



Wasfi Kani has always been something of an opera outsider. By her own admission, there was a period when the iconoclastic founder of Grange Park Opera, the daughter of Indian immigrants, was “just a bit too different – partly because I wasn’t a white posh man”.

Now, however, Kani is 69 and has probably launched more successful British opera companies than anyone alive. As well as Grange Park, which she founded in 1998, she has helmed Pimlico Opera, which works in prisons and primary schools, since 1987 and was brought in as chief executive of Garsington when it started building momentum in the early 1990s. Kani has been around, and thrived, for so long that she has picked up both an OBE and CBE. “I’m so old now I’ve become an ultra-insider,” she says.

Still, there is the occasional reminder of her difference. Over tea at her north London home, Kani recounts picking up the latter gong, which she was awarded in 2020, from the Princess Royal at Windsor Castle. In tow was her partner, with whom she does not live and about whom she only ever speaks coyly.

“I went with the guy I hang out with, and as you walk in there’s endless flunkies. They all said congratulations to him, and... he couldn’t believe it,” Kani recalls. “It wasn’t just one.

They all looked at him, a beautifully turned-out Italian man [and] they went, ‘Congratulations, sir’. And he said, ‘It’s her actually,’ which was quite sweet.”

Did that confusion – a result of unconscious sexism or racism, or some combination of both – bother Kani at all? “I don’t mind! We’re all trying our hardest,” she insists. “And I thought it was quite nice for him, actually.”

In any case, Kani has higher ambitions than “merely” being a CBE: she wants to be elevated to the House of Lords. “I look at some of the people there [and] at least I know a whole load about the arts or imprisonment; there’s a whole load of stuff that I do know something about,” she says. “There are issues being discussed and there are very few people there who know anything about them.” It is all very Kani: at once self-deprecating, pushy and funny.

It is exhilarating being in Kani’s company, as conversation slaloms from the mundane (a new robot vacuum cleaner has “completely changed” her life) to the profound (we talk about the existence or non-existence of God; she became a Catholic after being instructed by a Jesuit at Oxford) to the gossipy

Scott novels from her shelves to

take home; when I demur, she instead foists leftover Christmas cake and festive lavatory paper away instead. No matter that it is mid-January.

The ostensible reason for our meeting in Kentish Town, before

we got sidetracked, is to discuss Grange Park’s new summer season – for which *Telegraph* readers get early access to tickets. The bill includes a revival of Verdi’s monumental *Don Carlo*; the first performance of John Taverner’s

last work, *Krishna*, which has been championed by the King; and, perhaps most ambitiously, the launch of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, which will run until 2030.

The scale – mounting so many shows in her purpose-built

650-seat theatre in Surrey – is all the more impressive when one considers that Kani has only about 10 staff working full-time in the Grange Park offices. They seem to take after the boss. “We don’t believe in meetings. We don’t sit around endlessly and say, ‘Shall we do this? Shall we do that?’ and then fail to do any of it,” she says. “It’s very easy to have an idea; it’s very difficult to execute.”

Depending on how you count things, there are four or five dedicated country opera companies; other stately piles host their own arts festivals of which opera forms a part. Longborough, for instance, has made a name for itself in putting on its own *Ring* cycle productions. Does Kani feel like she’s treading on toes?

“Sometimes people refer to other companies as competition,” she tells me in her typically confiding manner. “And I say,

there cannot be too much culture in the world. And if they do well, I do well, and if I do well, they do well. Yes? So it’s not an Olympic sport where you run and you come first, second or third.”

What Kani leaves unsaid is how she has helped to popularise the entire form of country house opera in the UK, as when she started out it was really just Glyndebourne that mounted festivals.

Kani grew up a world away from the one she now inhabits, a world where her friends include aristos and plutocrats. Her parents, Indian Muslims, had come to Britain after Partition; her father worked for the General Post Office, while her mother was a seamstress. Kani herself was born in 1956 in Cable Street in London’s East End, and there cannot be many other modern opera impresarios whose home had an outside lavatory.

The family moved to west London when she was a child, and Kani attended Burlington Grammar School for Girls, where she excelled at music and maths. (The school was next to Wormwood Scrubs, which sparked her interest in prisons.) Kani played the violin for the National Youth Orchestra and later read music at St Hilda’s College, Oxford. After graduating from university she spent a decade designing computer systems in the City but felt unfulfilled in finance. An autodidact, she studied conducting in her spare time and, aged 30, decided to work as a professional conductor instead. Kani started mounting operas in historic houses and launched Pimlico Opera to work in prisons. By 1992, she was appointed chief executive of the fledgling Oxfordshire’s Garsington Opera; after five years, she wanted to start her own company.

Kani came across The Grange at Northington near Alresford in Hampshire around this time. The Greek Revival building was a wreck and owned by John Baring (aka Lord Ashburton) of the banking dynasty, but in the care of English Heritage. Kani convinced him to let her mount an opera festival in the grounds, and it quickly became a success.

It is, in hindsight, perhaps not surprising that Kani, a self-described “communist” with a single-minded determination that borders on contemptuousness for authority, fell out with the blue-blooded banker. But fall out they did, and, in 2015, the Barings ended her lease early even though she had already signed up performers for the 2017 season. What she tells me about the Barings today is not printable in a family newspaper.

She needed a new opera house, and fast. It was while reading about the broadcaster Bamber Gascoigne’s surprise at inheriting West Horsley Place, a stately home in Surrey, from his great aunt in *The Telegraph* that the ever-industrious Kani saw her opportunity. In no time she had convinced Gascoigne to let her build a miniature version of Milan’s La Scala in the grounds and started raising the millions needed to get it done on time. She even took all of the fixtures and fittings – down to the red velvet seats – from one home to another.

The reborn Grange Park Opera, now a short train ride from London’s Waterloo, soon thrived in its new home, but the first obstacle came with the coronavirus pandemic. “This thing about the lockdowns, the whole way people started behaving differently, that was, I think, very damaging for the country,” says

Kani. “They seemed to end up watching television all the time. We’re kind of back into it. People are beginning to behave normally again.” Part of the reason her company was able to thrive, not just survive, owes much to Kani’s ceaseless efforts to part the wealthy from their money.

She is regarded as being among the very best in the business at drumming up cash, which she largely does herself because “donors want to talk to the boss; a big donor isn’t interested in talking to a fundraiser”.

Kani is a rare kind of cultural leader: one who intimately understands both the art form and the business that makes it happen. “I do a lot of spreadsheets,” she admits. And she is rare in polite British society for being willing to talk, bluntly, about money. “It’s only money. I’m not stealing your children from you, and I’m not shooting your black Labradors.”

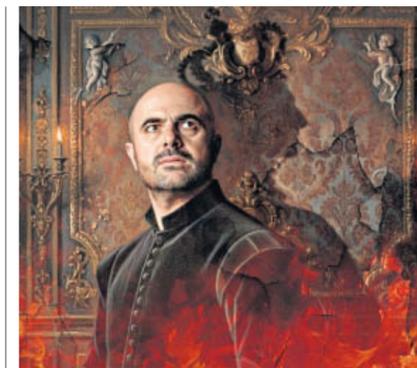
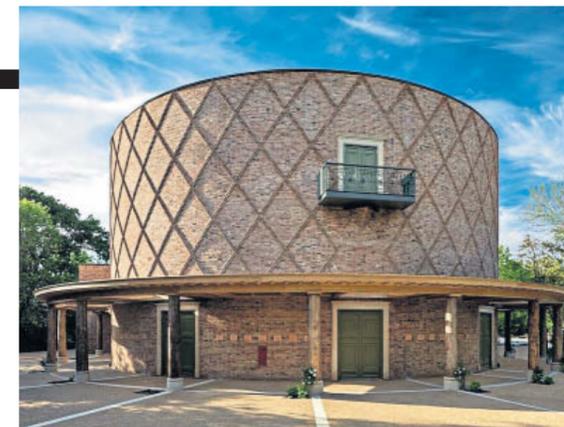
How is she able to raise as much as £3m each year? “They have to believe in you,” Kani says of her donors. “People have to give their money to someone; they’re more likely to give it to someone they think is going to deliver. And because I’ve been doing it for so long, I’m obviously going to deliver.” It probably doesn’t hurt that Kani has a habit of making you feel like she’s your best friend when she speaks to you, even if she is prone to outbursts of shouting and yelling.

The added benefit to this ability to raise vast sums is that she never has to go with her begging bowl to the Arts Council, which has long had a fraught relationship with opera companies. “The simple thing is, the people making these decisions, they won’t be there in three years’ time, because everyone just moves jobs all the time now. So they rip apart Welsh National Opera and [look at] the damage they’ve done,” she says. “Of course, it doesn’t matter [to them], because they just hand it on to someone else. It’s terrible... I wonder what the people who are making these decisions have done with their lives.”

Kani used to tell people – including *The Telegraph* in a 2002 interview – that she would like the chance to run a big opera company, like the publicly funded English National Opera. But she no longer has that ambition, and is content with having the ENO’s orchestra play the *Ring* cycle for the next five years.

“I love working with ENO... but it’s a lot of trouble,” she says. “All I want is to do one thing really well, and die, and then everyone goes: ‘She did that really well.’”

Dauntless: Wasfi Kani at home in north London, main; Grange Park’s Theatre in the Woods, right; Matthew Rose as Philip II in *Don Carlo*, below right



Priority booking for Telegraph readers

Telegraph readers can take advantage of priority booking ahead of the general public for Grange Park Opera’s summer season. The priority booking window is open until Friday February 13.

➤ To find out more, visit: grangeparkopera.co.uk/the-telegraph, call the box office on 01962 73 73 (office hours) or info@grangeparkopera.co.uk

‘I don’t compete with other companies. It’s not an Olympic sport’

What’s on at Grange Park this summer

Krishna

(June 4–July 2)
Many of us still pine for the numinous glow of John Taverner’s music, so this posthumous staging of his final work is a very exciting prospect. Completed in 2005, the piece, which evokes 14 moments from the life of Hindu deity Krishna, has the seal of approval from the King.

Don Carlo

(June 6–July 7)
If you think opera is flippant and psychologically flimsy, we direct you to this Verdi masterpiece; multi-layered and emotionally rich. It is a devastatingly good tale

of an arranged marriage in Spain’s royal family with a spectacularly dramatic fallout.

Das Rheingold

(June 14–July 10)
This year, Grange Park Opera launches a hugely ambitious project, to stage all of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle over four years. It begins, with this pruned opening chapter as three Rhinemaidens unwittingly unleash an extraordinary catalogue of events. A crack cast includes James Rutherford and Christine Rice and, best of all, Harry Sever conducts the mighty Orchestra of English National Opera.

Il Barbiere di Siviglia

(June 25–July 12)
The mother of all crowd-pleasers, Rossini’s masterpiece is ultimate escapism. But it isn’t just fluff – its music is a masterclass in comic timing. This production, stars mezzo-soprano Ginger Costa-Jackson.

A Night of Ballet

(July 9)
Melissa Hamilton is a Royal Ballet principal dancer, known for her collaborations with choreographer Wayne McGregor and star turns in the classics. Here, she curates an evening of dance from the classical and contemporary repertoires.