

Afterwards we were invited to dine at the home of the arrangers of the concerts, the Larssons, a family of builders in Gärds-vik. What could be more natural than that Jussi and I should there devote some time to our national sport, arm-wrestling. The outcome in this instance was less of a foregone conclusion than had been our earlier musical competition, and the hilarious struggle favoured first one and then the other, with intense exertion on both sides.

Some time later that year one could read in the newspapers that Jussi had had to cancel engagements in America because of an attack of sciatica. When I subsequently met him he tried to lay the blame on me. "You caused this bit of mischief that evening on Ljusterö." I was able to object, rightly I think, that sciatica usually affects the leg and that we had been armwrestling, not playing tug-of-war. Later on there were some further concerts. No one should imagine that Jussi was any sort of prima donna who had to be persuaded to take part. Rather, there came to be established an amusing little ritual in which he would ring up and plead for us to help out again for a good cause, it was so enjoyable, etc.—as if persuasion were needed!

In August 1958 he had hardly had time to leave the platform after all the applause before he learned that the painting of the community centre was now assured, but that the kitchen needed doing up. Jussi's answer was characteristic: "We're sure to get enough for that after a bit more 'shouting' next time." The next time was the 17th August 1960, his penultimate official performance. It should actually have taken place six days earlier, but had had to be postponed because he was in hospital with heart trouble. But now he sang as never before. None of us who was there will ever forget the greatly loved, final encore, "Land, du välsignade" [Thou, blessed country]...

Proudly may one remember that he was Swedish, Sweden to your honour, Sweden.¹ ■

¹ An adaptation of the final lines of Ragnar Althén's "Land, du välsignade".

Working for Jussi

By Bertil Hagman



*Bertil Hagman was born in 1919 and grew up in Stockholm. He studied at the universities of Stockholm and Uppsala, and was productive as a writer beginning in the early 1940s, especially in the fields of opera and ballet, for the Svenska Dagbladet newspaper and various periodicals. In 1957, he came to the Royal Opera in Stockholm as press officer and program editor and remained there until his retirement in 1985. In just a few months after Jussi Björling's death in September 1960, Hagman succeeded in editing the Minnesbok from which the essays here have been taken. He also edited the book by Birgit Nilsson that was published in English in 1981 as *My Life in Pictures*. Among his later books was *Guldåldrar och guldroster* (Golden ages and golden voices) in 2001, with a foreword by Birgit Nilsson. Bertil Hagman died in 2008.*

For the final vignette in this memorial book let us ask some of those at the Royal Opera, who over a number of years saw Jussi Björling develop from the poor but talented dalmas into the world famous tenor, what it was like to work with and for him. Their opinions are variations

on the one theme: a god-given voice, a musical genius, a conscientious and humble artist, and a whole-hearted friend.

We begin in the foyer at the box-office for it is there, of course, that the performance also begins. During a twenty year period the most faithful gathered there as Jussi's guest performances approached when one could be as sure as one can be about anything of being able to put up the "SOLD OUT" sign. Selling tickets for the 128 occasions on which Jussi appeared as a guest artist at the Royal Opera was both easy and difficult: easy in that the tickets were usually sold out within a couple of hours—it was just a matter of having everything organised before selling-time began and then counting the takings afterwards; difficult because people were so disappointed when there was a cancellation and money had to be returned. Naturally such things were trying, but as a rule the public accepted the situation with understanding and took their places in the queue again the next time. It could of course be that sales were a bit sluggish if Jussi had cancelled on one or more occasions just prior to a performance or if the newspapers had had to report that the public's idol had come down with a cold. This occurred, for example, a couple of years ago when Jussi was to sing des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut* for the first time in several years. The prospects looked alarming, for only a few days earlier he had been forced to discontinue a concert at the Malmö Municipal Theatre (right in the middle of an aria from *Manon Lescaut* moreover) because his voice had totally failed him following a severe and prolonged cold and a strenuous autumn schedule in the U.S.A. The newspapers had announced that he would sing on a certain day, but this guest appearance had had to be put off for a few days. The actual performance was, it is true, on a Saturday, but the date was 20th December, a time when audience attendance is normally poor. At any rate, people had been scared off by the notice of indisposition and when the performance

took place there were still thirty or so unsold seats in the stalls. This, though, was an exception. Nine times out of ten the tickets were completely sold out within a couple of hours. Only once in a while would there still be a few seats in the stalls remaining unsold when the box-office closed for the day.

The oldest member of the box-office staff is **Vera Olsson** who has worked there since 1932 and who is always the same invariably calm presence on the telephone or behind the counter no matter how difficult or undecided the customer might be.

"Sometimes the first customers arrived as early as the afternoon of the day before ticket sales began," she relates. "They would come when they had finished work at 5 o'clock and wait in the foyer until the doors were closed after the evening's performance. Up till 8 o'clock the next morning they had to queue outside, but when the doorman arrived they were let in. Often we had long waiting lists; people rang and asked us to reserve any returned tickets, but tickets were very rarely brought back. People held on to them as though they were precious stones. The regulations don't allow us to buy back tickets, but we took them back on commission and often they would be sold as soon as the customer handed them over. Sometimes we sent people who wanted to return tickets directly to the Grand Hotel where the doorman would receive them with open arms. There were always foreign visitors who wanted to get hold of tickets to Jussi Björling's performances at any price."

Bertil Berg, the Royal Opera's doorman since 1956, tells the same story. When he started, loyal customers had to contend with certain injustices. On occasion, purchasers would employ a town-messenger to buy up large numbers of tickets and then sell them at black-market prices—double, even triple the regular price. A scalper would sometimes even set himself up outside the Opera House in order to dispose of his tickets. The Royal Opera decided to introduce a limit on ticket purchases whereby each customer was permitted to buy a maximum of only six

tickets. These days this limit has been abolished as scalping has largely disappeared.

"Without doubt Jussi attracted the largest queues," recounts Bertil Berg. "If you were sometimes not sure whether there would be a queue the next morning before, for example, a premiere or a guest performance, then you certainly knew there would be one when Jussi's name was advertised on the bill or in the newspapers."

When Bertil Berg first came to the Royal Opera he soon began to work together with the society TIK [Täten i Könen—The Head of the Queue] to bring about a better arrangement for the sale of tickets. A system of queue-tickets was introduced to both parties' satisfaction. A representative of TIK took charge of the queue-tickets and began distributing them as soon as the first customers arrived. A roll-call took place, and does so still, every other hour, but in between times people could wander around town or go home if they lived close by. However, you had to be there for all the roll-calls, otherwise you lost your place in the queue and had to begin again at the end of the line. When Bertil Berg arrived at the Opera House at 8 a.m., one hour earlier than on ordinary ticket-sales days, there was no need for further roll-calls before the box-office opened at 10 o'clock. Initially, the first ten in the queue were allowed through, and then five at a time followed. But people still had to be in their place in the queue at the right time. For example, it was no good the owner of queue-ticket number 44 arriving out of breath a quarter of an hour late and expecting to be let in after number 59. No, he or she would have to go to the end of the queue, a bitter fate, but one which was, however, accepted with equanimity. It was also required that those in the queue paid attention and did not talk. TIK's fair dealing was incorruptible and no one was allowed to jump the queue. Going over to a friend further up in the line to ask him to buy your tickets was greatly resented. When the doors were opened at 8 o'clock, between 100 and 150 people had already arrived, and

when it was time for ticket-sales to begin, there were at least a couple of hundred in the queue. After that things went quite smoothly. Those who could afford tickets in the stalls or the dress circle did not need to arrive until about midday. Tickets for the upper circle and the gallery sell out first.

"I have only good things to say about TIK," states Bertil Berg. "Like the others in the queue, they are pleasant and well-mannered people. I have made many friends amongst them - it's usually the same faces you see. It is surely now Birgit Nilsson who will be the reason for the long queues. She has actually already started to follow in Jussi's footsteps, but only since she was first announced as a guest artist. Apparently it was the same with Jussi in his time. As a young singer he is said to have attracted audiences in the normal sort of way, but when he became a guest artist, with his name announced in grand style on the bills and in advertisements, then tickets sold quickly.

We now leave the ticket office and make our way behind the scenes where we immediately run into **Albin Rude**, the true veteran of the Royal Opera, the oldest person of all those working there, and doyen of the institution. In spring 1960 he celebrated 50 years of service as a *répétiteur* with the Opera—a unique, so far unbeaten record. He has been retired for a few years now, but is still working several hours a day. In fact, last year he had more work than ever to do since his retirement.

Albin Rude was already a senior member of the staff when Jussi Björling came to the Royal Opera. He has many stories about Jussi to relate and knows immediately which ones he will draw from his store of memories.

"One day—it was probably in 1928—Nils Grevillius came to me. He needed a pianist for a small orchestra made up of members of the Royal Orchestra, which was to accompany a young tenor in a recording, and he asked me to assist. I heard this young seventeen-year-old whose name was Jussi Björling, and I was utterly astonished. I remember that I went over to him when the recording was

finished and exclaimed: 'Young man, what a future there must be in store for you when you already sound like this!'

"I also recall that I rehearsed his very first operatic role with him—the Lamp-lighter in *Manon Lescaut*. I very quickly came to have the greatest admiration for his phenomenal memory. The most striking demonstration of this that I personally experienced occurred one day when we were rehearsing Rangström's *Kronbruden* in Studio Number 1. We had been rehearsing Mats's role for about a week when Jussi came to a rehearsal one day (this would have been in spring 1933) and nonchalantly mentioned that he could not find his piano score.

'Have you left it at home?' I asked.

'No, I've never taken it home,' answered Jussi. 'It was in my dressing-room and now it's not there.'

'Come over here and sit next to me,' I said. 'You can look at my score while I play.'

'I don't think I'll need to,' Jussi replied. 'I can stand here on the other side of the piano as usual. Let's see how it goes!'

"He sang the role quite splendidly, faultlessly from memory. Fantastic! And the part is musically difficult."

Albin Rude has also been the organist at Saltsjöbaden Church since 1915. "One time," he relates, "Jussi was engaged to sing at a sports festival at Saltsjöbaden. This was during his first year at the Royal Opera. He asked for and received a fee of 200 kronor, a quite considerable sum at that time. But there was something bothering him. I could see that straight away. Before the concert section of the programme he said to me, a little embarrassed: 'Albin, if Jonte [i.e. John Forsell] asks you what fee I received, say 100 kronor will you, because that's what I've told him. I really want to keep a hundred for myself...' Forsell was then, I seem to remember, Jussi's guardian, as Jussi had not yet come of age. In any case, he controlled all Jussi's affairs and Jussi had to report all his extra earnings to him. In the event, I fortunately did not have to lie because Forsell never asked me."

Another senior member of the staff is the prompter Mrs **Gunvor Mandahl**, daughter of that fine old opera singer, Thor Mandahl, and of the opera singer, later prompter, Julia Jahnke. Her service at the Royal Opera is contemporaneous with Jussi's as she began to take over from her mother as prompter around 1930. She remains to this day a reliable support for the opera artists and is required to have mastery of not only librettos in Swedish, but of Italian and German texts as well, since many operas are performed in their original languages. During the Royal Opera's guest performances in London in autumn 1960, for example, she had to prompt in all three languages.

"I remember," she says, "that I was the prompter for Jussi's first performance in which he sang the Lamp-lighter in *Manon Lescaut*. That was in July 1930 as, for some reason, we began that season earlier than usual, in the middle of July. After that came his first proper debut as Don Ottavio, and there were many subsequent performances. Jussi was wonderful to prompt. I never needed to shout, even when he was standing at the back of the stage, because he did not need to hear me—it was sufficient for him to see the movements of the prompter's lips. I can't recall his ever losing his place. One never had much to do when Jussi was on the stage as he was so thoroughly musical. I have never come across his equal, even though there are many singers who have good memories and a good ear. The only person I can compare with Jussi in this respect is David Stockman, his great predecessor. Even if Jussi might have lost track of the text momentarily, like Stockman he would never lose the musical line. I would also like to add that Jussi was a wonderful colleague."

Stage-manager, **Ryno Wallin**, also has much to relate about his colleague and friend Jussi. Wallin came to the Royal Opera in 1935 as a member of the Opera Chorus, but since 1942 he has been the stage-manager, the one who is responsible for ensuring that all goes according to plan at a performance.

"Jussi was the most exemplary opera artist one can imagine," says Ryno Wallin. "He was extremely particular about arriving in good time for a performance and about making sure that everything was in order. He saw to all his entrances himself; one could always rely on him and there was never any need to call him. He was dutifulness personified. Before the performance and before his entrances he never chatted or larked about, but remained always completely concentrated. As a result, they were perfect performances on his part. During the last two years it was certainly noticeable that he was tired as his pauses became longer and he needed a few minutes extra in which to recover. Earlier on he had liked the shortest possible breaks in the proceedings.

"When the performance was over and, after a few curtain calls for the whole cast, he had to proceed on his own onto the stage, he never wanted more than a couple of solo curtain calls, as he did not like having to walk alone across half of the stage in order to bow. He preferred to have the opening in the curtains parted and take his bows that way. Nor did he like carrying the numerous flowers he was sent onto the stage more than once. It was enough to show the givers that he had received them.

"When it came to acknowledging the applause he was always generous towards his colleagues. He never milked the applause to extract the last drop of appreciation. Often he would say to me after having gone out in front of the curtains a few times: 'That'll be enough now, Ryno, let's finish up now!'

"He was always extremely mindful of those in the gallery and waved up at them often. Something that I've virtually never seen with anyone but him was that he would often say, as he was taking his curtain calls: 'Thank you very much, thank you very much!' No one, of course, could hear it through the storm of applause, but they could see his lips moving. He was always humbly grateful for his talent. You never heard him boast about his successes. When

I began at the Royal Opera in 1935 Jussi was still a young unknown tenor, merely a local celebrity. But he remained the same as ever towards all his colleagues even if, during the last few years, it was seldom that we got together after a performance. Always he was friendly, attentive and considerate."

The Royal Opera's make-up artist **Atos Berg** has been responsible for Jussi Björling's make-up for practically the whole of Jussi's career, right from his first student year until a couple of years ago when Berg retired. Now Atos's son Lars has succeeded him, but every now and then Atos must stand in for Lars and help out. Throughout the years the make-up room has been situated in the same place, to the left of the stairs on the first floor above the stage.

"I remember what Jussi was like right from the very beginning," says Atos Berg. "Where Ingvar Wixell and Sven-Erik Vikström now have their dressing-room, almost next to the make-up room, was situated one of the Opera School's rooms when I first came to the Opera. It was there that John Forsell toiled energetically to instil in students the skills of dramatic interpretation. Gurli Forsell, who before her marriage was herself an opera singer, used to instruct the pupils in the art of make-up. I remember how calm Jussi was right at the beginning. For his first performance at the Opera he came for his make-up session only a quarter of an hour before his entrance."

Atos Berg is the only one who has ever done Jussi Björling's make-up. "He was used to me," notes Mr Berg, "Abroad he always had to do his own make-up, but he wasn't especially keen on that. The last two years, after I retired, he has done his own make-up. In the early days he would like to chat while he was being made up, but the bigger the roles he got and the greater his fame, the quieter he became. It was as though he needed those brief moments in front of the make-up mirror to concentrate in preparation for the evening's assignment. But he was always very kind and friendly and never interfered in the make-up process.

In later years he always liked to borrow a make-up brush to make a final adjustment around the corners of his mouth and would then borrow a comb in order the smooth down his eyebrows.

"Jussi was not difficult to make up, although it was necessary to try to tone down the roundness of his face and make it appear narrower. As part of his make-up he always liked to have a small false nose too. He often had his daughter Ann-Charlotte with him as his 'mascot', and one time, when she was little, she said spontaneously, on seeing the final result of her father's make-up session: 'Oh, how clever Mr Berg is, and how handsome Daddy looks!'

"On several occasions he was a guest here in my home," says Atos Berg, leafing sadly through an album of memorabilia and other items he has gathered through a long life's work in the theatre. In this collection are Jussi's own memoirs, acquired when they were published fifteen years ago.

Last in the line of people at the Royal Opera who have, so to speak, been close to Jussi during his performances is **Erik Sundin**, for many years head of the Royal Opera's men's tailoring department, and, from its beginning, the head of the costume department at the new Municipal Theatre in Stockholm. Earlier on he was one of the Opera's dressers.

Erik Sundin came to the Royal Opera in 1943, and two years later he became Jussi's dresser for his performances here. Of all those at the Opera House, therefore, it was he who was closest to the famous tenor during the course of performances, and he who got to see his character at close quarters. What he can tell us about Jussi is, consequently, of special interest.

"When Jussi Björling was scheduled to sing I always had to get down to the Opera House a couple of hours beforehand. He was always very particular that all should be as before and that everything should be laid out and close at hand," explains Mr Sundin. "He did not like new ideas or changes to what he was accustomed to. He required that his two

chairs be in his dressing-room. As a rule he was taciturn and he disliked having visitors in his dressing-room before a performance or during the intervals; he wanted simply to be left in peace and quiet to concentrate. It was best if one could disappear as quickly as possible when everything was ready yet still be nearby if needed.

"Like many artists he was quite superstitious. For example, it was not done to present him with a right shoe or sock first—you had to watch out with that. Whistling in a corridor was a mortal sin, as was going into the stage area with a hat on. Well, he was certainly not alone in that sort of thing. He took umbrage at the fact that the old traditions of the theatre were starting to be abandoned. He would always touch wood before stepping onto the stage, and, even if he had only left the stage for a moment, he would always have a glass or two of room-temperature Pommac [a brand of soft-drink] before returning. At one time he was trying to lose weight and then he avoided Pommac because it contains sugar. But he returned pretty quickly to his Pommac. I don't think the slimming really suited him; he felt better when his weight started to creep up again. After he had lost weight he became more clothes-conscious as his costumes often had to be altered.

"When he was accepting people's compliments in his dressing-room after a performance he was naturally happy and grateful, but he was always well aware when he himself felt that he had not given a fully satisfactory performance. He therefore saw through compliments along the lines of 'you sang better than ever', and received them with a gently ironical glint in his eye. 'I must always be in good form,' he once said to me. 'I just can't be sick.' His brother Gösta's sudden death a few years ago affected him very deeply and he had the feeling that it would not be long before he followed.

"He was very fond of his daughter Ann-Charlotte, whom he always called 'Little one'. When Ann-Charlotte was small he was always keen for me to take her back-stage

and position her where she would be able to see and hear him best.

"There could certainly be some nervous moments sometimes during his performances, and you were always curious to find out what sort of mood he was in. He could be easily irritated by things and become argumentative, but he was never nasty and was certainly no prima donna.

"He had made me promise that I would always be his dresser for his performances at the Royal Opera for as long as he sang there. When I began work with the Municipal Theatre I was a little uneasy that I would be unable to keep that promise on account of my new position. Now I have been released from my promise, but in an unexpected and tragic way.

"But I am happy that I was able to help him throughout the whole of those fifteen years. To have been able to be there and hear the world's greatest tenor sing all those beautiful arias and duets to absolute perfection more than outweighs all the trouble and all the nervous hours that being his dresser involved." ■

A Jussi Björling Media Acknowledgement

Referring to the voice of tenor, Max Lorenz, René Kollo said: It was perhaps the kind of Nordic clarity that Björling, Flagstad and Birgit Nilsson had. The kind of Nordic sound we associate with cold and ice and glaciers. (24:50 into the DVD documentary "Wagner's Mastersinger—Hitler's Siegfried: The life and times of Max Lorenz.")

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