Jonathan Miller’s working life consists of a series of contradictions. He tries to be an artist and a scientist at the same time, in a society of specialists, and to use his experience in one field to make him better at the other. A darling of the media in the 60s, when the Oxbridge revue *Beyond the Fringe* ushered in the satire boom, he finds himself today increasingly excluded from the major institutions of the arts world.

His television series *The Body in Question* saw him use his unique skills as a communicator to guide us round that most mysterious of subjects, the human body. And the attraction of opera, that most artificial-seeming of art forms, is the way it lets him reveal the mysteries of real and observable life. His current production of *Rigoletto* - in which a hunch-backed clown has his daughter killed while trying to save her from seduction - is set in New York, among the mafia; its most famous aria comes out of a juke box. This month it is joined at the London Coliseum by *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's treatment of the come-upance of Don Juan. Here Jonathan Miller, a lifelong socialist, talks to Paul Allen about television, the National Theatre, medical matters and his life in the opera.

**Presumably Don Giovanni will be in English?**

Yes. What you get in return for the loss of acoustic elegance is immediate intelligibility, so it becomes a drama. It’s important with any good dramatic opera that you know what’s going on from moment to moment. Most people going to Covent Garden or places where it’s done in the original language, are either crazed opera buffs who know every word anyway or they get a vague idea by reading the programme notes. Now I think that if you simply get a vague idea it’s rather like making love in a contraceptive. It just takes all the immediate sensation away.

No I don’t think it’s religious. Well, you can see it in other terms. It’s a moralistic work, and not in the worst sense. Mozart has set the force of unbridled licentiousness against the requirements of an orderly life. He sees it as a liberating instinct (as Freud did) that has to be restrained to make the possibility of an orderly life. Also there is the notion that this free philandering leaves a lot of casualties behind it: abandoned women, ruined women, dishonoured women, thrown out. In many ways the opera is simply about the morals of attachment.

It’s a metaphor for the fact that there must be an account, written at a time when hell was the only way of articulating and symbolising final judgements and accountability. It depends what you think hell is... I think he’s taken away by all the dead women and the punishments of the hereafter are nothing other than the sentence that one would be forced to enact one’s sins for ever.

Mozart lived in the age of reason, the Enlightenment of the rationalist 18th century, but had his own appetites to contend with. Was any of what you’ve just said in his mind consciously?

I don’t think consciously. Mozart was tremendously interested, as we all are, in this double pull that exists inside a personality. What would it be like to follow appetite, untrammelled, to the end? To seduce every woman who glances in one’s direction? To follow every single unspoken encounter to its sexual conclusion? There’s that, which we all feel. But there’s also the pull of the notion of responsibility, of attachment, of domesticity, things which actually seem to be the basis of the society we have. I suppose some marxists might say the family is simply an elaborate device for guaranteeing the inheritance of property and the maintenance of power, but that’s only one aspect of it. The family is simply the way we haul ourselves up by the bootstraps from being relatively simple primates.

There can’t be many opera producers who bring that information towards the staging of
Don Giovanni or anything else.

I suppose it’s unusual in that I don’t come from the theatre. I come from outside with interests and knowledge which seem to be relevant to the theatre. If theatre is of any interest at all, it’s about us, about what we’re like, and I come from an area where I spent a lot of time thinking about what we’re like.

One of the problems with opera is that people have ceased to take any notice of what it’s about. They’re embarrassed if you point out that, say, Tosca is set in a police state.

An awful lot of the opera audience is determined to avert its gaze from the real emotional charges that are in opera. They simply want to hear lovely voices . . . there’s a sort of Richard Baker world!

What’s to become of it?

You just simply have to go on digging your trench work of serious productions which take the good works and reaffirm their emotional reality so that the audience is not let off the hook or made to think it’s attending a lovely concert in frocks. It mostly is!

What are the chances of you ever producing at Covent Garden?

Oh, I’ve never been asked and I don’t think I ever will go now. I suppose some of that is sour grapes, but I find it very difficult to adjust myself to that type of audience, to work with those sorts of stars.

Do you feel the same about the non-musical theatre? Do you have any plans for theatre productions?

Yes, I’m off to New York in the new year to do A Long Day’s Journey into Night with Jack Lemmon. That’s rather exciting. But I don’t see very much of an opportunity in England. I do most of my work in the classical theatre, not because I don’t like modern theatre, it’s just hard to find anything worth doing. But if you’re not a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National, you really can’t get your hands on casts that are big enough to do the work. There are quite a number of directors of my generation - people like John Dexter, William Gaskill, Michael Blakemore - who are now internal exiles, gipsies, who find it quite hard to scrape together productions.

Do you think it’s a conspiracy? Or just the sheer institutional nature of mainstream British theatre, dominated by the two great blocs, the RSC and the National?

Yes, it’s become very consolidated, and if you’re not in the institutions . . . I blotted my copybook with the National. I made a definite and self-conscious decision to get out. I didn’t like Peter Hall, I didn’t like the institution he was heading. There are a number of young and ambitious men in place now and they want to keep the work for themselves. It’s not a conspiracy against me or those others, but it is hard to get a production now.

Does diversification make life possible for you in the sense that it gives you the variety you personally need?

I’d be very bored if I was in the theatre full time. It’s an extremely engaging entertainment and often very hard work and I’m not going to pretend it can’t be very difficult to do. But it doesn’t fill up my mind. How could it? There are wonderfully skilled protagonists of relatively minor arts. The greatness of the theatre is supposed to be in the writing. Directors and actors will come and go but the only thing that’s remembered is Shakespeare.

Do you think television is ever going to be the medium for the advances in thought made, using the written word, by the Freuds, the Marx’s or whoever? Can it ever be that serious a medium?

Probably not. Television’s a very good medium for explaining. Well, I say very good. It’s actually a fairly good medium for explaining things. It hasn’t got the advantage of a direct lecture where you’re simply listening to someone talking. There’s a conflict often between ideas and images I think, because they employ different parts of the brain. And they’re not in sync. But television’s wonderful for getting to places you can’t reach for reasons of expense, fear, embarrassment or distance. It enables you to go to war, to see the unbelievably small, the incomparably large, the amazingly distant, the dreadful and the embarrassing. You can get into a hospital, you can see someone undergoing ordeals the normal private citizen is not allowed to witness, you can go into prisons, you can go to the highest mountain, you can see nature in inaccessible forms. It extends our senses, and it’s at its very best when it’s doing news, documentaries and sports events.

You’ve done other things in television.

I’ve been in and out of it for 20 years. I quite liked my Alice in Wonderland. I’m quite proud of that as a work of cinema which is what it really is. But one of the
best things I ever did was the programme about Ivan, the man with Parkinson's Disease. It is an hour-long documentary which intruded into the life of a man with a crippling and disabling disorder. It got somewhere you wouldn't normally be able to go. Now a doctor is doing that the whole time but he's never communicating that to other people, not even to the patient.

'Mission to explain' is a discredited term because of the fiasco of TV-am, which bore it as a motto at first. But that seems to be your

There ought to be a mission to explain. Merely gaping at things is uninteresting and I think improper. But when the periscope of television takes you to places where it might otherwise be improper merely to look, and elucidates as well, then it's very good.

You've a production of another Mozart opera about sex and infidelity, Cosi Fan Tutte, to be seen on television next year. You produced 12 of the BBC Shakespeares and directed seven. Anything else in the air?

I was trying to do a series on the history of the idea of evolution but it was turned down in favour of James Burke. It's the way of the world. It's hard to get in now, down in favour of James Burke. It's the idea of evolution but it was turned because of the fiasco of TV-am, which bore it as a motto at first. But that seems to be your

Medical colleagues?

Yes, and then there are people around in the media who simply say I'm a jack of all trades. This sounds a cantankerous and arrogant thing to say, but I'm usually called a Jack of all trades by people who are Jacks of one! And I don't think that if I were to stick at one job, say the theatre, I'd be better at it. It may be that the things which I've done which have been liked are good because I mess around with other subjects. One of the things that's wrong with the theatre is that people in it don't spend enough time observing real life. They observe other performances. It's too professional.

Do you think the deficiencies of British theatre are peculiar to the British theatre? Is it peculiar to Britain that we should be dominated by large institutions set up I suppose as part of a socialist vision of the arts?

It's a mixture of something that is totally commendable and a regrettable outcome of empire building. The National Theatre has been under one man's management and the RSC under one man's management for a very, very long time. Two men, virtually, have run both theatres for 25 years. That is bad. It means one person controls employment in each, and it has become very, very centralised. Also, we haven't got enough of these places. In Germany they're all over the place, so the socialist idea of a subsidised theatre is not peculiar to here.

You don't think there is anything debilitating about the big institutions themselves?

There is, probably, in the long run. Certainly very big, institutionalised modern buildings aren't good for the theatre. There's an official feeling, like the DHSS. I've come for my giro, or ticket! The shabby old theatres at least impose a sort of light-heartedness on what you do.

I see myself leaving Britain fairly shortly. I think my attempt to go back into medicine was partly prompted by an impatience to leave English theatre.

Did theatre work give you anything to take back into medicine? You've described the advantages of working the other way round.

Oh yes, a tremendous amount. I now observe things in the wards, watching patients, which often the physicians miss... the way someone with a locomotive disorder will phrase a movement, or the way they don't finish the movement, or it's clumsily phrased. Often in people who are not overtly paralysed I can see things that are in fact the result of brain damage, because I've spent 15 years watching normal people moving under the influence of music or under the influence of rehearsed emotion. There's a constant reciprocal relationship for me between the clinic and the theatre.

America is not like England. There they like people dodging in and out... I've just been talking to a university who actually would like me to come and work in the theatre department for some time but also work in the department of neuro-psychology at the same time. I'm not a fugitive from an oppressive regime, but I feel myself a fugitive from a regime I don't like very much - a dreary, drudging, drudging world in England.

You're not just talking about the present regime? You feel it about the post war culture as a whole?

Yes. It's class-ridden and it's pompous and it's condescending.

And you don't think it will be very different if Neil Kinnock wins the next election?

No I don't think so. Probably a bit greyer, that's all.