

Operatic Entrance

As Paris feted Queen Elizabeth II, photographer Bert Hardy found a circumstance to match her pomp

- By David J. Marcou
- *Smithsonian* magazine, March 2007



"I saw this fabulous scene," said Hardy. Excluded from the press pool, he had borrowed a dinner jacket and sneaked into the Paris Opera.

Bert Hardy / Picture Post / Getty Images

The sun was setting on their empires, but neither the British nor the French were going quietly. The two powers, not always the closest of allies, had just tried to thwart Egypt's plans to nationalize the Suez Canal. The two nations were suffering the consequences: tension with the United States, opprobrium in the Arab world, a dawning recognition that the Americans and the Soviets would eclipse them on the global stage.

What better time for a royal visit?

On April 8, Queen Elizabeth II arrived for a three-day sojourn in Paris—the first English queen to visit France since Victoria, in 1855. After a state dinner that evening ("You were the cradle of our kings," she told her hosts, alluding to William the Conqueror's Norman heritage), she swept into the Paris Opera for a performance of the ballet *Le Chevalier et la Demoiselle*.

Photographer Bert Hardy, who had slipped through security, was already shooting, precisely and surreptitiously. Because his 50-millimeter lens could take in only a fraction of the scene before him, he shot 20 frames in all, 15 of which were painstakingly joined, by hand, to compose the image you see here. Diplomatic amity notwithstanding, the British photojournalist was quietly scoring a scoop for his magazine, *Picture Post*, then the *Life* magazine of the United Kingdom.

"*Paris Match* was very much our competition," Hardy told me in 1981. The press pool for the evening was limited to two French and two British media, and *Picture Post* was not on the list. "But the French newsmen were above the rules," he said. "They had 20 [journalists], we would have 2, and the French police were making sure that's all we had."

Hardy hid his Leica under a borrowed and oversize dinner jacket and reported to the opera house. "I waited till a herd of French dignitaries arrived," he said. "They were terribly courteous, and I went in with them."

Anxious that his brown shoes would stand out amid a sea of formal clothes, he positioned himself with a view of the stairs and started shooting. He could not be haphazard about it: the frames had to overlap just so, because the edges of each one,

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distorted by his lens, would be discarded during printing, when the frames would be assembled in a montage, or join-up.

Then Elizabeth entered, escorted by French president René Coty. She wore an emerald-and-diamond tiara and a Hartnell dress encrusted with pearls, topaz and gold. Across its ivory satin lay the French Legion of Honor's bold red sash. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Hardy had his pièce de résistance.

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This is a great summary of a fantastic picture from the era when photographers had to be resourceful behind the camera.

Posted by Jon Tarrant on February 7, 2008 | 02:08PM

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