Most critical commentary concerning John Adams’s 1987 opera Nixon in China focussed on the opera’s first act, a parodic reenactment of the well-known ceremonial scenes associated with the China visit. It appears that Nixon in China is an opera in the traditional mould as Richard Nixon steps down the gangway of the Spirit of 76 to a hero’s welcome. Yet beneath this veneer of realism lie rich subtexts. It emerges that what is really going on is a parody (in the satiric sense) of a grand opera, a parody in which issues of cultural representation and gender politics are worked out. These themes are brought to the fore in Acts II and III but have been ignored in most critical commentaries.

A great deal of this imbalance in the opera’s critical reception can perhaps be attributed to the fact that most media attention was directed toward composer John Adams, who gave a number of insightful interviews about the opera just after its premiere. Any comprehensive discussion of Nixon’s conception, however, has to include director Peter Sellars. I interviewed Peter Sellars not far away from his home in Los Angeles, California, in May 1994. Our conversation (transformed here into continuous narrative) began with Mr Sellars talking about the staging of the opera before moving into the critical reception of Nixon and, finally, specific moments in Acts II and III. I am extremely grateful for Mr Sellars’s permission to reproduce transcripts of our conversation here.


Most of the staging in Nixon in China is anything but realistic and yet the audience comes away with the sense that they have seen something very, very real. In fact I am busy staging a Peking opera: the staging is extremely stylized and is based on classical Chinese opera all night long. It is literally a question of ‘in Chinese opera, how would a plane land?’ The meeting with Mao, the way they each enter, their first gestures, the way they first cross each other, and all of that stuff, is taken from classical Chinese opera: that is the way two kings enter. The staging exactly follows traditional Shanghai opera and so all of the layering of it, although they are wearing suits and whatever, the hand gestures of Chairman Mao’s three secretaries, the ‘Maoettes’ (Sellars motions with his hands), all of this stuff is how you hold the pen and write in Shanghai opera, it all comes down to ‘what would this be like at the Chinese opera?’

The acrobatics in Act II scene 2, a reenactment of Madame Mao’s ballet _The Red Detachment of Women_, however, are very literal. [Our choreographer] Mark Morris – I was thrilled to find out – was deeply attached to _The Red Detachment_. One of his first experiences of dance was seeing that film of _The Red Detachment_, and all of his life he had wanted to do it. My interest in that and the Cultural Revolution predated the idea of doing Nixon. I first met John at the Monadnock Festival in New Hampshire, where they were playing his _Shaker Loops_. That summer I was busy preparing to stage for the fall one of Madame Mao’s politically correct ballets; _Shachiapang_ it was called. I was working on it very intently, plus I was working on Haydn’s _Armida_, which I had set in Vietnam. So I was reading the Kissing memoirs, and I finally decided that I could not morally stage the Madame Mao ballet. Too many people had to die so that the piece could be put on stage. The comic implications of that were more than I was prepared to take on. I just felt that I finally didn’t have the right to do that material, that people lived and died for. To put on those propagandistic ballets deals with the whole notion we have in the West that they are propagandistic and we are just trying to tell the truth, when obviously everything on the front
page of the *New York Times* is sheer propaganda. Our entire media apparatus is attuned, so that in the Gulf War we beat the drum and Saddam Hussein becomes Hitler. This week, if we want Haiti to have a different government, then we can depend on the LA *Times* to have a front cover photo that will prepare the Clinton administration’s attack on Haiti next week. In fact we live with the same controlled press and the same level of propaganda masquerading as reportage. In *Nixon in China* we wanted to get at that and start you off with ‘what is propaganda here, what is actual news? What is historic event and what is a photo opportunity?’

The televised version of *Nixon* [produced by Brian Large] couldn’t capture what was actually happening because the way I direct is always about simultaneity. For me what is interesting in drama is not even this dialectic, but what Bakhtin would call dialogic imagination, where the truth is never here or here but it’s in the dialogue of these things happening at the same time, hovering in between. The truth is not here or here. It is not that we are for Mao or against Nixon or against Nixon. All night long it is hovering somewhere. And you say ‘well, what do the creators believe, who are we rooting for?’ It’s like a Dostoyevsky novel, or a Shakespeare play: you don’t know who the author is rooting for! To my mind the mark of great drama is that you don’t have this simple conclusion: you don’t have this impression that we are pro or anti Nixon. That is what everybody came looking for, and the opera wasn’t like that.

We wanted to leave a discussion, something to talk about. The only reason that we put any of this stuff out there is to get people to discuss these issues. Therefore you create something where you don’t have a universal reaction, you exactly have the potential for a wide range of reaction. You create images, and music, and words that put the viewer on edge to get the picture after their own fashion. No two people will have the same reaction – that’s what’s exciting about the piece. It fails to dupe the answers for you: you have to fill out your own questionnaire. What drives me wild is that with so many irritating pieces of our period – God knows, Puccini and Strauss set the tone – is that the questionnaire is filled out in advance for you. I just find that really offensive. It is assumed that I am an idiot and I will just sit there and take this all in and burp afterwards, content to have my world depicted in these flat comic book terms without moral ambiguity, without larger historical consciousness.

Meanwhile, *Nixon in China* is about moral ambiguity and historical consciousness, it is also about generational crisis, it is also about people who built the world – what do you do after you built the world, what are you left with? These are real questions that are dealt with very profoundly in *Nixon*. At the same time the sense of Act II scene 2 of the ballet is hard to get on television, because they couldn’t show you everything that is happening; plus the rape is done much more powerfully in later productions than it was then. I think that we have got the tone more refined, so that it is more disturbing; at the same time the gross comedy of it is so vivid. Kissinger is the man who authorized the secret bombing of Cambodia, and that rape is the bombing of Cambodia: it’s about Henry Kissinger taking it upon himself to destroy a small nation. That’s what’s going on simultaneously.

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Most people treat the opera as if it only consisted of the first act, these big ceremonial scenes, the smell of success, the paranoia, and the jokes. Meanwhile the last act is too bizarre, so it is also just ignored. The second act is the turning point of *Nixon in China*, however.

It must be said, the audience doesn’t understand anything of what the conflict is: and their point of view in this is shared by the Nixons. What the opera finally gets to the point of is that, all night long, you have had this illusion that you understand China – here we are, it’s an open book etc. – the second act begins to imply with Pat Nixon that there are certain things that she will never know. She will never know that ‘white
tea’, during the famine, was boiled water. What is that amazing women’s chorus sung virtually a cappella at the end of that scene? ‘Please Mrs Nixon, please, watch, watch your step…’ This is the first indication that this isn’t just a vacation, and that actually you don’t know you are in this country at the moment when it is tearing itself apart; you don’t know it, because a giant façade has been put up. You come, and you think this is China, and you don’t realize we are in the middle of eating ourselves here; you have no idea who is in prison-camps; you have no idea who had to die so the red carpet could be rolled out for you this morning. Mrs Nixon, being gracious, is not able to pick up on the note of menace and concern that the women are trying to indicate, because of course they are not allowed to say anything to her.

After Pat’s aria, that scene goes into that strange late afternoon light, that strange chill of oncoming darkness which John captures in his music with such delicacy. It’s the end of a winter day when you are oddly depressed and you don’t know why and people are trying to warn you of something menacing but you don’t know what it is or how to respond because you don’t know what they are talking about. How does that chorus begin? – ‘Men like these create revolutions’ in the world, swimming like fish – communist elements – men like these build statues out of the dust . . . ’ (forgets). I am sorry, I can’t remember the rest. All of which is just to say that ‘they drank white tea’ is a reference to the famine camp and to people working in prison camps. Again it is a set of references that people don’t get. Because the opera is written for Americans by Americans we are busy identifying with the Nixons, which is ironic. In The Red Detachment, however, the lid just gets blown right off. You realize that this entire picture postcard in reality is a seething internal conflict. In the West, we don’t understand the Cultural Revolution. We didn’t then, and to this day we still don’t know where many of the bodies are buried. Many of the rival factions and so on are not in the historical record, and the people who could tell us are, in many cases, dead.

In [Act II Scene 2] the ballet scene we are dramatizing is an incredibly complex moment of internal struggle during the Cultural Revolution. Commandant Hung Chang Ching is the nice young Chinese man who as Americans we support. We say ‘this young man has a future, we are going to invest in him. Let’s throw American support behind his group’. So we are giving him foreign aid so he can appear dressed in Western clothing, which he does in the birthday party scene for the landlord. ‘How do we win the hearts of the Chinese?’ is our question as Americans, so we pick the cream of Chinese youth and say ‘here . . . ’ Meanwhile, within China, he suddenly becomes very controversial.
Madame Mao then picks him as an enemy, because she is trying to create something that is exclusively Chinese but again with her strange American models, including Gone With the Wind and so on.

Once again, you have this strange combination: Madame Mao's directive is to shoot the imperialist, whereas Hung's approach is to work with the imperialist, to use the imperialist's money, to create negotiation, and to do what China is trying to do now: do business. It's exactly what Nixon wanted to open up China for, so we could have what we have now — people in prisons making our socks. So you have this simultaneous existence in China: two competing ideologies which come from the same place. It's just a strategic question of do you use your gun and liberate yourself from your oppressor, or do you make a business deal? So we have this crisis: when Madame Mao intervenes, she says 'the gun' and forces Ching-hua to shoot the villain (alias Henry Kissinger). Consequently, the commandant's way of moving forward is destroyed, which is exactly what happened during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's factions took over and it all got out of hand. Any connexion with the West was cut off ruthlessly. Finally, we see a political training seminar, which the commandant tries to interrupt — but he can't, because he is thrown out, and eventually becomes one of the main subjects of the brutality. So you watch him go from the shining hope of the liberation to being the dishrag: rejected, hopeless, and with his entire vision of the future in shreds.

So there's that politically ironic metaphor running through it all. We also get to what it means to be in the ideology of Madame Mao in the reign of terror that ensues. We worked on the ballet a lot, over and over again. To my mind it's very exciting — the complexity of the scene and its sheer dramatic qualities. Its political nuance is superb: this is expressed through the poetry, music, and dance equally: the music doesn't tell the whole story, the words don't tell the whole story, nor do the dancers: it's the whole combination.

Another large political question is 'what is the place of women?' — to have the contrasting figures of Chiang Ch'ing and Pat, with the poor dancer in the middle (between being the plaything of Pat Nixon and modelling herself after Madame Mao), and to deal with Pat's femininity in the last act. I think that the interesting thing about reading the biographies of Pat Nixon, and the many people who were close to the family, is Pat's incredible strength, but her refusal to show any of it in public. In public she was correct and courteous, and there was no indication of what lay behind. I think that's what John captured marvellously. In the first act, the public persona is the doormat; and then in the second act she is charming and perfect, like her hair. But there is also something darker and something with a much greater aspiration, expressed in her aria 'This is prophetic'. It really surprises us: it's homespun but at the same time it's not. You feel another type of yearning, another type of political aspiration, which takes you aback because you just assume that this was a given: the classical American housewife was photographed next to the refrigerator.

In the opera, on the contrary, there is all this stuff going on — she is busy nailing eagles to the barn-door; really shocking stuff is happening.
there. And then some strange sense that she would yearn for some solidarity with these women, and their white tea, is very haunting. We really do feel the swell of emotion. Jimmy Ingalls did the most beautiful lighting at that point, which is completely absent on television. Those late afternoon skies that you know, if you have been to China, Jim really got it. All of this is really just to say that Pat really does have this amazing spirit and strength in the ballet sequence. She is one that says 'save that girl', 'these young people – we need to give them our support, and you better not...' The marvellous stuff that Pat Nixon would never have said in public; but in private she was very strong that way, apparently. There are a couple of interesting biographies of her. One of the things I know Alice Goodman used, or at least read (because to say that Alice 'used' anything is a bit strong) is a book called *The Lonely Lady of San Clemente*. That of course is a marvellous book, and there are lots of family sources. Her anger about Watergate was never expressed in public, but in private that was not the case. In public she always stepped back so Nixon could be in the spotlight, as women of her generation were trained to do, to be in support, to be your mama.

In the last act [with Mao and Chiang Ch'ing] you also get the pain: you can change China [says Chiang] but what else? What happens when the dialogue is not platonic? You've probably read those accounts of life in the Yenan hills before they marched into Shanghai and began the revolution. It was a period when they were all living in caves in Yenan, which is where a lot of the most important of Mao's addresses come – I think that it's volume 2 or volume 4 of the collected works. All his commentary on art and so on dates from the Yenan forums. He is putting together all his thoughts about art, because he is having this torrid affair with Chiang Ch'ing.

I do hope that people realize that the way the picture postcard of China is shredded across the evening is our way of saying 'hold on here'. At the same time, with all the sheer commodification of these images, the whole point is that the trip was planned as a domestic political television bonanza for the elections. Nixon knew that he could get prime-time coverage every night for a critical week just before the elections. So of course that is what is was – everything was scheduled for American television. It was all set up by Kissinger and could have been done earlier in complete different circumstances. That week Kissinger was never seen, it was Nixon every night. All of the contacts were Kissinger's, but he was kept relentlessly off stage. It turns out that there actually wasn't a story, the Shanghai communique has no substance, which is what Act 3 opens with. The leaders have stayed up all night, and they still haven't agreed on a wording which makes sense. The newspapers are beginning to notice – what is this trip, how much substance is there here?

You have to understand that we were writing this opera in the second term of the Reagan era. In Washington, which is where I was, and where Alice, John, and me had our meetings, we had finally perfected government by press release, there was no substance, the Reagan White House would simply realize photo-opportunities and publicity events. Meanwhile, behind closed doors, they were tearing the country apart, dividing profits among their close friends, slashing budgets, putting cities deeply in the hole. That whole notion of government by press release, where there is no substance, just a photo-opportunity, became the issue very powerfully in *Nixon in China*. Indeed, the first act ends with this giant photo. Then we say 'Wait a minute'. The second act goes behind that photo, and starts tearing it to bits; and the third act gets far away from the press and any official posing: which is the point of Mao stepping out of his poster, which was a poster not a person.

The big shock, upon which there was a lot of comment – and for years it was a real tension-point – was the first night of rehearsal in Houston, the first reading of the score. I was so moved by that third act, I said 'this can't be a stupid party scene'. I changed the set and changed the entire conception just after we sang through the piece. That night, I just said 'forget it, get rid of the party scene, get the band offstage'. The way it had originally been designed we had a big party scene – the tables were supposed to come back, the whole thing. We removed everything and I had them make those beds. That night I called Adrianne from Houston and said 'we need six beds that look like coffins.' I had slept in Peace Hotel in Shanghai, that hotel where Noel Coward wrote *Private Lives*. The beds were exactly like coffins, it was an incredible feeling, I had a powerful image of that. That act is such a nocturnal scene, the music is so nocturnal, the sense of the sex of going to bed and at the same time of being laid to rest – those images. The night that that happened, John was shocked, Alice was shocked. John was resistant for years, really – he was nice about it, though.

They all thought there should be some kind of party, things festooned around, a tired band, and that we should really do the tangos – basically
what’s in The Chairman Dances. Now that scene has nothing to do with The Chairman Dances, that kind of rumba sequence we have made very short in the staging of it. The other thing is that I have changed the staging very profoundly – after the Tienanmen massacre, three years into the life of the piece. For Los Angeles I restaged the last act.

Coming to this opera after the Tienanmen massacre we felt ‘let’s get serious.’ So the last act is actually staged now with the staging that was there at Houston but with many layers on top of it. It is staged as Chou En-lai’s funeral: the previous time that troops cleared Tienanmen square. Because when Chou En-lai died, spontaneously the next day there was a massive demonstration. Tienanmen Square was filled with flowers and memorials, and Mao ordered everyone to be removed. Mao himself died shortly after, but it was one of his most bitter moments. So I staged the whole last scene with Chou En-lai reflecting in his coffin and coming out of his death bed, trying to argue from the grave with everyone who was still alive. This entire procession of all these choruses that we have seen returns and puts flowers around his bed. There is this giant funeral procession and people come and weep over his open casket, which is what his bed becomes.

Kissinger still goes off to the toilet but doesn’t come back. (For two years I brought him back, but then finally I left him off). Meanwhile I am staging Henry’s affairs with the Maoettes. It actually turns into a whole plot of the Maoettes versus Madame Mao: which of course was what happened. Nancy T’ang would no longer allow Chiang Ch’ing access to Mao, and that was when there were big crises late in the Cultural Revolution, when the secretaries took over. Nancy cut off Madame Mao’s financial allowances and Madame Mao kept making these trips to see Mao at his summer retreat and couldn’t get to see him; we staged all of that. First of all the Maoettes beaver Henry and the confrontation between Madame Mao and the Maoettes. That’s Mao ‘who chose these numbers?’ When Henry says ‘all of us, the people’s choice’ it’s Henry and the Maoettes versus Madame Mao. So it’s ‘What is the people’s choice here?’ Again ‘it’s the future of China, and we are directing it not you, now all communications will come through us instead of through you.’ So I staged that whole innerness: each one of the Maoettes has their own separate plot in the last act, which is not in the televised version at all. The Nancy T’ang figure is sleeping with Henry; the older one, the second secretary, does this whole thing now where she has this lonely confrontation with Mao in the hallway in the middle of the night – just this amazing set of things. Madame Mao knows Mao is making out with the secretaries.

You are not allowed to show that in public in China still. That may change ten years from now but at the moment it remains unacceptable. The Xinhua Press Agency reviewed Nixon and said ‘this opera could be shown in China, except for the treatment of the sexual relations of the historical figures which is not acceptable.’ During the same section, we then have this long procession of mourners while Mao realizes something alarming is going on. That’s what interrupts his lovemaking with Madame Mao. Then he goes to his room and he is frightened. There’s also this big crisis after Chou En-lai’s death, of who’s going to run the country, which is what builds into the extremely dramatic and intense music just before ‘Unnamed children and nameless wives’, that astonishing ensemble. Mao starts ‘Our few subjectivist mistakes’ and there’s that duet. What happens is at Chou En-lai’s death we then have this vision of the country without Mao, where Ch’ing doesn’t have Mao to stand up for her and the portrait of Mao is removed. The guards come in and haul it all away and get rid of everything. Earlier, I forgot to say, Kissinger goes to the toilet by going up the aeroplane stairs into the Mao poster’s mouth and shuts the door. You have the recapitulation of the earlier entrance of coming down the aeroplane stairs. It’s a strange and ironic moment. Then Chou starts singing ‘We saw our parents’ nakedness, rivers of blood will be required to cover them’ as we see Kissinger walking up the red carpet behind him, like a tongue coming out of Mao’s mouth. So Kissinger is walking up this river of blood while Chou is singing. Those images are not there in Houston, you can’t see any of this stuff, some of it I hadn’t staged yet.

Finally, Madame Mao is left desperate and running around, the guards won’t pay attention to her and she is suddenly persona non grata anyway. After everyone has obeyed her commands, ‘I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung’ at the end of the second act, suddenly she can’t do anything at all, she’s in a total panic. That’s when Mao comes and grabs her and begins her trial, ‘your few subjectivist mistakes’; while Chou En-lai rises from his grave, haunted, and not able to sleep. The whole act becomes about Chou En-lai’s inability to sleep in the grave, because his work is unfinished and he is not prepared to die. He still looks at China and he can’t go to sleep, he can’t stop, his work isn’t finished, and he is restless in the grave. So he keeps being laid to rest with the flowers and so on, but he keeps getting up and
saying 'I can't finish yet, I can't'. And he keeps on being laid to rest and keeps getting up and pressing on. The way each of those interventions works becomes progressively more pointed and haunting. Then we stage Mao's funeral, because Mao should die. Again as the honour guard come in and drape the Chinese flag over Chou En-lai, the honour guard drape it over Mao. Mao has a heart attack which is just like a seizure - 'What do you think of that Karl Marx', bmm bmm. John has this thing in the music of the heart stopping.

It's in the music. I am trying to stage the music and at the same time stage history, so that the last act follows Chinese history very closely and shows you each of these stages of the end of the régime. Alice [Goodman] really did absorb this history very profoundly and then worked for that, so that these images do lend themselves to the events that subsequently happened. Interestingly Alice was officially recapitulating events in the thirties, the wild apricots and all of that, the riding incident when Chou En-lai broke his arm - the legend in that Madame Mao pushed him from his horse because she didn't want him to be number two, she wanted to be number two - that rivalry.

With that little section of 'revolution is a boys' game' again the question 'will we include girls?' 'Here's this girl who wants to be a part of our revolution coming to Yenan, I'm fucking her every night, and I enjoy her dance music that she is bringing, but do we let her be a revolutionary figure?' 'Or is she is just going to be my love-interest?' So, in that whole 'revolution is a boys' game' section and 'we ate wild apricots', Alice is recapitulating the rivalry between Madame Mao and Chou En-lai in the Yenan hills. 'Who is it that's going to lead this revolution? Is it for boys or can girls play too?'

Meanwhile Chou En-lai was busy saving people from her, and quietly opposing her throughout the entire Cultural Revolution, which is the last image of Act II with them facing off while China is being torn to shreds behind them. There's this other dimension to Act III now where it really begins to give the fullness of what's going on in the music.

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People assumed that they knew this piece but, like any great piece, it just keeps growing as you realize its depth, as you begin to dive deeper into its layers. Some people think that we have made Mao far too menacing and militaristic, and that he was much more of the sage; 'our music is too aggressive', for example, is a comment. Again a lot of Chinese people are a little taken aback by the sexual images. At the same time everyone admits that is what happened. I think that is what is interesting about the piece: everyone comes to it with things they like and don't like, and things about which they said 'that's exactly it' or things where they said 'no, no, no, it's really different from that'. That's exciting, and I think that's correct. What's important for me is that this is one of very few pieces in the West to take up this subject-matter, and not treat China the way Aida treated Egypt: actually to say 'Chinese people had their story and their history, and you may know what it is, but it's happening'. Meanwhile we are walking into it so much with the American subtext: we are looking for the little clues of Nixon losing his mind and stuff like that. The audience in America and the West is constantly reading into every little gesture of Nixon. We are so stunned by Jim Maddalena because we carry Nixon into the room with us, whereas Mao is just a poster.

The fact that American audiences all clapped when Nixon came out of the aircraft is supposed to happen. We staged it for that, it's great theater, it's politically correct, and it's a thrilling moment. The combination of John's music and the sense of occasion, and then the visualization, is pretty spectacular. Again, I think that the opera gets reviewed and thought of as that moment - a lot. That moment is so powerful it freezes itself into your mind. The other thing is that parts of the opera connect so powerfully to images we all have had implanted in us already, so that when we see the photograph that we have grown up with, there's a spontaneous connexion - the toast, the coming out of the plane. When we stage those actual photographs, we are reliving history, and you were there. At the same time I think, then, the opera begins to make the point of how staged those photographs were, and how in fact history was staged. All of this is a set up. And what is going on behind the set-up? To my mind that is where the opera surprises; nobody knows what Nixon and Mao talked about.

The people who thought this was an opera of easy promotion for Nixon were taken in by the seductive surface of the piece. Again, it is meant to be seductive: we are dealing with the seductiveness of the entire trip. At the same time the opera doesn't end there, it keeps going. Anyone who really looks at it a second time realizes that even that actual surface has the most astonishing things happening in it, when you actually listen to what they are saying, and deal with the way that the music is undercutting the words in really extraordinary ways, and revealing all kinds of metabolic irregularities. People fail to grasp quite how ironic 'Comrades and friends let us join hands' is on Nixon's part [during the
Study Scene, Act I Scene 2]. In fact somebody just made a documentary on me and used that as the crowning moment, which is an embarrassing misreading – we staged that as highly ironic and suspect! Somebody literally came along and though that was most moving – John understands the simplicity of that, how simple-minded it is, and how disingenuous it is coming from the people who were secretly bombing Cambodia, and at the same time deeply sincere. Nixon is sitting there, he has always imagined himself as an intellectual and a statesman, but he is incredibly outclassed by Mao. Which shocks him, because he thinks he is completely briefed – he knows what the yellow crane is, he thinks, and then shows how he doesn’t, he is ready to talk about Li Li-san. And Mao couldn’t care less. He is moving in a completely different plane. Nixon has always imagined himself as the man with the great historical overview. When he comes to somebody who has a historical overview from much higher up, he is totally shocked. He begins to think, for one of the first times in his life, beyond sheer self-interest and the chess-board element, and comes up with this strange thing of ‘what are we leaving for the next generation when we send children abroad?’ It’s about withdrawing from Vietnam, finally; when did that moment occur for the man who escalated the Vietnam war? That’s what’s interesting about that scene.

There are also the notions of traditional grand opera which surround the piece. When the opera was premiered everything was devoted to Aida – we were the other thing that Houston opera was doing. Which is ironic, as that is not how history will remember it. That’s why there are all these slightly amusing Aida references in Nixon throughout the evening, why we make all the elephant jokes: partly it’s the Republican party, but we also know that we are in repertory with Aida. There are all of these ironic references to grand opera and that grand opera in particular. Bring on the elephants! We knew the audience would be seeing Aida the night before or the night after. We were dealing with those questions of what is grand opera, and what is the imperialist tradition of moving into Egypt, and saying ‘we are now doing an opera about Egypt’. We were very aware of those questions of otherness and quite consciously commenting on that.

That Nixon is a spectacular entertainment has been grasped, but that it has deeper layers of meaning was not generally remarked upon. When it was premiered it was a novelty item – ‘let’s cash in on Nixon’ – just as Nixon’s death just now created this giant caffuffle, hoopla, and commentary non-stop for two weeks. It was pushing everyone’s buttons – Bloomingdales had done China that year. That Nixon in China is actually as interesting about Chinese history as it is American history escaped western commentary by and large...