease on this earth" from a poem of Shakespeare's that was dear to him and that we will hear interpreted today by his oldest friend Sir Mark Elder.

"Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth (...)
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?"

"So short a lease," Shakespeare wrote. It is the motif of the *memento mori* that reminds us of the inevitability of death. Since his first cancer diagnosis in May 1976, Peter Jonas has never been able to suppress death as a constant companion. His beloved sister Kathryn had already been dead for ten years at that time. He felt her loss particularly acutely in the days before his death.

She, the big sister, took him by the hand for many, important years. It was she who had recommended a film to him that became symbolic of his life: It was *The Seventh Seal*.

In Ingmar Bergman's film, the knight Antonius Block returns exhausted from the Crusades to his homeland. Deeply disillusioned, he strikes a bargain with death. "The knight who plays chess with death, that's me," Jonas confessed. The image of the

Bayerische Staatsoper

intellectual in search of God struck him to the core – long before Prince Charles knighted him in the name of the Queen.

"This is my hand. I can move it, and the blood throbs in it. The sun is still high in the sky, and I, I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with death," the knight had exclaimed when he decided to use the respite granted him by playing chess with death "for a single meaningful action."

Peter Jonas was one of the leading *Theatermensch* of his generation. In a field that has found the image of the *Intendantenkarussell* for the changes of its leaders, his life path with only three stations is a rare exception.

But at these three stations, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the English National Opera and here, the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, his achievements were outstanding.

When I approached Sir Peter with the idea of writing his biography, I had these stations in mind. I knew about his migrant background, his cancer; he himself had spoken about it – always to a certain extent, well-dosed – in interviews. I knew his official story.

What kind of fate was hidden behind his chatty stories, what abysses and what coincidences, how much luck made up his life, I had not been aware of at the beginning.

For me, writing his biography meant accompanying his dying. To experience how he dealt with his pain, the physical pain, but also the emotional pain. I hadn't expected that when I asked him for his consent.

I met a person who weighed for a long time whether he wanted to take the time in his last years to face the story of his life. Who carefully examined whether he could trust. And who, when he had made his decision, spoke with painful openness about the shoals of his life; not unreservedly – why should he have done that? But with an attitude of wanting to question himself and, above all others, to answer to himself.

To be able to express his feelings, even the dark ones, with words was for him an act of self-assertion. He claimed authority over the narrative of his dying. What satisfaction he derived from having disproved his doctors' diagnosis for the last time and being able to say: "I am still alive! The blood is throbbing in my hand."

Even in those last months, indeed weeks, before his death, he wanted to continue working on his life story. His voice had become brittle, at times he already had to be supported. He had frozen most of the time.

Please do not think that he had lost his strength, his mental power in these days! He could still rant, and how! The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union hurt him deeply in his identity as a citizen of Europe. His homeland had become foreign to him. Highly sensitive to what can endanger a basic democratic order, he followed international politics as always with a wide-awake mind – an iPad in his hand lying on the sofa.

Bayerische Staatsoper

"What a pity I can't move so well anymore! Otherwise, I would take a machine gun or a revolver and just assassinate Trump, Johnson, Orbán and Netanyahu. Okay, that's a childish fantasy, but I'm so furious!"

It was far from the only *suada* of this kind with which he was outraged by politics in these weeks.

Today, on the day when we can finally celebrate him two years after his death, two years in which we had to accept closed theaters and opera houses for a long time, Pentecost Sunday! we want to celebrate him for what constituted his attitude: his art policy. This was the express wish of his wife which I am happy to comply with.

In his estate there are several hundred speeches that he gave on a wide variety of occasions. Several hundred, just from his Munich period alone. These speeches all breathe one spirit: the spirit of wanting to convince the public with artistic work and through it. To art, to opera, to artists, to this "single meaningful action" he dedicated his lifetime.

Sir Peter has taken every, really every opportunity to impress upon politicians, patrons, his audience, indeed, the world: Our society cannot do without opera. For him, art was "a fingerprint of our civilization." How a society deals with its art and its culture is what later generations will judge us by; Sir Peter was convinced of that. For him, a society was less healthy if it was unaware of the artistic. He once said:

"Some kind of artistic life in a nation is essential to the health of the nation. It's also essential in helping people understand what they're afraid of, what they love, or what they want to resist."

Now during the Corona pandemic, just in the year of Sir Peter's death, the health of the nation was at stake. But he would have gone to the barricades at the latest when it came to the absurdly different treatment of soccer games and theater attendance. The fact that opera's accessibility no longer depended on the way it worked, on the way it appealed to people, but on the decision of the politicians in power, would have set in motion all the reflexes of civil disobedience in him. It was his certain conviction that art and culture can hold our society together, that art as a "battlefield of tolerance" can make the ground fertile for society.

The art of opera, for Sir Peter, was the "most irrational art form," "the most complex and all-encompassing art form of mankind."

"In opera you have a conversation with your soul." (I hope that)
"we human beings never lose the need to express our most tender, dark, secret and idiosyncratic feelings in art."

Bayerische Staatsoper

One of Sir Peter's favorite comparisons was the following; you will recall:

"We theater makers have an obligation to make it clear through our work that culture is as important to life as education or hospital beds. And when people say to me, 'A hospital bed is much more important than a place in the theater,' I respond, 'That's true, anyone could be hospitalized, but not everyone is sick!'"

He simply asserted that. Theater has to be! He really believed in it, and he didn't justify it any further. – Yes, he did: he justified it; just not argumentatively, but by the quality of the performance of his house, the Bavarian State Opera. To convince with his artistic work was what made up his integrity.

Peter Jonas understood music theater as dramaturgy of society. Quality, accessibility, and the right to be allowed to fail: For him, this was central to being able to reflect society in music theater. "I do believe opera is for interpreting - and not representing". That was his attitude.

As artistic director, however, he also understood it as his very own task to counter the prejudices of the political left and right precisely on a political level – not only with words, but with his entire demeanor, his habitus. No one has captured this feature of his personality as precisely as Daniel Barenboim did when he wrote on Jonas' departure from Munich:

"He wants to be part of the establishment in order to fight what he dislikes. He manages the balancing act of being part of the establishment without conforming. For this he is admired by many, but in doing so he also provokes hostility."

Sir Peter defied such hostility, even if it troubled him many a time.

No one, no government, no politicians, no artistic director should regard culture as property, he said. "This circumstance gives art its strength." From this attitude he drew a far-reaching consequence: the person to whom such an institution is entrusted "must obey the dictates of artistic truth and integrity." He was an *Intendant* who presented himself as "figurehead and defender. As an enabler" in front of his house. He wanted to serve his audience. And he served his audience. That was his standard: opera obliges. All.

His confidence in artistic institutions, their *raison d'être*, and their capacity, was unshakeable. You remember this immensely important sentence of his:

"Artistic institutions are our life, our heritage. They embody the best of us humans as a society."

Bayerische Staatsoper

Peter Jonas was a person who was comfortable in the corset, the set of rules that institutions just happen to entail. He chalked it up – again, a bit maliciously – to his childhood and adolescent years in the drill of a British Benedictine boarding school.

"The institutions make the artists, enable them, shape their talent and give them a free space. This free space is what the artistic director must primarily create."

For this open space, for this *Möglichkeitsraum* of art, he has given his strength. Already in Chicago, when he fought against the adversities of his cancer; then in London, when he fought against the austerity policies of the Thatcher government; but also here, in Munich, with Zubin Mehta at his side: He wanted to offer the best working conditions to the institutions he presided over. In the end, everything always came down to this: to produce the best art possible. This commitment, to which he gave himself with every fiber, was also the reason why, at the end of his Munich directorship, he announced: "I want my life back."

In doing so, he – fortunately! – succeeded.

At one of my last encounters with Peter Jonas, he was lying on the sofa, blankets to keep him warm, but he was still freezing. What had been a weakened, scratchy voice months before was now just a barely audible huff. I could only understand him when I sat on the floor next to the sofa. To speak cost him great effort. "I have a lot to say, much of it is locked away." He had to gasp often and could not continue speaking. The oxygen machine was at the ready.

In these moments shortly before his death, Peter Jonas wanted to make clear what really mattered to him in opera. All the strength of mind, however, could not hide the fact that in his chess game with death he had only single moves left. During these weeks he endured gloomy moments. He doubted his life's work. It seemed to me that he used these talks for a last confession. I listened to his last speech.

"Theatre is just a moment." It's not a matter of life and death. Don't take it too seriously, he said, then quoted from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the beloved drama with which he associated a wonderful moment of his life, from Puck's final monologue.

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended –
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.

Again, he was silent, drawing strength.

"The reason is always a musical one. That's what I really wanted to say." Music always comes first, as does service to artists.

Bayerische Staatsoper

"I stand by my opinion that when I hear Daniel Barenboim play a piano sonata by Beethoven, that's the origin of the drama in the music! I make no apologies to my ur-dramaturgical friends, David Alden and the other compatriots. The drama and what the director makes of it comes originally from the score, from what Monteverdi or whoever wrote. The primal energy of these works always comes from a musical thought."

"(F)or the reinterpretation of older works (we have to be) aware ... of the history. Not just approach them freshly, but through an understanding of the story. A strict inner dramaturgy."

Jonas fell silent again for quite a while before he talked about his gift for Ivor Bolton. Jonas had discovered a score of Michael Tippett's *Midsummer Marriage* in an antiquarian bookshop some years ago and had given it to Ivor Bolton combined with the wish to hear it under his conducting.

"I'm sad that I won't live to see this opera before I die," he said. "I lost my voice at the moment when I first feel and understand how these operas should be staged. Only now am I beginning to understand ... I don't say I have the answers, but I understand the questions ... the courtesy of a question, that is what interpretation means."

In these last weeks, Peter Jonas was allowed by Daniel Barenboim, one of his oldest friends since Chicago days, to wish for a new piano piece every day, which Barenboim would play for him in the evening. Jonas was deeply gratified by these last concerts of his life. Piano solo, that was the repertoire he had come to know through his beloved sister. It was the music with which she had awakened him in his childhood. Once again, music nourished him, gave him comfort. With his last concerts for his friend, Daniel Barenboim accompanied him on his way back to his sister.

"Theater and opera are about the now, not the past. A former artistic director should have no further significance apart from the years of his directorship. When those years are over, they are as over as a performance. It lives only in memory. You did your best, whether it worked or not. You captured people's imagination and seduced them – or not. You entertained people – or you didn't. And then it's over."