



Observer

Opera

The Observer

Billy Budd– the aye-eyes have it

Grand theatre, Leeds; Royal Opera House, London

Roderick Williams is a winning Billy Budd in Opera North's top-notch production.



Stephen Richardson (Dansker), Daniel Norman (Red Whiskers), Roderick Williams (Billy Budd), Eddie Wade (Donald) and members of the cast and the chorus of Opera North in Billy Budd. Photograph: Clive Barda

Kate Kellaway

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Britten's opera opens biliously – the seasick swell lulls you into a true sense of insecurity. **Billy Budd** is as much an endurance test to watch as Shakespeare's *Othello* (its librettists, EM Forster and Eric Crozier, were aware of the echo). [Orpha Phelan](#)'s attentive production brings this tremendous work into focus – but brace yourself for the feel-bad factor. Enter Captain Edward Fairfax Vere, in long buff coat. “What have I done?” he sings, and repeats the question more faintly, becoming his own echo, consumed with

guilt at having, long ago, helped condemn an innocent sailor, Billy Budd, to hang.



Alan Oke as Captain Vere. Photograph: Clive Barda

[Alan Oke](#) is superb as the ancient mariner – his wan severity reminiscent of Peter Pears (whose [entire performance](#) can still be seen on YouTube). Behind him are distressed grey walls, as if the designer had given up on the job (which Leslie Travers very much has not). The shattered wall is, as we move into extended flashback, hoisted to suggest, ingeniously, a sail. The ship (the Indomitable by name only) is elegantly sketchy, not obviously seaworthy, a shiver-me-timbers vessel. And the mist rolls in, the weather colluding with the blurred morals on board.

[Opera North](#)'s chorus is top-notch. **Naval hierarchy is emphasised by Thomas C Hase's lighting that picks out the golden epaulettes of officers who stroll on the bridge above, and plunges the calico crew that toils below into shade.** Their singing is steeped in reluctance: they scrub the decks as if in a trance. Britten is routinely hailed as a virtuoso interpreter of words but what strikes most in this opera is how astonishingly precise – close to verbal – the wordless music is. The undulating orchestral tumult is indicative of brutality to come. John Claggart, master-at-arms, is ushered in with a phrase of feline notes: no words needed to warn us further. As Claggart, Alastair Miles is wonderfully intimidating, with a voice that holds fast and a withheld officiousness (he makes you want to hiss, as if at a pantomime baddie).

Claggart is the opera's Iago, and Billy's cravat (which Claggart confiscates) the equivalent of Desdemona's handkerchief – if differently employed. There is a suggestion that he is sexually attracted to Billy and repelled by temptation: he pulls the cravat from his own neck, as if it were tainted, and asks: “What hope is there in my own dark world?” It is tempting to see the opera as a period piece about homosexuality, but Britten and Forster have carefully covered their tracks. And for today's audience there is even more to it. There is a grimly topical scene in which a handful of officers, swigging grog, express their dislike of the French, like tipsy Brexiters – a reminder there is nothing new about British xenophobia.



Roderick Williams, top, as Billy Budd. Photograph: Clive Barda

But the evening is made, above all, by [Roderick Williams](#)'s Billy Budd. He is winning – he beguiles throughout, a happy-go-unlucky chap. Billy admits he cannot read but claims he can sing – and who could disagree? At the end, he memorably makes a virtue of simplicity, facing death, on an empty stage, with soaring stoicism. Garry Walker conducts with finesse, and the Opera North orchestra sustains tension with aplomb. Only one vexation: the absence of surtitles. Too many words escaped on a sea breeze.