

arts & culture

Dec 31, 2009

Sleep of death

By Helen Kaye

He lives in an 18th century castle in Tipperary and has a studio in downtown Los Angeles. He has four grown children, all artists, and a four-year-old granddaughter. His wife, Renate, came here to spend Christmas with him. He's a painter, photographer, installation- and performance-artist, and, latterly, a stage designer. He is very famous. Helnwein's production of...

He's Gottfried Helnwein, and he is the set and costume designer for *The Child Dreams*, which has its much-heralded world premiere at the Israel Opera on January 18. The music is by Gil Shohat. The director is Omri Nitzan. Director and composer wrote the libretto together, taking it almost verbatim from the 1993 play of the same name by Hanoch Levin, and it is a very great play.



Helnwein's production of Levin's "The Child Sleeps."

It follows a group of refugees in their attempts to find a refuge after being driven from their home and native place. But it is the child, wrested from peace, hounded inexorably towards death, who drives the narrative.

"In a very poetic way [Levin] describes the world we live in," says Helnwein, "with the child as metaphor for innocence, purity, confronted with the corrupt adult world. The adult characters, even the mother and father, are all archetypes; the child doesn't understand this world [into which he's been thrust]. With complete trust, he thinks that the bond between himself and his mother is unbreakable, but, of course, it's broken..."

"What moves and touches me is how poetic the language is. His language is so evocative that I immediately see three dimensional images, strange, moving, so inspirational. But that is what great artists do - they transcend a horrible reality through their aesthetic."

Before he read the libretto for *Child Dreams*, Helnwein had never heard of Levin, but now, he says, "I am happy to know him because what he says in words, I say with my images."

THERE IT baldly is - because Helnwein is chiefly known for his disquieting, wrenching, beautiful images of children. He draws, paints and photographs children as society would much rather not see them, not know about them. His huge canvases of children abused, children in pain, dead children, children oppressed, suppressed and denied, elicit a visceral response - whether of praise or of hate - from any who see them.

Last year, for the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, Helnwein created a 100-meter-long installation in the center of Cologne with huge images of children's faces. A couple of days into the exhibition, the children's throats were slit. Helnwein repaired the pictures with duct-tape, left it visible, and made the installation "more powerful" in the process.

Some 20 pictures, including Israeli children painted here this year, will be installed on the plaza at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center - that's all there's room for - to run concurrently with the opera.

Children have been the focus of Helnwein's art from the beginning. He started out by making small pictures of wounded and bandaged children, as well as creating performance art pieces with a child collaborator on the streets of Vienna.

Why children in particular? Because, according to Helnwein, kids always get the short end of the stick; they're small, powerless, easy to push around, exploit, bamboozle, disregard and disrespect. "Children need to be adored for what they are," he says roundly, "they haven't been and are not."

Helnwein went through his own childhood, he has said in many interviews, feeling as if he'd been decanted onto an alien planet. He was born in the Russian sector of Vienna in 1948 - a dreary time, full of despair and depression, and, he has said, "all the grownups I saw were ugly, grouchy, and rude..."

"I remember empty streets, ruins of bombed houses, rust, rubble, no colors, no sound... I never heard anybody laugh. I never heard anybody sing..."

BUT IT'S not that Helnwein's own parents were cruel to him - they were nice people, he says, and he loved his grandfather's farm, out in the country. Rather he felt spiritually disconnected from them, from all adults in general - especially when he started asking all those awkward questions about Austria's very recent Nazi past. He got thumped, he has said, but he persisted.

And yet he has retained an affinity for kid-dom. Basically, "it felt good to be a child," but there was also that alienation, which drove him to rebel "against the prevailing attitude towards children" when he was in his teens. "I vowed then that I'd have children, and that when I did I'd respect them."

Helnwein's own beloved brood - three boys and a girl - was born in Vienna. The extended family has lived in Austria and Germany, but since 1998 it has mostly made its home in the rambling, ivy-covered Castle Gurteen in Tipperary County. Helnwein also has a studio and home in downtown Los Angeles because, he says, "so many of my friends live in the area."

LA is also where Israel Opera head Hannah Munitz first saw Helnwein's work, which, she attests, "made her jaw drop." After that, hiring Helnwein to do *The Child Dreams* was, you might say, inevitable.

Helnwein first visited Israel in 2005 when the Israel and Los Angeles Operas mounted *Der Rosenkavalier*, for which he had designed the stage, and now has been back and forth many times for Child.

From the beginning, sensing that it is what Levin would have wanted, Helnwein insisted on having actual children onstage. "When you look at the stage you have to see a fragile, beautiful child." So although soprano Hila Baggio sings the part, she is still the "voice" of an actual child.

A huge picture-wall of a sleeping child, through which the soldiers break, is the first of four amazing sets, culminating in a "universe of deadchildren in an infinity of space."

When he designs an opera stage, says Helnwein, "I try to tell the whole story in pictures so that even a deaf person could completely understand." And for this opera, "It has to be done so that were Levin to see it, he'd be excited."