

Floating and fleeting

Battersea Park / Albert Embankment

London's first-ever floating opera takes place on the Thames this week at two locations, Battersea Park and Albert Embankment. It's called **Fleeting Opera** and is part of the London String of Pearls Millennium Festival, combining singers from the Royal Opera Chorus, dancers from the Royal Ballet and musicians from the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House. Artist Max Couper has created the piece in collaboration with composer Trevor Wishart, Royal Ballet choreographer Tom Sapsford and textile artist Sasha Kingston. The project is a collaboration between the Royal Opera House and The Couper Collection floating museum by Albert Bridge and is part of an ongoing series being created by Thames-based artist Max Couper. The first episode, *Birthright*, is centred on a matriarchal figure representing the river as a symbol of life and renewal. It will be performed in fleeting sequences on July 26 and 27 by singers, dancers and musicians, featuring the unique ambience of sound, light and movement over water on board two Thames barges towed by Max Couper's tug-boat moving slowly into the in-coming flood tide. The audience will be able to follow the action by walking slowly along the river bank. Couper describes the piece as "very contemporary, based around a computer-generated soundtrack overlaid with voice and instrumentation. The Thames has always been subject to a swirling mass of complementary and colourful influences arriving from over the seas, and *Fleeting Opera* is no exception." The matriarchal character and her admirers are performed by singers of the Royal Opera Chorus and each character is assigned a musician from the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House.

For the performance on July 27 Dame Judi Dench will narrate a text written by Max Couper which evokes the piece in its setting. Dame Judi says: "Any opportunity to be part of Max Couper's waterborne artwork that brings together opera, ballet and the spoken word, I find irresistible. The last time any such serious artistic statement was created and performed for the river was Handel's *Water Music* in 1717. I passionately believe the Thames is underused. This draws attention to it in a spirited way." *Fleeting Opera* takes place at Battersea Park Riverside Terrace on July 26 at 9.30pm, and at the Albert Embankment on July 27 at 9.30pm. See Battersea Park in Opera listings



Max Couper:
Thames man

A RARE TREAT comes to town this week in the shape of the musical **Mack and Mabel** which has a production currently running at the Tower Theatre in Canonbury Place, Islington, N1. Jerry Herman and Michael Stewart's musical about film producer Mack Sennett and actress and comedienne Mabel Normand had a rocky ride when it opened in the US in 1974 and it took all of 21 years to reach London.

It is a touching love story of the silent movie era told in a kaleidoscope of songs, dance and comedy routines. Jerry Herman's score has many delights including 'I Won't Send Roses', 'Movies Were Movies', 'Tap Your Troubles Away' and 'Time Heals Everything' and, of course, that wonderful overture made famous by Torvill and Dean in their popular ice dancing routine which David Jacobs took up and played regularly on his Radio 2 programme.

This led to a one-off gala concert version of *Mack and Mabel* presented by Barry J Mishon at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane with the composer at the piano, and an all-star cast which undoubtedly led to its receiving a full-scale production at the Piccadilly Theatre in November 1995. Since then it hasn't been aired too often, so now's your chance to see it, if you missed the show in the West End.

Sara Randall's production of *Mack and Mabel* is at the Tower Theatre until July 29. Tickets are bookable on 020-7226 3633. For further details, see Opera and Music Theatre listings.