

“Sexual misconduct” witch-hunt targets conductor Charles Dutoit, director Max Stafford-Clarke and actor Ed Westwick

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11 January 2018

The latest cases in the sexual misconduct campaign in Britain only underscore its reactionary character. It is being used as a means to police and control the arts and wider forms of critical thought.

Just before Christmas, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) announced that it had cancelled appearances by its artistic director, 81-year-old conductor Charles Dutoit. The RPO claims this is to allow him the opportunity of due process against allegations of inappropriate sexual behaviour, but Dutoit has also been sacked from positions at the San Francisco, Boston, and Sydney Symphony Orchestras. Orchestras in New York, Chicago and Cleveland have cancelled his performances, while the Philadelphia Orchestra, with which he was closely associated for over two decades, has removed his status as conductor laureate.

Dutoit began his celebrated conducting career in 1959. During his 25-year tenure as its artistic director he developed the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (OSM) from a good regional ensemble into a widely-recorded orchestra of international standing. His two Grammys were for recordings made there.

Although not its music director he was chief conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra for four years and artistic director of its summer season for 21 years. He joined the RPO for 10 years in 2009, and was to be appointed honorary conductor for life on completion of that contract.

Dutoit has denied the allegations, saying, “I believe within this current climate, media accusations on serious physical abuse do not help society tackle these issues properly if the claims are in fact not true.”

Prior to this, London’s Royal Court Theatre responded to allegations of sexually inappropriate comments by 76-year-old director Max Stafford-Clarke—which had already seen him ousted from his theatre company—by cancelling performances of their revival of Andrea Dunbar’s play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*. This was evidently a step too far. Reeling from accusations of censorship, the theatre was forced to

reinstate the production.

Stafford-Clark was the Royal Court’s artistic director from 1979 to 1993, when he left to found Out of Joint. It was revealed last October that he had been forced from that company after making inappropriate sexual comments to a member of staff.

Stafford-Clark has suffered pseudobulbar palsy and “occasional disinhibition” since a stroke in 2006 and is confined to a wheelchair. His statement noted this medical background, saying his “occasional loss of the ability to inhibit urges results in him displaying disinhibited and compulsive behaviour and his usual (at times provocative) behaviour being magnified, often causing inappropriate social behaviour. Whilst this is an explanation it isn’t an attempt to dismiss his behaviour and he apologises for any offence caused.”

Dunbar’s first play *The Arbor*, about a pregnant teenager and her abusive father, began as a school project when she was 15. Stafford-Clark staged it at the Royal Court three years later, in 1980. He also directed her 1982 follow-up, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, about two teenage girls having an affair with the same married man.

Critic Roger Ebert described the film of the play as “an angry comedy,” noting perceptively that it was “further complicated because both of the girls are so sassy and irreverent that it’s hard to see them as victims.” The scripts are accurate, difficult reflections of the brutality of life in Thatcher’s Britain, and it is to the credit of Stafford-Clark and his Royal Court that they were developed.

The sexual misconduct campaign, however, would prevent such reflections of complicated reality. The theatre’s initial statement accused the play of themes of “grooming and abuses of power on young women.” The contradiction prompted an embarrassing retreat by Royal Court artistic director Vicky Featherstone, who said she was “rocked to the core by accusations of censorship and the banning of a working-class female voice.”

Dutoit is seeking legal advice, and has said he will defend himself against the “shocking” allegations. Six female musicians have accused him of incidents between 1985 and 2010. Four women initially spoke to the Associated Press (AP), and two subsequently made allegations to critic Norman Lebrecht’s website. The OSM has since announced that it is opening an investigation into a further allegation.

The RPO acknowledges that Dutoit has a legal right to defend himself, but it has done so while terminating his current engagements. The RPO says “the truth of the matter should be determined by the legal process” and the conductor “needs to be given a fair opportunity to seek legal advice and contest these accusations.” In the meantime, however, it has been “jointly agreed to release him from his forthcoming concert obligations with the orchestra for the immediate future.”

In other words, he is free to defend himself but not while conducting under the employ of the RPO. Other orchestras have dispensed even with this nicety.

Dutoit has written that he does “not recognize the man or the actions being described in the media,” He said, “Whilst informal physical contact is commonplace in the arts world as a mutual gesture of friendship, the serious accusations made involving coercion and forced physical contact have absolutely no basis in truth.”

Dutoit has long had a reputation as a demanding conductor. Last year he told the *Daily Telegraph* of a changing culture of musical development. He played viola under such conductors as Herbert von Karajan, and came to prize the slow nurturing of a deep-rooted musical culture.

He said that musicians today have more immediate access to material but lack that depth: “Nowadays young musicians have everything under their fingertips, they can learn a new piece just by listening to it on YouTube. They are amazingly well-informed but they have no culture. In my day everything was slow, but it meant that it was rooted. You had to seek things out and work on them slowly with the score.”

This has informed both his lengthy integration with orchestras and his sometimes autocratic approach. He described his work with the OSM as being “to lead them out of their kindergarten into the big world. I was determined to raise their standards and they shared my ambition.”

Unsurprisingly, this has not been without conflicts and disputes. Even Dutoit’s admirers acknowledge that he can be difficult to work with. There were several contractual disputes during his time at the OSM, and some clashes with the union. Given such close scrutiny of working conditions, therefore, it is all the more significant that no complaints of sexual harassment were raised then. A complaint was received “for the first time” after the AP coverage.

The Philadelphia Orchestra, similarly, can pass feedback on conductors through its members’ committees. Cellist John Koen, who was chair of the members’ committee, said he knew of no formal complaints about Dutoit’s behaviour. Again this is noteworthy because the orchestra’s management had issued particular instructions to “report any inappropriate [sexual] behaviour immediately.” Despite this explicit advice on reporting, the orchestra’s president from 1989 to 2005 Joseph H. Kluger said, “No one did while I was there.”

A question remains of how far the AP sought out these allegations, and how far its pursuit has continued in light of the broader campaign. Reading the coverage one could be forgiven for thinking that all previous allegations are already settled. Lebrecht, for example, casually writes that Dutoit was “a regular participant at... two of the locations where James Levine was active.”

Levine, a conductor of similar standing, was suspended last month from conducting engagements at the Metropolitan Opera in New York where he was musical director for 40 years, on the basis of unproven allegations of sexual interactions. Lebrecht’s remark shows how presumption of innocence and the right to due process have been discarded. Levine, himself collateral damage in this reactionary campaign, is condemned to legitimise the campaign further.

The campaign continued into the New Year with the news that the makers of BBC drama *Ordeal by Innocence* have replaced actor Ed Westwick after he was accused of sexual assault. Westwick denies the allegations. The BBC took the decision to pull the already filmed programme from its Christmas schedule and replace Westwick’s character, Mickey Argyll, with actor Christian Cooke in the production that is based on an Agatha Christie novel. This echoes the reactionary move by director Ridley Scott who erased actor Kevin Spacey from his film, *All the Money in the World*, following allegations of sexual misconduct against Spacey.

The author also recommends:

The petition against Matt Damon and the “erasing” of Kevin Spacey: The fiercely antidemocratic character of the sexual misconduct campaign

[28 December 2017]



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