

Can Viable Systems Modelling Explain the Management Problems of London's Royal Opera House?

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ABSTRACT: *London's Royal Opera House has undertaken a much-needed redevelopment. The management of the operation has been problematic, bringing the House close to insolvency, and causing the resignation of many senior staff. This paper summarises these events, and earlier papers analysing them using systemic methods. It examines the organisation's structure using Beer's Viable Systems Model.*

The management problems are attributed to system incompatibilities, and to simple management errors. The VSM analysis indicates that all elements of a viable system were present. However, there was inadequate provision for a vital aspect of the redevelopment project, for which the main Board must take responsibility.

Keywords: Systems, viable systems model, management, Royal Opera House.

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, (ROH), is London, leading Lyric Theatre, and is the only internationally ranking opera house in the UK. It is known variously as “The House”, and “Covent Garden”. Although the home of one of the world's greatest ballet companies, the Royal Ballet, and an opera company, the Royal Opera, which has attracted the world's leading operatic singers, it has been the subject of decades of very public criticism. The criticism, sometimes artistic, but mainly concerned with administration and particularly with financial control, has become very serious over the past few years. Situations of imminent insolvency have been narrowly avoided and what has been described as a “managerial meltdown” has occurred. Chief Executives have come and gone with alarming speed, government committees have pronounced disapproval of managerial performance in the most violent terms, and potential closure has been averted at the eleventh hour. The drama has consistently maintained a high level of public interest, stoked enthusiastically by the national press, particularly the tabloids.

The principal cause of the most recent problems was the scheme to redevelop the ROH to provide a restored historic theatre. The requirement to perform a major refurbishment of the beautiful but crumbling Victorian theatre has become increasingly urgent. There has been doubt in recent years that the theatre would obtain a safety certificate. However, the availability of an adjacent site for expansion, and the crowded conditions both in the public areas of the theatre and particularly back-stage, encouraged the consideration of more fundamental improvements. A fully refurbished and re-seated auditorium, combined with new public areas and a stage with leading edge technology, would be much more appropriate to an international opera house entering the twenty-first century. The ROH reopened towards the end of 1999, and apart from a few teething problems, the reopening season was successful, and the initial performances staged in the new facilities were generally very well received.

This paper will try to set in context the events concerning the planning and redevelopment of the ROH, which started more than a decade prior to the closure of the House for major reconstruction. The inconsistent policies and objectives of many of the major actors introduce additional complexity. This has been the subject of a number of earlier papers, which will be summarised later. Firstly, here is a summary of the problem situation.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

The fundamental problem of the ROH is inadequate funding. The level of tax-derived funding was not maintained against inflation during the 1980s. The Thatcher Conservative government was against public subsidy of the arts, and favoured support by private sponsorship on the American model. The ROH was required to accommodate a subsidy from government via the Arts Council which consistently decreased in real value year on year. This, together with increasing operating costs, required more sponsorship from commercial and charitable institutions. When this was insufficient to balance the budgets, an increase in seat prices was the only remaining option. Access to the ROH became more difficult for these potential customers without deep pockets, and made the operation appear as “elitist” and the province of the rich. After the General Election, the “New Labour” administration of

Tony Blair was warmly welcomed by the theatrical profession in the expectation of a more generous provision from public funds for the arts. This was not forthcoming, as the new administration pursued the same tight fiscal policy as its predecessor. Worse still, and totally irrationally, the new government complained about the "lack of access" which the ROH was displaying. There was much talk of "peoples' opera", provoking the then General Director of the ROH, Jeremy Isaacs, to comment (Isaacs, 1999) 'If the people want opera, the people will have to pay for it'. The costs of mounting opera and ballet productions are high, and if seat prices are to be maintained at a level which most people can afford, the subvention from public money must be substantial. This is the case in other countries such as France (Paris Opera), Germany and Italy (numerous opera houses), Austria (Vienna State Opera), and Denmark. Inadequate funding caused a number of financial crises at the ROH during the 1990s.

Without significant maintenance work on its building, the ROH was becoming both obsolete technically and seriously unsafe. Plans had been available since 1982 (Tooley, 1999) for a major redevelopment of the facilities. These included refurbishment of the beautiful Victorian "horse-shoe" shaped auditorium, despite its serious sight-line flaws; a complete rebuild of the stage to bring it to a technical standard appropriate for the twenty-first century; and conversion of the adjacent Floral Hall and its surrounding site to provide much needed public space and a second small auditorium. This package was set to cost £214 million, and take at least two years to complete, during which the theatre would be closed. It was only when a successful bid was made for funding of £78.5 million from the National Lottery was it possible to go ahead with an appeal for the rest of the total requirement of £214 million. The actions of the ROH management, (Isaacs, 1999), were those of a group who perceived their one and possibly only opportunity of resolving a problem that had become increasingly serious every year, and moving the organisation forward at the same time. Understandably, they grabbed it without complete awareness of some of the consequences and intermediate potential difficulties, convinced that the inevitable problems could be resolved as they went along. This could be regarded as either a massive act of faith, or foolhardiness. By late 1998, it was looking very much the latter. Even so, at that time the author commented in his first paper that the decision to proceed could ultimately appear an act of great vision and courage when viewed in hindsight after all the trauma of the closure period was forgotten. However, problems consequent on the closure of the theatre led to financial and operating difficulties that almost brought the ROH to state of insolvency and its companies to a state of collapse.

EARLIER PAPERS

The author has published three papers on the subject of the recent management of the ROH. These papers attempt an analysis of the complex and confused management issues using various systemic techniques. They consider three approaches to the problems of the ROH. However, this analysis did not fully explain the obvious errors of managerial judgement, and how the control systems did not prevent these occurring, and led to consideration of the complex and in many ways arcane arrangements for the direction of the organisation.

The first paper (Reavill, 1999a) deals with the general problems of the Lyric Theatres of London, the ROH, the Coliseum, and the Sadlers Wells Theatre. These theatres supply the opera and dance performances of the capital, and are to an extent complementary. The paper concentrates primarily on a consideration of the influence of the various stakeholder groups on the management of London's Lyric Theatres in general, and the ROH in particular. The paper concluded that the ROH activities were inextricably linked with those of stakeholder groups whose objectives were inconsistent with one-another, and not always compatible with the stated objectives of the ROH. Errors have been made by the ROH administration, and these have been compounded by limp administration by the Arts Council. However, the major problem is the inconsistent policy of a government that wants the public to have access to opera and ballet of an international standard in London, but does not wish to support it appropriately from public funds.

Another paper (Reavill, 1999b), used General Systems Theory (GST) to analyse the situation of the ROH. GST allows the analyst to define the "system of interest", (an organisation such as the ROH) which is composed of sub-systems, and exists within a "wider system of interest" with which it interacts, and an "environment" to whose influence it is subject. Examples of sub-systems within the ROH are the Royal Ballet, the Royal Opera Chorus, the ROH Orchestra, the various administrative groupings such as the ROH Board etc. Systems in the wider system of interest include the Arts Council and the various commercial and charitable organisations which sponsor ROH activities, and perhaps most important of all, the paying customers who constitute the audience. Systems in the environment include the Government, whose policies for arts funding are significantly influential, but also groupings of the media, which can reflect, influence, or even generate public opinion of sufficient force to influence policy. The conclusions of this analysis were that the defined objectives of the ROH system (Royal Opera House 1996) were inconsistent with the delivery capability of its financial sub-system. In addition, there was some inconsistency with the objectives of some of the sub-systems within the ROH, for example the Opera company and the Ballet company were to some extent in competition for resources. The objectives of some of the systems within the greater system of interest were incompatible, for example the stimulation of sponsorship was assisted by exclusivity while

public subsidy required accessibility. Also for the opera, an international opera supra-system exists which contains the management.

The third paper (Reavill 2000) attempts an analysis of the problems in terms of the influence and objectives of the principal "actors" by considering the subject of the study as a complex interactive system. It was noted that such systems are prone to unpredictability because actors within the system are free to make some decisions independently of the other actors, and all actors have incomplete knowledge of the intentions and actions of the others. Also, time passes before the decisions, their implications and their outcome, become apparent to the other actors. Thus it is impossible for any one actor to control the outcome of a complex interactive system, and there will be unintended outcomes of any decisions made, however reasonable the decisions might appear at the outset.

The overall conclusion of the analysis was that whereas the Royal Ballet was reasonably independent of major external influences, the Royal Opera was of necessity a part of an international opera supra-system. International ballet companies (Royal, Kirov, Paris Opera, Bolshoi, New York City) have a status which is company based. The companies have their own star performers, but it is the company which is the box-office draw. For membership of the international opera "club", an opera house must provide a top-quality chorus, a fine orchestra, and must attract the top international opera singers. These individuals are specialists who are not freely available, and who therefore command high fees. Thus to achieve membership of the "Premier League" of international opera houses requires the financial resources to attract the top opera stars. There are analogies with the international tennis circuit. The ROH has for at least a decade been in the position of being required by its system objectives to be a member of an expensive international club, for which it could not afford the subscription. Inability to acquire funds commensurate with its organisational objectives, for reasons that the systemic analysis illuminates, remains the nub of the problem. However, it does not explain why in the late 1990s, and during the period of the redevelopment, the organisation almost folded. For an explanation, an examination of the direction of the organisation is required, together with the application of the Viable Systems Model of Stafford Beer (1985).

THE REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Having acquired the initial capital from the National Lottery to fund the redevelopment of the Opera House site, an appeal for the residue of the money, the greater part, was launched. Planning of the project commenced, and it was decided to close the Opera House for reconstruction in July 1997, with a planned re-opening of the "new" house in December 1999, just ahead of the millennium. There were two major elements of the project: the construction work, for which the matching funding generated by the appeal was required in order to allow the Lottery funding to be released; and arrangements for the activities of the Royal Ballet, the Royal Opera and the ROH Orchestra during the closed period of two years. The majority of the technical staff, stage crew, front-of-house staff, catering etc. would not be needed over the closed period, and would have to be made redundant.

The management of the development project deserves great credit. The refurbished house looked very beautiful, and the new public areas were an immense improvement. The new facilities for the Royal Ballet caused great delight within that organisation, and the completely rebuilt backstage facilities, after some technical teething problems were resolved, fulfilled the requirements of an opera house technically fit for the twenty-first century. The project was completed to time, to specification and to budget, so the management of this aspect of the redevelopment deserves top marks.

The Lottery and appeal funding was for the capital work. Other additional expenditure consequent on the closure was to be found from revenue funds, and additional money from the Arts Council. It was in this area that disaster lurked. A study had been done some years before the closure period of possible alternative theatres the companies could occupy during the closure period. There are very few London theatres that are sufficiently large, both in audience capacity and stage dimensions, to accommodate the productions of the ROH. The Royal Ballet had appeared for seasons at the Coliseum and at Drury Lane Theatre, but the former was occupied by the English National Opera, and the latter by the long-running musical *Miss Saigon*. However, this show might have closed before the commencement of the redevelopment project, or its producer might be persuaded to transfer it to another theatre. Theatres also considered included the newly rebuilt Lyceum, (located in Bow Street as is the ROH), and a newly built temporary theatre in the Bankside area of London. Jeremy Isaacs relates in his memoir of the period (Isaacs, 1999) the relative advantages and disadvantages of the various options, and the reasons why all of them were eventually lost to the ROH management. His conclusion was that in their search for an ideal solution, a number of acceptable options were considered, and discarded, and when the most attractive option (the temporary theatre at Bankside) ultimately proved to be an illusion, the other possibilities were no longer available. The major factors in not selecting the Lyceum were lack of money in the budget to hire the theatre, and the constraints its use would have put on the repertory.

The outcome was that the ROH found itself committed to the closure of its theatre with no alternative location for its activities. In order to keep its companies occupied, it eventually settled for a series of short seasons in a number

of venues of varying degrees of unsuitability such as the Albert Hall and the Festival Hall (both concert halls), the Barbican Theatre and Shaftesbury Theatre. This process was likened by the chairman of the Select Committee that the Government subsequently set up to investigate the administration of the ROH, Gerald Kaufman, as “wandering around London like the *Flying Dutchman*”. It proved costly, and the venues (or the repertory selected for them) did not attract the attendance that had been over-optimistically predicted. The financial shortfall that this produced was exacerbated by a substantial decrease in sponsorship, due partly to the economic situation, but also to the competitive demands of the Redevelopment Appeal. The result was a serious cash-flow crisis. Isaacs admits that inadequate estimation of the costs of closure was critical: ‘What is true is that at every stage my colleagues and I underestimated the real costs of closure. In 1994 we did not foresee how much we would lose in annual private revenue, given the counter-pull of the Development Appeal. And we seriously underestimated the fall-off in box office outside the ROH. (Isaacs 1999) Jeremy Isaacs was nearing retirement and was to be replaced by a new Chief Executive. Also, a new Chairman of the main Board was appointed. The new Chief Executive (Genista Mackintosh) resigned after three months, and was replaced by Mary Allen, who remained in the post for seven months. She was replaced temporarily by Pelham Allen from the management consultants Coopers Lybrand until the appointment of a new permanent Chief Executive, an American, Michael Kaiser. When the Select Committee published its report, it was scathing (in many respects without full justification), but the new Chairman, Lord Chadlington felt the need to resign, and the Board also resigned en-masse. The ROH was saved from insolvency at the eleventh hour by a massive injection of money by two of its major sponsors. The mayhem provided much copy for the newspapers, particularly the tabloids, and significant damage to the morale of the artists, particularly the Royal Ballet, which lost six of its best male dancers. Deborah Bull, Royal Ballet ballerina, commented on the effect these events had on the company: ‘I just keep hearing echoed paraphrases of Oscar Wilde: “To lose one Chief Executive may be regarded as a misfortune, to lose both looks like carelessness.”’ (Bull, 1998)

The complex interactive system analysis suggests that the ROH were to some extent the victims of variations within the greater system over which they had little influence and no control. Even so, the outcome was that the Board had failed in its primary duty to maintain the financial viability of the organisation, and had brought it to the brink of insolvency. Gerald Kaufman commented ‘It would be better for the ROH to be run by a philistine with the necessary financial acumen, than by a collection of opera and ballet lovers who have brought a valued institution to its knees’. He very successfully drew attention away from the government’s failure to support the ROH with a viable arts subsidy policy and realistic funding. There were serious management failures, however much the various incumbents of the role of General Director/Chief Executive (both long serving and short) might seek to justify themselves (Allen, 1998; Tooley, 1999; Isaacs, 1999). The rest of this paper will review the senior management structure of the ROH, and apply to it the Viable Systems Model of Stafford Beer (1985).

THE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Until very recently, the main Board of the ROH had the characteristics of a London gentlemen’s club:

‘The Board of the ROH was then (1988) still a self-perpetuating body: they chose their fellow members and they also appointed their Chairman, only as a matter of courtesy informing the Arts Council and the Prime Minister of their choice’. ‘A place on the Covent Garden Board was much coveted, and, once obtained, was elegantly clung on to.’ (Isaacs, 1999)

The Board was regarded by many as a resting-place for pillars of the “establishment”. Many able people served on it for no reward, but the Conservative Arts Minister, David Mellor, was sceptical that they brought their abilities to bear on the ROH activities: ‘They left their brains with their coats outside the boardroom.’ Select Committee Chairman, Gerald Kaufman complained about the ethos: ‘When I go to the Royal Opera House I feel as though I am intruding into a private club which is tolerating my presence with difficulty’.

After the resignation of Chadlington and his entire Board in 1977, Chris Smith [the Arts Minister] appointed – technically, he suggested and the rump of the Board appointed – a new Chairman, Sir Colin Southgate of EMI. He got off to a wonderful start by telling the press that ‘he did not want to sit next to someone in smelly trainers at the Royal Opera House’. But his fresh, big business, realistic analysis of the House’s finances would carry real weight. (Isaacs, 1999) Southgate “assembled a small Board, which included two members of its previous incarnation, Vivien Duffield and Michael Berkeley, who was to chair the Opera Advisory Board. Lord Eatwell, a newcomer, was to be Chairman of the Ballet Advisory Board. Both of these Boards were subsequently abandoned”. (Tooley, 1999) However, this was the start of a policy of selection of Board members for their expertise in the arts, or in some other relevant area, rather than for their general worthiness. The policy of many decades of selection from the “great and the good” was over.

The complexities of the many boards of directors at the ROH are summarised by Isaacs (1999) as follows:

‘The Royal Opera House has Boards like the Circle Line has trains: There was the Main Board, the Ballet Board and later the Birmingham Royal Ballet Board, the Opera Board, the Development Board; the

Royal Opera House Trust, the Friends of Covent Garden, both the Executive Committee and the Council; the American Friends of Covent Garden; the Royal Ballet Governors; the Royal Ballet School Governors.

The complexity was in some respects due to the legal status of the bodies involved. For example, the Royal Ballet charter dated 1956 established it as an independent body. With “a council cunningly binding school and companies together while leaving each the management of its own affairs, the charter removed the ballet from dependence on any one person or theatre” (Bull, 1998). Two other bodies, external to the ROH, had significant power by their control of the income to the ROH. These were the Arts Council, which was represented on ROH Boards, but not vice-versa, and the Floral Trust. The ROH was the largest “client” of the Arts Council, and the Floral Trust had control of funds generated from exploitation of the real estate of the Covent Garden site. Mary Allen (1998) relates that the release of funds by the Floral Trust rescued the ROH from insolvency in the middle of the closure period.

If the multiplicity of Boards looked arcane and confused, the operating management appears realistic:

“The senior management group (c. 1995) was precisely that - the executives who ran the house: Technical Director John Harrison; his deputy and Development Project Manager John Seekings; Nicholas Payne, Opera Director; Anthony Russell-Roberts, Royal Ballet Administrative Director; Malcolm Warne-Holland Orchestra Director; Keith Cooper, Corporate Affairs; Mike Morris, Personnel; Clive Timms, Finance Director; Felicity Clark, ROH Trust; Christopher Nourse, my assistant and Chair of the Planning Committee; and me. (Isaacs, 1999)

THE VIABLE SYSTEMS MODEL

In a short paper to a systems based conference, the author will economise on space by omitting a proper analysis of the Viable Systems Model of Stafford Beer (1985). This paper represents work in progress, and the author is currently attempting to fit Beer’s standard VSM model to the organisational complexities described earlier. It is assumed that the conference will be more familiar with Beer’s model than with the complexity of the events in this case study. However, the detailed implementation of the various activities of the organisation are assumed for System 1; the co-ordination activities are assumed for System 2; control and monitoring in System 3; intelligence and linkage with the environment in System 4; and policy and strategy for System 5. All the anticipated levels of recursion are observed in the case. The model will now be applied to the ROH case study:

DISCUSSION – APPLICATION OF VSM TO THE ROH CASE STUDY

There appears to be no significant problem in applying the VSM model to the activities of the senior management group. Each of the members of this group headed a function within the organisation that could be mirrored in a host of other organisations: finance; personnel; marketing; opera (a product line); ballet (another product line); ROH trust (a money generating function) etc. These all fit as System One’s, and the anticipated recursions are evident. The heads of these functions come together under the leadership of the General Director/Chief Executive in the “Senior Management Group” as System 3. The necessary co-ordination activity is present, as System 2 requires. The role of the General Director (Isaacs in this example) is to co-ordinate these activities, to link to the main Board and the other Boards. The latter linkage was stronger in his case, because he was a member of the Board when appointed General Director. He remained on the Board, unlike his predecessors and successors. The role of General Director/Chief Executive and his management team appears to fit System 3 requirements well. So in the “operational” areas of the VSM, all seems to be present and correct. And, at the operations level of the ROH, all was functioning very well. Performances of a high standard were being produced, on time and generally on budget, to full houses of happy customers. There appears to be a strong correlation between a satisfactory VSM and a satisfactory performance, at least at the operations level.

Moving to the main Board and the other Boards, the modelling is not as clear. The main Board should inhabit System 5, with its policy and strategy function. The functions look at the future, essentially deciding where the organisation is going, and planning the route it might take to achieve the goals which have been identified. The Board certainly did this, and the Redevelopment Project was the means by which the goal of an opera house fit for the twenty-first century might be achieved. The General Director of the time (Isaacs) was the driving force, and would still have been so, had he not been a member of the Board. It could be argued that the problems that arose were due to inadequate intelligence, control or forecasting, which is the function of System 4. We still have to locate the subsidiary Boards on the VSM model, but it might be well to start with a definition of the function of each.

The Governors of the Royal Ballet companies, and of the Royal Ballet School, were there to perform a System 5 function for the Royal Ballet and its school, as required by its charter, as discussed earlier. They are legally constituted bodies with authority over the Royal Ballet companies, which are independent of the ROH. There are two Royal Ballet companies. One, the Royal Ballet, is based at the ROH. The other, originally based at Sadlers Well Theatre was called the Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet, and as administered by the ROH. It subsequently relocated to

Birmingham, became the Birmingham Royal Ballet, and later became independent of the ROH. This illustrates that the Royal Ballet companies are not tied to the ROH. Rumours abounded at the deepest moments of crisis that the ROH based company might secede from the ROH, and in extremis may have taken this action. Perhaps the handsome new facilities for the ballet at the rebuilt ROH may have prevented this. In relation to the management of the ROH, the Governors of the Royal Ballet could be performing a System 4 function, with information, intelligence, and awareness of the future and contact with the environment. The Royal Ballet School, which trains dancers for the Royal Ballet companies, is perhaps more peripheral, being concerned with the distant future.

The Friends of Covent Garden (and the American Friends of Covent Garden), are support groups of opera/ballet aficionados (fans) whose function is to support the activities of the ROH. However, by holding "events" (lectures, demonstrations, etc.) and raise substantial sums of money (over £500,000), most of which is fed to the ROH for various activities such as the sponsorship of new productions. They also publicise the activities of the companies and by this make a contribution to the marketing activity. Again, these probably inhabit System 4.

The Ballet and Opera Boards came and went, which must imply some doubt as to their value. Isaacs, (1999), did not regard them highly, commenting that they 'talked a lot and did nothing', which might explain why they were abandoned. Their function was advisory on policy concerning the opera and ballet repertory and productions. Their members were presumably in touch with the artistic environment, and therefore they are placed in System 4.

The Development Board was to oversee the redevelopment of the House. The Board delegated this function and it reported back to the Board. It concentrated on the design and planning of the reconstruction work, rather than on the full picture of the activities of the closure period. This group is also included in System 4.

Finally, there are the two money generating Boards, the ROH Trust and the Floral Trust. The Floral Trust was established to control the real-estate of the ROH site, when it was bought many years earlier by the government for possible redevelopment. Significant funds were generated for the redevelopment by leasing ground level property on the periphery of the site for shops. The ROH Trust was a permanent body established for many years to raise funds for the ROH, and so had a particularly substantial and vital function when £214 million was needed. However, the fund-raising bodies concentrated on raising capital funds, and indeed were loath to ask donors to give towards the extra revenue expenses incurred by the redevelopment. Isaacs (1999) comments from 1996:

"...if the House, instead of keeping its funds separate in watertight compartments, would resolve to make use of all the resource expected to be available to it, it would get through the closure somehow and complete the development. When we look back from the year 2001, we shall find this to have been the case."

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this first attempt at analysis using the VSM is that all the 5 Systems were in place, albeit in a very complex configuration at the System 4 level. The operational level appears well ordered, and works well. The physical aspects of the redevelopment proceeded very well, but were essentially "spun-off" as a subsidiary project, with very clear and specific objectives, budgets and schedules, and a viable and expert project organisation to match. Thus the "hard" aspects of the redevelopment were in good order, but the "soft" issues of the maintenance of all the activities were given inadequate consideration. The planning and financing of this vital aspect was inadequate. This was due to weaknesses in the System 4 and System 5 area, particularly the latter, since it is a primary duty of the main Board of any organisation to make decisions which ensure the continued viability of the organisation.

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