

Chorus in a car park

There is a corner of England that is for ever Finnish. And now it's getting its own opera. **Nick Coleman** explains

At the far side of the cemetery in Lewes, you will see a monument, a stone spike rising out of the greenery. It is decorated with inscriptions, doggerel and 28 names. This is all that remains on English soil of the 300 Finnish prisoners of war who, 150 years ago, were the most celebrated group in this East Sussex town. These 28 men died fighting not their captors, but tuberculosis.

Or is this all that remains? Back down the hill, in a warehouse at the Phoenix Ironworks, the director Susannah Waters is taking two cast members through a key scene in a new opera, *The Finnish Prisoner*. She and her co-creators – composer Orlando Gough and librettist Stephen Plaice – are trying to decide whether to introduce an urchin with a Game Boy to a strangely old-fashioned-seeming seduction scene.

The scene is one of several in the opera in which the events of 1854, at

We shall remember them ... (right) Lewes's monument to the prisoners of war; (below) director Susannah Waters

The POWs who were officers spent their time waltzing in the drawing rooms of the bourgeoisie

the onset of the Crimean war, leach into the world of 21st-century Lewes. It's a meta-ghost story, founded in historical fact. In 1854, shortly after declaring war on imperialist Russia, the British and French allies staged a pre-emptive strike on the Baltic fortress of Bomarsund. They came out with 600 prisoners as political trophies.

The fortress had been garrisoned not with Russian regulars but with Finnish conscripts, Finland then being a sub-state within the Russian empire. Half the captives were shipped back to Britain to see out the war in Lewes. While the officers were billeted in town houses and spent their time waltzing around the drawing rooms of the bourgeoisie, the ordinary soldiers found themselves banged up in the old civil prison, newly requisitioned as a prisoner-of-war camp. Nevertheless, the Finns went down a storm in Lewes. Locals and tourists visited the prison, and the Finns made children's toys for visitors to buy. The parting at the end of the war is said to have been genuinely sorrowful and entailed a formal civic farewell.

It was Plaice who uncovered the story during a spell as writer-in-residence at Lewes's modern-day prison, five years ago. When Waters came calling for ideas, out it popped, not entirely formed. "I didn't want it to be a period piece," he says. "I wanted it to reflect the present-day community in relation to its history. There's an idea in the piece that not only do long-time inhabitants of a place retain some kind of genetic memory of important events that occur, but that the place itself seems to hold on to those events in a strange kind of way. So we used the setting of the modern car park, where the prison used to stand; the car-park attendant doubles with the 19th-century prison warder – the watchers, the jailers of our society."

The story of *The Finnish Prisoner* begins with a local woman, Cora, carrying back to her car a picture of her great-grandmother as a young woman. Cora deactivates the car's central locking, triggering the appearance of a 19th-century Finnish corporal, on



the site of whose cell she has parked 150 years later. The bleep also triggers a narrative in which two parallel realities get tangled up with one another, one set in a car park, the other in a prison yard.

It is a definitively local production; of the three choruses joining the professional soloists, one is made up of Lewes citizens, another of local children. Alongside them will be nine members of the Finnish National Opera, flying in specially to participate.

Waters has just conducted the first full rehearsal with the 85-strong cast. She crackles with the same energy as her brother, the actor and former Globe director Mark Rylance. "It was great," she says. "The community chorus burst into spontaneous applause at the sound of the Finns. They've really given us all a lift. It's an incredibly exciting sound. Simple, open-throated singing free of operatic airs."

Gough isn't troubled by operatic airs either. "I'm not sure, actually, that it is an opera at all," he says. "It isn't through-written; it's got a lot of spoken dialogue in it, and I'm very keen on writing songs. I'd say it was a musical, perhaps nearest to Sondheim in style, but based in Scandinavian folk music. It looks like a musical to me."

It is certainly fair to say that not many operas come scored for three large choruses and a small instrumental ensemble resembling a klezmer band. "Lewes has a long tradition of non-conformism," Plaice says. "But what's particularly interesting about the story we're telling here is that it's about the way we're haunted by the voices of our ancestors, and what they'd think of us" ■

The Finnish Prisoner is at Unit 9, Phoenix Place, Lewes, East Sussex, Wednesday to Sunday. Details: www.paddockproductions.org.uk



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