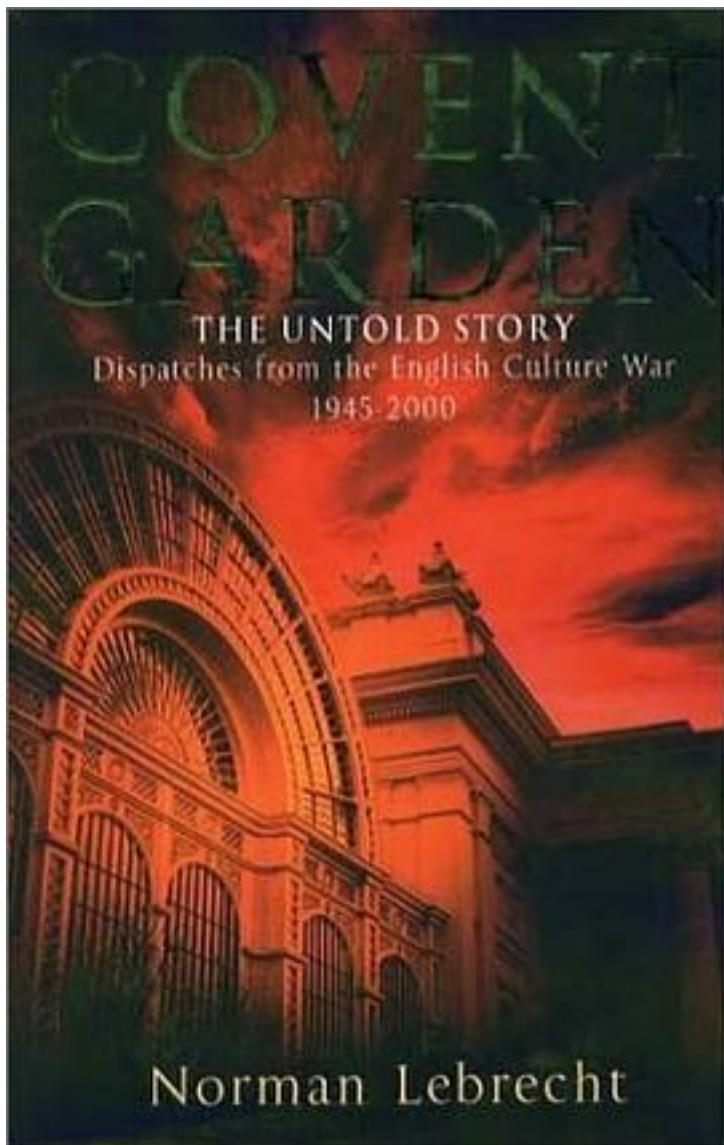


Covent Garden, the Untold Story



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From 1732 until World War II, London's privately owned and operated Royal Opera House (ROH) at Covent Garden was reflective of the country it served -- the rich and noble enjoyed performances in the luxury of the theater and concert hall while the rest of the classes viewed the shows from the dimly-lit top gallery. In 1945, with Britain in financial crisis, its cities in ruins, and its citizens living on strict food and fuel rations, Covent Garden was reborn as a public company after economist Maynard Keynes called for state money to support an Arts Council and Royal Opera House, under his own chairmanship, that would resurrect the nation's fortunes and spirit through the preservation of English culture and performing arts. From that point on, says Norman Lebrecht, ROH, with its Royal Opera and Royal Ballet companies, purported to conduct this postwar national mission while attaching itself to the social elite, creating a recipe for disaster that finally exploded half a century later when the world-class Covent Garden was pushed to the brink of bankruptcy.

In this comprehensive and unvarnished history, Lebrecht explains the astonishing failure of an institution that was designed to define a nation. Four chief executives came and went in eighteen months, and the off-stage dramas, catastrophes, misadventures, and infighting became comic fodder for the press and Parliament. Lebrecht's illuminating account of the rise, decline, and fall of the ROH during the second half of the twentieth century is situated within the broader context of upheavals and changes in English cultural life that have eroded the very notion of "Englishness" and transformed the country from heroic poverty to heartless wealth.

With unprecedented access to private archives and key players, Lebrecht recounts an intriguing tale of special relationships between internal management and successive governments and arts councils, hidden public cash, corruption, anti-semitism, and campaigns against homosexuals. He also provides colorful details about the many celebrated performers and personalities, including Maria Callas, Rudolf Nureyev, Margot Fonteyn, Georg Solti, and Kiri te Kanawa, who helped shape Covent Garden's storied traditions.

Lebrecht concludes by offering thoughts on what the future holds for this notable institution, arguing that Covent Garden should be privatized along the same lines as the Metropolitan Opera.

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书评

In the late 1990s, the Royal Opera House, which was barely fifty years old as a performance institution, suffered a managerial and financial crisis which brought it under critical scrutiny, including investigation by a Parliamentary committee and attacks in...

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