

# Tower of London poppies creator Tom Piper on being snubbed by the art world

'Most of the time, I feel I'm teetering on the edge of disaster,' says the 51-year-old British theatre designer [Tom Piper](#), smiling anxiously.

Gangly and diffident, Piper looks at me intensely, while one of his hands toys with his thinning hair. Tufts of it stand erect, like poppy stalks swaying in a field.

We are sitting in a costumier's in north London, where Piper has been overseeing fittings for a new production of [Tchaikovsky's](#) opera Eugene Onegin, which he is designing.



Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red (2014), designed by Paul Cummins with Piper Credit: camera press

It is due to premiere next month at [Garsington Opera](#), the annual festival held in a country estate in the Chiltern Hills. 'Today I've been going up and down the rails, looking for waistcoats,' Piper tells me.

In particular, he was hunting for waistcoats that could, conceivably, have been worn by 19th-century Russian peasants. 'A lot of work goes into making clothing look authentically broken down,' he says. 'It costs as much to hire clothes for a peasant as it does for a princess.'

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Most of the members of the opera's cast of almost 50 will require three different costumes during

each performance. Piper, who is working under the director Michael Boyd, the former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company with whom he has collaborated extensively in the past, is responsible for every single outfit.

## **A remarkably stressful process**

The whole process sounds remarkably time-consuming and stressful. 'Yes, it can be,' he says, fondling his hair again. 'But we will get it done.' Few would doubt him.

Within the world of [British theatre](#), Piper is known as Boyd's softly spoken sidekick. They first worked together in 1991 in Glasgow, where Boyd, who is nine years older than Piper, was running the Tron Theatre.



A set model of Tchaikovsky's opera Eugene Onegin Credit: Courtesy of Tom Piper

'I really liked the smell of his work,' recalls Boyd, who collaborated with Piper on another opera, Monteverdi's Orfeo, at [the Roundhouse](#) in London last year. 'So I put him through the purgatorial apprenticeship of designing a pantomime [Jack and the Beanstalk]. He was very inventive, and we just kept working together.'

In 2004, a year after he had assumed control of the [RSC](#), Boyd elevated Piper to 'associate', or in-house, designer within the organisation.

Until Boyd stepped down as artistic director in 2012, he and Piper collaborated on many memorable productions – including an ambitious staging of eight of Shakespeare's history plays as a single 'cycle'.

During that time, Piper earned a reputation as a talented but self-effacing designer, whose austere, stripped-back sets, which Boyd describes as 'sculptural architecture', incorporated natural materials, such as wood, as well as weathering steel. 'Piper was Boyd's unobtrusive nuts-and-bolts man,' says the Telegraph's theatre critic, [Dominic Cavendish](#).



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'His designs didn't insistently have a wow factor – but sometimes the good stuff is what you don't particularly notice.'

More recently, though, Piper has been noticed like never before. In 2014 he left his associate role at the RSC and won widespread recognition, far beyond his former employer's heartland of Stratford upon Avon, for his involvement in a single project: a temporary art installation, marking the centenary of the First World War, called Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red.

### **Thousands of ceramic poppies**

To the millions who saw this extraordinary work during the four months it was on display, it was known, simply, as ['the poppies' at the Tower of London](#). Piper didn't come up with the idea of filling

the Tower's moat with 888,246 ceramic poppies, each one representing a British military fatality during the war: that was dreamt up by a ceramic artist from Derbyshire called [Paul Cummins](#).

Stunning time lapse of workers assembling Liverpool's 'Weeping Window' poppy installation Play!  
00:50

But once Cummins's proposal had been green-lit, Piper was brought on board as its 'designer'. 'My initial role was to be a facilitator of Paul's idea,' Piper recalls. 'It was meant to be a three-week job.' To begin with, Piper concerned himself with logistical details: 'Paul's early prototypes were very beautiful, but the red wasn't strong enough,' he says.

Also, he realised that if the poppies were only placed within the moat, their overall visual impact would be diminished. Accordingly, he explored ways to relate the poppies to the building itself.

To this end, he commissioned scaffolding-like structures that could support thousands of poppies, so that the flowers would appear to flow down the Tower's walls and swoop up into the air.

***"I stood on a little mound within the poppies, in front of a few thousand people, and read out 180 names, before a bugler played the Last Post"***

Two of these dramatic 'sculptures' were subsequently bought: one by the Backstage Trust, the other by [Clore Duffield Foundation](#). They are now touring Britain until 2018. [Weeping Window](#), which created the illusion of poppies tumbling from one of the Tower's windows, is currently installed on the west end of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, Orkney.

'Paul and I brought two clear metaphors to the piece,' Piper says. 'You had the individual poppy as a soldier, and you had the poppy as a liquid: a flowing blood-like substance, which poured out of the building. The collaboration of those two metaphors enhanced it and made it work.'

## **Beautiful - but very ordered**

The original plan was to 'plant' the poppies over three weeks, before unveiling them during a royal visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry. This, Piper says, was 'unrealistic'. So he came up with a solution: to stagger the planting over several months, leading up to [Armistice Day](#).





Piper's collaborations with director Michael Boyd include the RSC's *Henry VI Part 1*, in 2006. Credit: Ellie Kurtz/RSC

To assist with this, the Tower recruited 30,000 volunteers. Despite all the manpower, though, planting the poppies was still manic. 'We had to plant about 80,000 every week,' Piper recalls. For him, though, the ongoing spectacle was a big part of the installation's success.

'In a sense, the volunteers were performing,' he explains. 'The whole thing had a natural, flowing quality. Grass grew up through it. Birds were flying around. It wasn't like the formal memorials in Flanders – beautiful, but very ordered.'

## From Helen Mirren to Nigel Farage

The Tower enhanced the sense of drama by initiating something called the 'roll of honour': a list of names of Commonwealth troops killed during the war, read out by various people (from Beefeaters to [Helen Mirren](#)), every day at sunset.

'I did it once,' Piper says. 'I stood on a little mound within the poppies, in front of a few thousand people, and read out 180 names, before a bugler played the Last Post.' His voice trembles with emotion. 'It was very moving.' Almost by stealth, the poppies became the nation's most important memorial to the First World War: a big splash of red, signifying Britain's heart.

Dignitaries and politicians lined up to pay their respects, including Nigel Farage. When he visited the installation in November, the Ukip leader was photographed wiping away tears. 'That was ridiculous,' Piper says.

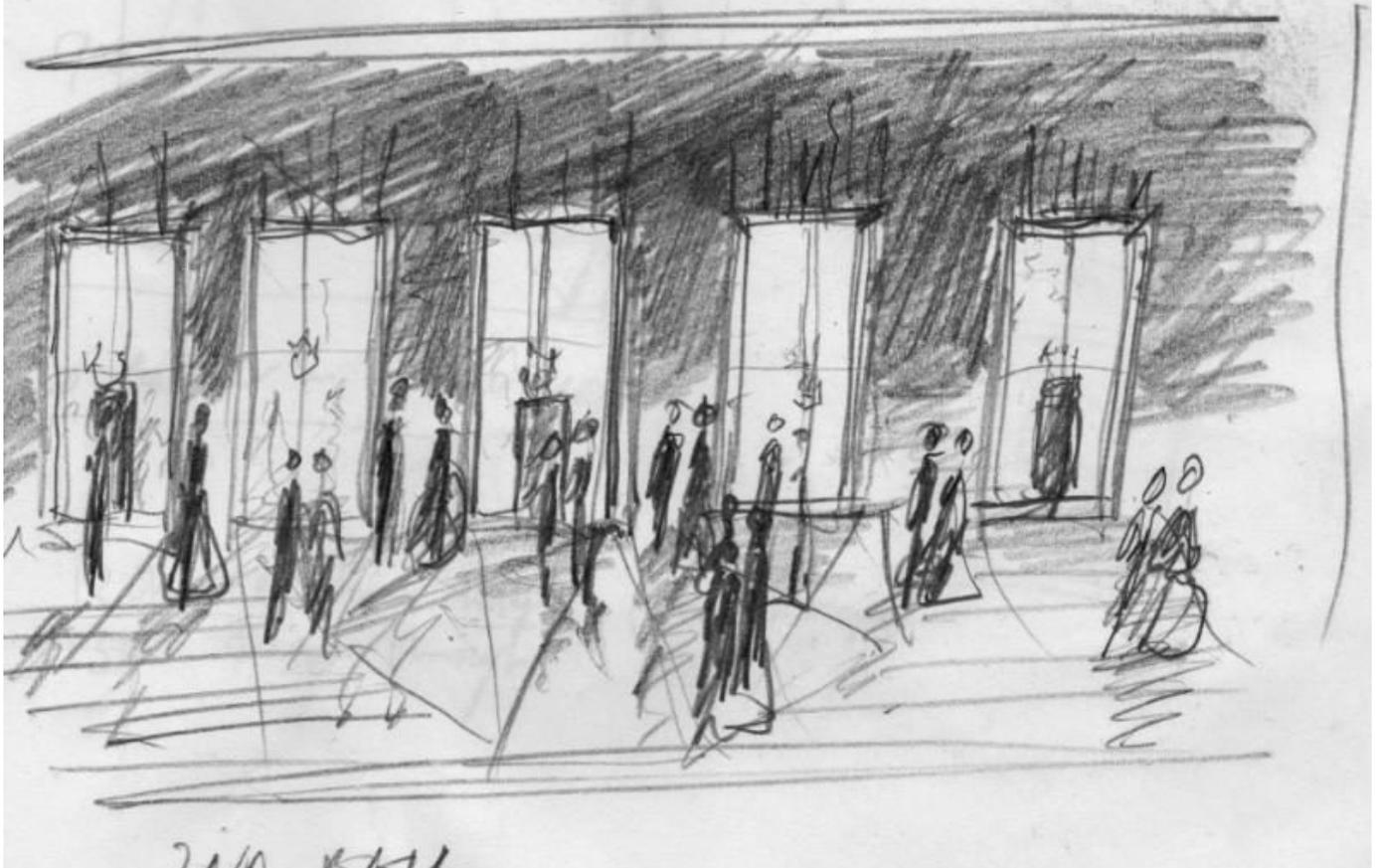
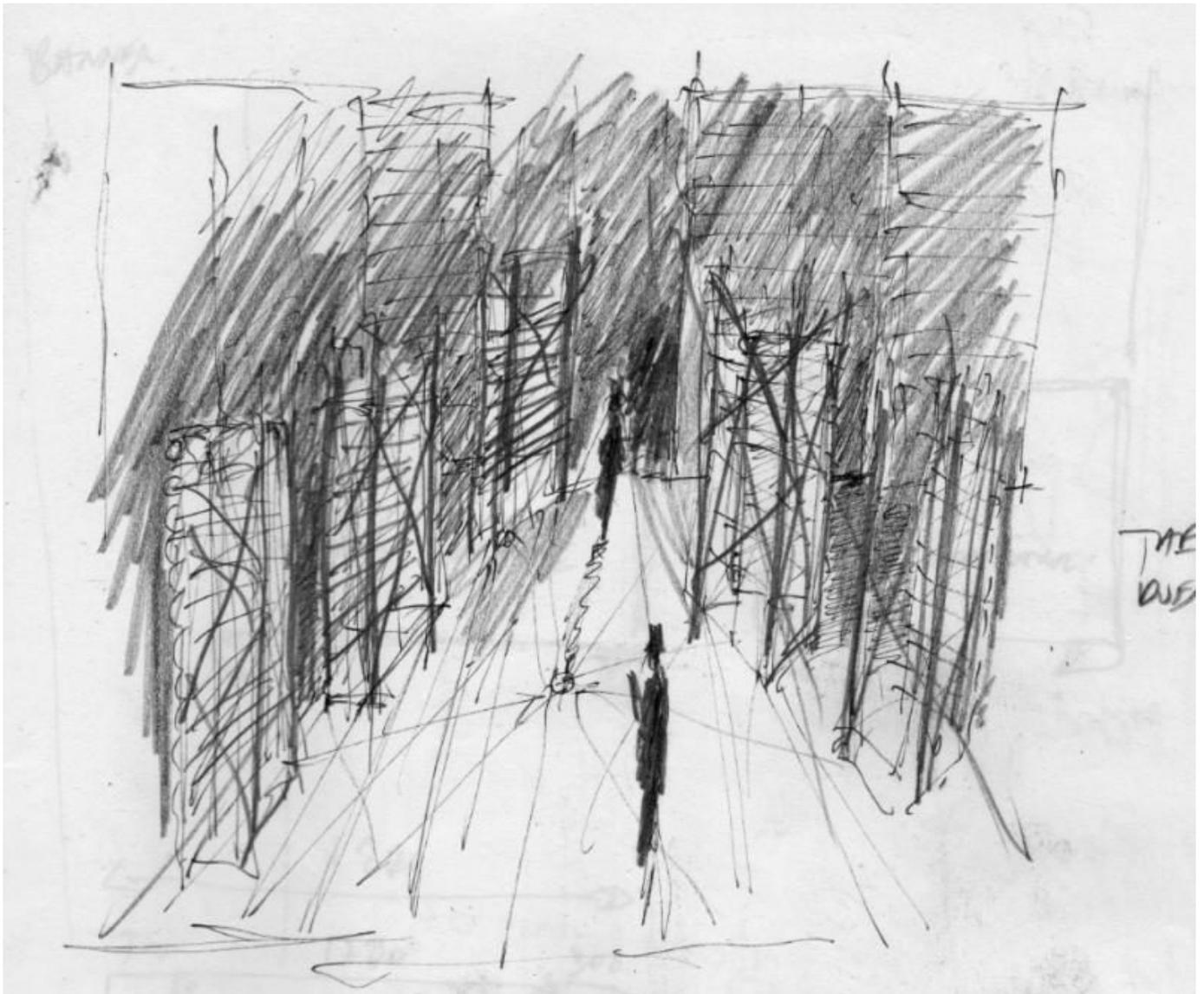
***"Then we took them all out, quickly. It was brutal, muddy. When we had finished, the whole moat looked like the Somme"***

The final poppy was put in place at 11am on November 11. 'The poppies only reached stillness for one day, which was rather beautiful,' Piper says. 'Then we took them all out, quickly. It was brutal, muddy. When we had finished, the whole moat looked like the Somme.'

Before they were removed, though, the poppies were offered for sale to the public. (Piper bought six.) The proceeds raised £9.5 million, which was distributed equally between six service charities. By the time the last of the flowers had left the Tower, they had been seen, in person, by more than five million people.

## Scathing reviews

Yet, despite their popularity, the poppies were attacked in certain quarters. The Guardian's art critic called the installation 'prettified' and 'toothless', and argued that the moat should have been filled instead with barbed wire and bones.





A sketch for the opera, Eugene Onegin Credit: Courtesy of Tom Piper

Even though Piper is used to criticism ('In theatre, you have to have a thick skin,' he says), he was, he tells me, 'a bit angry' when he read the article. 'For me, bones would have been a much triter, more obvious thing to do.' Moreover, he was 'disappointed' by the lack of recognition for the poppies from within Britain's 'art establishment'.

## Turner Prize ambitions

At one stage, Piper confesses, he 'flirted' with the idea that he might win a nomination for the [Turner Prize](#). That didn't happen – although he was awarded an MBE last year. 'Artists I know, like Cornelia Parker and David Mach, thought it was fantastic,' Piper says.

'They admired its resonance. But various people in the art world, for whom "populism" is a dirty word, said, "Well, it's not a work of art, because it was made by a potter and a theatre designer."'

This riles Piper for two reasons. First, Piper's father, a distinguished museum director who ran the [Fitzwilliam](#), [the Ashmolean](#) and the [National Portrait Gallery](#), was the embodiment of the 'art establishment' – yet he always had a populist instinct. Second, Piper is actually a graduate of art school.

***"it would be lovely to be able to afford to get my children through university but pursuing commercial success, in theatre, never really works"***

To begin with, he wanted to be a scientist. Fascinated by biology, he entered Cambridge in the mid-1980s to read natural sciences (he later switched to art history).

## Portrait of a young artist

As an undergraduate, he spent most of his time involved in student drama – designing more than 30 plays for contemporaries such as the stage and film director [Sam Mendes](#), a friend and former classmate from Magdalen College School in Oxford, who is godfather to one of Piper's children.





Piper's collaborations with director Michael Boyd also include the Orfeo by Monteverdi, at the Roundhouse in London last year Credit: Stephen Cummiskey

After Cambridge, Piper attended the Slade art school in London, where he specialised in theatre design. Despite the great popular success of the poppies ('I'll never have that many people see my work again,' he says), Piper now finds himself in a curious limbo, languishing between the separate spheres of theatre and art.

'The art world [still] doesn't really know me,' he says. Meanwhile, the theatre world continues to treat him as it did before. 'I am being offered a range of jobs,' says Piper, who has already committed to work with Boyd on another opera, Debussy's *Péleas et Mélisande*, at Garsington next summer. 'But nobody is going, "Wow, now we have to offer you this fantastic big musical."'

### **Just like *Pride and Prejudice's* Mr Bennet**

Is that what he'd like? 'Well, it would be lovely to be able to afford to get my children through university,' he replies. Piper has five daughters, aged between eight and 22.

'I am the real-life Mr Bennet,' he jokes. 'But pursuing commercial success, in theatre, never really works.' In person, Piper is calm, quiet, even unassuming.

For much of his career, he has been successful while flying under the radar. Yet, according to Boyd, Piper can also be 'very forceful, when he wants to be'.

Poppy memorial time-lapse at Tower of London from dawn to dusk Play! 01:26

Certainly, Piper's 'forcefulness' is evident when he talks about the status of theatre designers. 'Britain has some of the best theatre designers in the world,' he says. 'And yet theatre design, in this country, isn't treated as a serious art form.'

Does he consider himself an artist, then? 'I think I am an artist, yes,' he replies, hesitantly, 'although I am called a designer.' Yet isn't he reliant on someone else's vision? 'That's what I'm used to,' he concedes. 'I suppose, by nature, I find the idea of a blank piece of paper scary.'

Luckily, in theatre, you never really have that: you are always collaborating. And the sum of the parts is always greater than any individual's contribution.'

**Eugene Onegin will premiere at Garsington Opera on June 3. For tickets, call 01865-361636 or visit [garsingtonopera.org](http://garsingtonopera.org). The production will also be screened in rural coastal communities, including Skegness, Ramsgate, and Grimsby. For further details, visit [operaforall.org](http://operaforall.org)**