

NOA NAAMAT ON PHAEDRA

Warwick Thompson

Warwick Thompson writes for *Metro*, *Opera* magazine, and *Opera Now*, and regularly gives talks at Glyndebourne.

The first step in creating this production was to grapple with Henze and Lehnert's version of the Phaedra myth: what did they keep in, what did they leave out, and why? Only then could I fully comprehend the piece and offer my own interpretation. One of the most evident changes is that here the dramatic action extends to after the death of Hippolytus and suicide of Phaedra, the point at which most other versions of the story end. Thus, Henze and Lehnert explore new territory beyond the well-known story, and suggest different emotional journeys for the characters.

But an even more significant change lies in the inclusion of the Minotaur. In the familiar versions of the Hippolytus/Phaedra story, Theseus has already killed the Minotaur, but in Henze's version he is very much alive and kicking. He is constantly mentioned in the stage directions, and he is the one leading the final scene, presenting us with the moral of the story.

I imagined him as a wild, self-destructive creature who inhabits the minds of all the other characters. He prevents them from escaping their own spiritual labyrinths, and from realizing their own true identities. They are constantly fighting the voice of the Minotaur, who wants to push them to their dark sides and make them doubt themselves, their actions and their whole existence. In this way, the Minotaur becomes an active player in the characters' inner conflicts.

Henze's unpredictable yet melodic music and Lehnert's rich and poetic text bring to life a story of a dystopian society. I was, therefore, interested in creating a world where there is no sun, no warmth nor human touch, where everything is controlled by the Minotaur, who in our production is a cold, soulless machine. The designer takis and I have chosen to create a kingdom for the Minotaur, in which he sits above everybody else; a world in which the characters are always trapped, always watched, and constantly battling self-destruction.

The British-American philosopher Alan Watts once said that in order to come to your senses, you first have to go out of your mind. For me, this is what the characters in this opera are forced to do.

As told to Warwick Thompson