

Spencer challenge shocks royal family

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the service became clear. Just as television audiences were not shown the faces of the bereaved families, so we, in the press seats, were placed at an angle that prevented us looking directly into their faces. Plainly the political issue of the week — whether to show a trembling lower lip or the stiff upper one — was being evaded. But, at least, we did not have the sweeping shots of architecture in which television indulged. For us it was all stillness and concentration.

Gradually guests started arriving, a hybrid bunch representing the cross-cultural force of Diana's personality — Queen Noor of Jordan, Richard Branson, Luciano Pavarotti, George Michael and Elton John.

At 10, the organ started playing and the atmosphere intensified. Celebrity spotting gave way to a more concentrated mood. The abbey seemed to be filling to bursting. Attendants had to bring in stacks of plastic chairs. Michael Barrymore and Conrad Black, the newspaper tycoon — one of many strange matches — found themselves squashed deep into the aisle behind the choir.

The visiting clergy filled their seats in the sanctuary, among them George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury. For the next half hour his rather odd role was to lean forward repeatedly to look down the length of the church and then stand up as a signal to us all when the royals or Spencer family came in. The Spencers provoked perhaps the most awe as they settled into their seats amid a sea of black hats and largely grey heads.

The Fayed's had arrived and I saw the startlingly diminutive pop star Bryan Adams shake Mohamed al-Fayed's hand — another strange match. Fayed himself, sitting close to me, looked stern and impressive, a compact figure of grief and, perhaps, anger. His painfully knitted brows were the clearest evidence of what must have been going inside the man.

On the television screen, we saw the cortege approaching around Parliament Square. Everything now changed. I heard a gulp, a snuffle. I looked round and handkerchiefs were out around me. At last this was no longer a party or a celebrity outing, it was a funeral.

The choir, as it led the coffin up the nave, was invisible to us. But its sound fell on us like a fine, silvery mist. Then, as the coffin approached us, we could

hear the soft tramp of the pallbearers' feet and, finally, it came into full view and, with an awkward grating noise, was slid into place — at, for that moment, the centre of the world thanks to the television camera projecting outwards on a gantry from the summit of the crossing, 100ft above the chequered floor.

The opening words of Wesley Carr, Dean of Westminster, were shocking — first because they signalled the start, at last, of the funeral narrative, and second because of the plainness of their contemporary vernacular: "She met individuals and made them feel significant." The pomp and pomposity of the setting was already being undermined by a new, more direct, more emotional culture.

"I vow to thee, my country..." filled the abbey like thunder and then, after Lady Sarah McCorquodale's reading, Lynne Dawson and the BBC Singers gave a piercing performance of the Libera Me from Verdi's Requiem. This was enough for me. It had been a long week. I wasn't sure I could bear to have my emotions assaulted further. Yet with Lady Jane Fellowes's reading, the whole world must have felt the shock. It was the voice of Diana coming from one of her surviving sisters.

Tony Blair was to signal the start of a central passage of quite unbearable intensity. He read from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians — "And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love". His reading was badly overstated, his pauses too plainly theatrical. But it worked and nothing could hold back those words.

At once, Elton John, from a grand piano on a platform just west of the choir, started singing his new version of Candle in the Wind. I had been dreading this. To me it is an over-the-top song, sugary and obvious; and the new words were hopelessly clumsy.

But it worked. He understated the performance, drying out some of the song's syrup. I found myself crying, and the tears were now flowing all around me. One weathered reporter was surreptitiously brushing his cheeks and another was rapidly putting on a pair of unnecessary glasses. As the song finished, we heard clapping from outside.

And then came Earl Spencer. Besides discomfiting the royal family, he lashed all of us in the press seats — we were "at the

opposite end of the moral spectrum" to his sister — and he claimed for her a title that seemed to be higher than saint: she was "human". She spoke to the "constituency of the rejected" but she could suffer from a "deep feeling of unworthiness".

It was not a well-written speech, but it was brilliantly pitched. He knew, in speaking of Diana, he must speak not to just the abbey, not even to the millions outside in the streets, but rather to the billions who made Diana in life one of the most famous people in the world, and in death the most famous of all.

He was speaking to the globalised, electronically connected culture of which Diana has become the supreme star. This was the new culture that, with that wave of applause, invaded and claimed the abbey.

We could only, from that point onwards, calm down. The archbishop's bidding prayers were again plain and direct, though he followed the globalising lead of Earl Spencer by asking everybody in the world to join in the Lord's prayer "in whatever language we may choose".

Finally, following the Dean's Commendation, the soldiers returned, again filling the cathedral with the strange soft rubbery stamp of their steps. The minute's silence was deep as they departed with Diana's body — you could feel it extending across the world — but interrupted by more snuffles and suppressed sobs in the north transept.

It was all more, far more than I expected. It was an event made by the incredible upsurge of popular feeling in Britain and around the world. Before she died, some may have been hoping that she would grow old, her celebrity would dim and she would be quietly interred in relative obscurity. Even when she died, nobody anticipated the scale of this popular rising.

It was only a week from that mangled Mercedes to the abbey. But it was a week in which a new world asserted itself and made a goddess out of one rejected, hounded, marginalised member of the British royal family.

The abbey service was the elevation of Diana to a new kind of heaven. I'll tell my grandchildren I was there. But they won't listen. By then, it will seem so obvious to them: of course Diana changed the world.

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