

DOING IT RIGHT

Designs for 'Peter Grimes'

Richard V. West



IN LATE 1968, I had the pleasure of visiting Rockwell Kent at Asgaard in connection with the exhibition I was organizing for the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.¹ My main purpose was to view the paintings that were on display in the house and stored in the studio. I toured the house with Rockwell from the basement storage area (haven for his books and massive correspondence files) to the main floor, where I was introduced to his Greenland memorabilia, flute, grand piano and bar. On a tour of the second-floor bedrooms and hallways, I saw the framed costume and set design drawings that he had done for a production of Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*. Apparently the production had never been mounted; at least, not with Kent's designs.

As an admirer of Britten's music, I was intrigued by the drawings, but I never pursued the subject further with Rockwell nor discovered the reason the designs were not used. However, the sequel to *It's Me O Lord* that Kent was working on at the time of his death and two related contemporary letters describe in some detail the origin of the commission, his approach to it and his struggles to create an accurate historical setting that also successfully realized the dramatic needs of operatic performance.

Kent received the commission early in 1965, shortly after his return from a visit to the Soviet Union. It was a request from the most important opera there, the Kirov State Academic Theatre of Ballet and Opera in Leningrad,² to design the sets and costumes for a planned production of Britten's *Peter Grimes*. At a time when Kent's reputation was at low ebb in the United States and interest in his work as an artist was practically nil, the commission excited him, but also concerned and puzzled him. As he wrote:

*I was asked by the Kirov Ballet and Opera Company to design stage sets for the Benjamin Britten opera, Peter Grimes. I, like a fool, accepted the commission and, in due time, got to work on it. I had done no stage design and consequently knew nothing of its presumably rigid conventions, limitations and demands. And why, I wondered, did they pick me, a known realist in art, to do it.*³

Despite his reservations, Kent soon began to work feverishly on the project. He adopted an approach that had typified his earlier *Moby-Dick* and *Complete Works of Shakespeare* commissions: realizations based on extensive research of the historical setting of the drama and the costumes of the protagonists.

The opera is set in Aldeburgh, a fishing town on the east coast

of England; Kent needed to know what the town and its setting looked like. He lost no time in writing to Sir Francis Meynell, a British publisher and poet who was sympathetic to Kent and shared many of the artist's political beliefs, asking for images of English fishing villages of the early nineteenth century:

*I am just trying to get started at the job now and find myself seriously hampered by my inability to get to New York and conduct the necessary research. So, Francis, I am writing to beg you to help me to the extent ... of sending me some pictures of an English East Coast fishing village of the beginning, if possible, of the early Nineteenth Century. Aldeburgh ... and its waterfront architecture should be just what I want. ... I need hardly say how excited I am at having such a commission. It is based on my illustrations for "Moby-Dick," which, published in the USSR, had a tremendous success. It is perhaps rash of me to attempt a commission of this sort, but I have found their pleadings that I do it irresistible.*⁴

It is not surprising that Kent found this opportunity "irresistible." In the first two decades of his career he had personally witnessed scenes of seagoing tragedy: Monhegan lobstermen and fishermen lost at sea and later, more poignantly, his experience in Brigus, Newfoundland, during the terrible winter of 1914 when fishing towns throughout the province were devastated by twin seal-fishing disasters that are still remembered and memorialized in that province.⁵ These experiences must have haunted Kent as he set out to capture not only the historical reality of Aldeburgh, but the gritty essence of a fisherman's life. In this, he was right in step not only with the poet George Crabbe, author of the original story, but the composer himself. When the opera was premiered in Great Britain as part of the reopening of the Sadler's Wells Opera after World War II, Britten wrote:

*For most of my life I have lived closely in touch with the sea. My parents' house in Lowestoft directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was coloured by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships on to our coast and ate away whole stretches of the neighbouring cliffs. In writing Peter Grimes, I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea...*⁶



In his research, Kent dismissed Joseph Novak's set design from the 1948 premiere at the Metropolitan Opera (shown left) as "a fantasy in Disneyland." He made better use of a photograph of the Moot Hall (above), which had been erected in Aldeburgh in the first half of the 16th century.

In this context, it is not hard to see in Kent's paintings such as *Down to the Sea*, 1910, *Bones of Ships*, ca. 1914, and *Shipwreck, Coast of Ireland*, ca. 1926-30 (probably inspired by an historical shipwreck off the coast of County Donegal)⁷ as the artist's responses to the same struggles referred to by Britten. Kent states that he immersed himself in the opera and its story and was critical of previous productions for imposing artistic fantasy over the tragic scenario:

We got the opera's score and beautiful recordings of the music, and traced its story to its roots in the poet George Crabbe's long work The Borough to its scene in the town of Aldeburgh.... [W]e got pictures and descriptions of the town, all of which displayed the beautiful Elizabethan town hall as its outstanding feature, around and in which much

*of the opera's action, as Britten's score demanded, centered. On the cover of the printed score was shown Aldeburgh as represented in an English production of the opera. It might have been a fantasy in Disneyland. Our Metropolitan Opera having some years earlier staged Peter Grimes, I wrote to Rudolf Bing for pictures of it. He most courteously complied and sent me some—Disneyland again! No wonder, I concluded, that the Russians want a realist to do it. And what a chance they'd given me to do it right.*⁸

This begs the question: Did Kent "do it right?" Unfortunately, the finished drawings that Kent had on display at Asgaard were presumably lost in the fire that consumed so much of his life work; the finished drawings and specifications submitted to the Kirov may be somewhere in the archives of the Mariinsky Theater. What we do have appears to be the artist's preliminary working sketches plus a few finished depictions of the stage sets that were produced as he started to develop his ideas.⁹ Sketchy as some of them are, however, they are important as documents of Kent's process of shaping his ideas to fit the dictates and requirements (as he saw them) of the opera.

There is no question that the tragic story of *Peter Grimes* resonated with Kent. Britten had selected Montagu Slater, a member of the Communist Party of Britain, editor of the *Left Review*, and a well-known journalist, critic and playwright, to write the libretto based on Crabbe's poem. Among Kent's *Peter Grimes* drawings is an unattributed typescript entitled "Man Against the Masses" that collates reviews and essays about the opera from various sources, such as the literary critic Edmund Wilson, as well as an outline of the plot and a list of the characters, which Kent may have used for reference. From the point of political authorship and content, then, Kent and the Kirov would seem to have been in step. Kent's questioning of why the Kirov offered the commission to him as a realist, however, had some validity. The Kirov was the successor to the Mariinsky Theater, known for its nineteenth-century grandeur and, even under the Soviets, the presenter of popular spectacles. The whole artistic vision of the Kirov administration would seem to have been to favor productions that emphasized stagecraft, special effects



Kent's vision of the title character. (Archives of American Art)

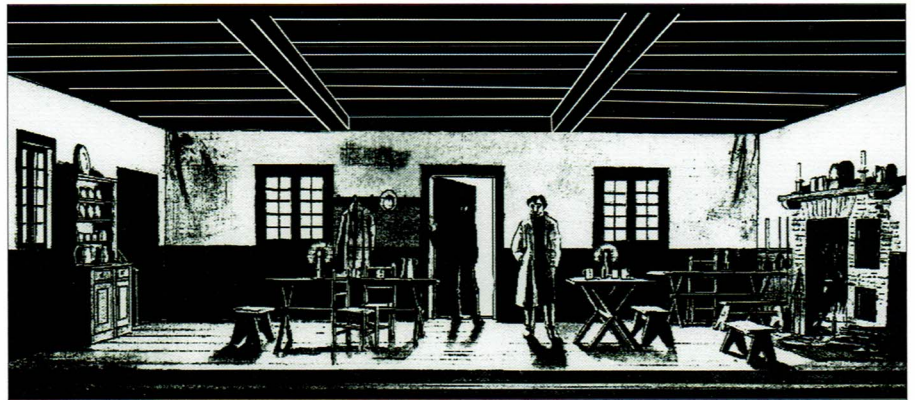
(such as the storms that punctuate the plot of *Peter Grimes*) and historical visual splendor for its own sake.

Kent, however, created a vision that was historically based and firmly tied to the times in which the opera is set. His interpretation, intended to be a realistic presentation that captured the appearance and spirit of a specific era in costume and architecture, was one that had worked well in his illustrations; it apparently failed to impress the artistic producers of the Kirov. His designs were not Disneyland material. Ultimately, his designs were not used. In a later letter to Sir Francis Meynell, the artist reported his feelings about the rejection of his designs:

"Peter Grimes" has now been produced by the Kirov Opera and Ballet Company ... it has had, we are told, a great success ... [T]he scenery, unhappily for me—and for the opera as Benjamin Britten intended it to be—is definitely not by me, despite my being mentioned in the Company's publicity as having collaborated in the production.

Being a realist in art, I had assumed on reading the libretto of the opera that its setting was to be the actual town of Aldeburgh and that I should aim at a true representation of Aldeburgh and its Moot Hall as it presumably appeared in the assigned period of the opera, 1830. After spending several weeks on that premise, I heard for the first time from Mme. Slutskaya, the producer, and learned that her conception of the scenery was highly romantic and completely unrelated to the town of Aldeburgh, or to any English fishing town of any period. We exchanged a few letters, and I sent her a number of preliminary sketches, only to realize that the realism I was aiming for and painstakingly trying to achieve was at complete variance with her own completely romantic ideas.... Nevertheless, in response to a cabled plea from the General Manager of the Kirov Company, I resumed my work—finally sending a complete set of finished designs for scenery and costumes. From photographs that have been sent me of the actual Leningrad production it was obvious that nothing I had done was considered to be of any use.

Since Benjamin Britten will probably get to see the Leningrad production and will certainly receive photographs of it, I beg you to assure him that, despite the mention of me as



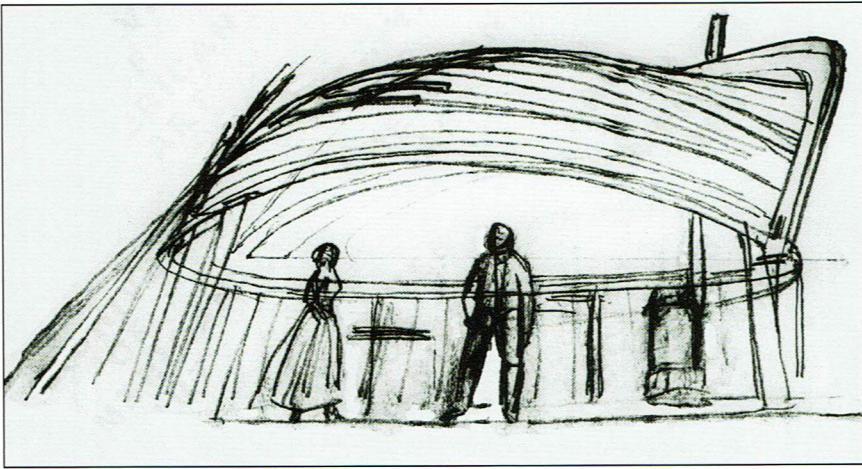
Peter Grimes, three of Kent's renderings, gouache and ink. (Archives of American Art)

Top: Act I, Scene 1, the opera's principle setting, described in the composer's libretto as "Street by the sea: Moot Hall exterior with its outside staircase."

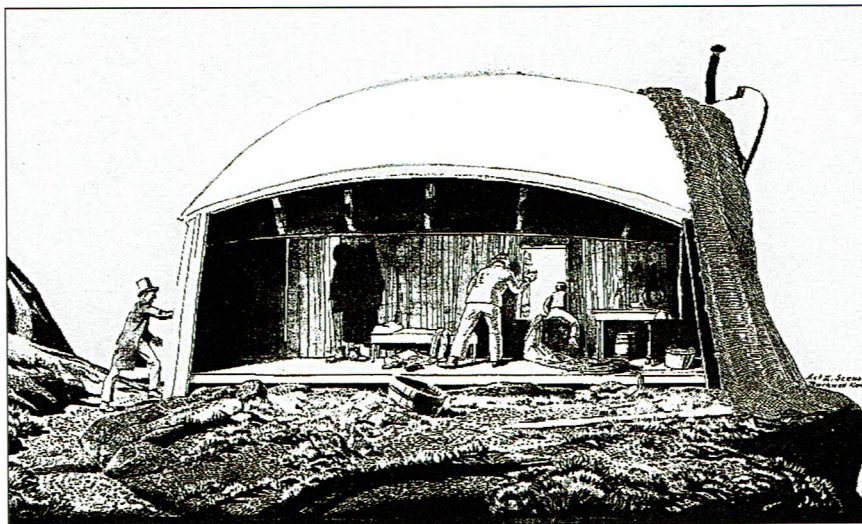
Above: Act I, Scene 2, the interior of the Boar, "typical main room of a country pub. No bar."

Below: Act III, Scene 1, "in moonlight," the exteriors of Moot Hall and the Boar.





Kent's preliminary pencil sketch of Act II, Scene 2. This is Peter's hut: "an upturned boat. It is on the whole shipshape, though bare and forbidding. Ropes coiled, nets, kegs and casks furnish the place. It is lighted by a skylight. There are two doors, one (back center) opens on the cliff, the other, downstage, opens on the road." (Archives of American Art)



Kent's final ink rendering of the same scene. He shows the overturned boat scantily furnished, its hull draped with a fishnet. Its setting on a perilous cliff is clearly delineated on the right side. (Archives of American Art)



In the summer of 2013, the Aldeburgh Festival staged Peter Grimes in its natural setting on Aldeburgh beach. The design by Leslie Travers hearkened to the realism of Kent's approach.

associated with the designing of the stage sets and costumes, I had nothing whatever to do with either. And, moreover, judging from the pictures I have seen, I could never have been brought to do such violence to the composer's clearly specified intentions.¹⁰

But Kent may have had the last word. In a critically acclaimed 2013 production of the opera presented in Aldeburgh as part of the famed annual music festival established by Britten, Kent's vision of the opera seems to have been echoed and validated after almost five decades. Perhaps, he had "done it right."

NOTES

Items from the Rockwell Kent Papers in the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution are cited as RKP.

1. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, "Rockwell Kent: The Early Years," Sept. to Dec. 1969.
2. Originally the Mariinsky Theater, it was renamed in the Soviet era, and the original name restored after the fall of the USSR, when Leningrad once again became St. Petersburg.
3. RKP, *It's Me O Lord* (unpublished continuation), reel 5741, frame 231.
4. RKP, Kent to Francis Meynell, 5 Feb. 1965, reel 5211, frames 1522-23.
5. Now known in Newfoundland as the 1914 Sealing Disaster, it refers to two separate, simultaneous tragedies on the sea in the spring of 1914. The *SS Southern Cross* and *SS Newfoundland* suffered a combined loss of 251 men, leaving hardly any person or community in Newfoundland unaffected. Kent's manuscript account of this disaster, "A Tragedy of Newfoundland," was published in the *Rockwell Kent Review*, Volume XL, No. 1, 2014, 9-12.
6. Benjamin Britten, *Introduction to the Opera*, Sadler's Wells Theatre, 7 June 1945.
7. Christy Gillespie, "The Background to Rockwell Kent's Irish Oil Painting: Shipwreck, Coast of Ireland: And Women Must Weep," *Kent Collector*, Summer 2010, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 5-9.
8. RKP, *It's Me O Lord* (unpublished continuation), reel 5741, frame 231.
9. RKP, Peter Grimes Drawings, reel 5741, frames 242-323.
10. RKP, Kent to Meynell, 13 Sept. 1965, reel 5211, frames 11524-25. The mention of Kent suggests that the Kirov was sensitive to his high regard in the USSR and the political implications of his having taken part in the production. This is supported by musicologist Justin Vickers in a 2017 essay on the mixed acceptance of Britten's music there during the 1960s. Vickers refers specifically to the 1965 *Peter Grimes* as an ideological gamble by the Kirov: "[T]he risk remained that an opera in the official repertoire of a major Soviet theater would have been subjected to the constant scrutiny of authorities and could be discontinued purely for ideological reasons." (Vicki P. Strocher and Justin Vickers eds., *Benjamin Britten Studies: Essays on an Inexplicit Art*, Boydell Press, 2017, pp. 395-96.) This raises the possibility that Kent was offered the commission to hedge the Kirov's bet on the production's initial acceptance by the Soviet authorities, hence explaining the urgently cabled plea not to abandon it.