

Classical & Opera

Cold-blooded Christmas

Nina Siegal spoke with British director **Katie Mitchell** ahead of the world premiere of Manfred Trojahn's 'Orest' at De Nederlands Opera

Did you have any communication about the opera with Mr Trojahn as he was writing the libretto?

No, he very much likes to do his own dramaturgy and his own libretto. I knew that it was based on the play by Euripides called 'Orestes'. I had that play and a one-page synopsis, and then we had to design it way before the opera was finished.

So you've been in production a couple of weeks now. When was the score actually delivered to you?

The piece was finished about six weeks ago. We sail delightfully close to the wind when we make new works because it takes a long time to compose. We had to conceive of the production before we had the completed opera. Challenging.

That does sound challenging.

Fortunately, I've done quite a few of the plays around this territory. I've done 'The Oresteia' by Aeschylus, 'Women of Troy' by Euripides and 'Iphigenia at Aulis', so I'm familiar with the mythic territory and the human stories within that territory.

This play by Euripides is very unique because it takes place a couple of weeks after Orestes has stabbed his mother to death. But years before that was another crime: his mother and her lover killed his father. Now there's a new murder: Orestes kills Helen [of Troy]. So I became very preoccupied with how to tell

the story of the two murders that precede the action and then how to stage the murder that takes place.

What's your approach?

Like lot of people I watch a lot of crime programmes and programmes about forensics specialists. I was also interested in the fact that this is a family home – okay, it's a palace, but still a family home – where these murders happen. I thought, what if you had a cross-section of a palace and you could see through to the bathroom where the dad was killed, the bedroom where



Criminal act: Katie Mitchell goes to the dark side

the mom was killed and then a living room where auntie Helen is killed. In the bathroom, the blood is very old because the dad was killed six years ago, so you can only see the blood if you shine UV light on it. The murder of the mother was two weeks ago, so evidence of the very violent head smashing with an axe is still visible.

They haven't

had a hazmat team through to clean up the blood yet?

They have, but they're just finishing. So we've still got the stepping stones the forensic people put down; they're still cleaning, they're still doing blood splatter analysis, they're still finger-printing. When the final crime comes at the end, the hazmat team comes in again.

'This production would withstand the scrutiny of a forensics team'

We're talking a 'CSI Miami' or 'Dexter' kind of look to the production?

Yes, I would say we are. But the music is very challenging, because it's a new opera. It doesn't sound like opera as we know it, but the kind of music you'd have in very good contemporary films. It's very discordant and frightening, but also very lyrical and beautiful. It feels like a slightly lyrical David Lynch film. There's a fantastic American photographer called [Gregory] Crewdson, who does these hyper-realistic photographs. Manfred pointed us toward one in which a woman is floating dead in a pool of water in a living room. He said, 'This is what this should feel like.'

When did he say that? At what point in the process?

About three days ago [laughs]. Fortunately, we'd been looking at Crewdson's photographs already, so that was a nice moment of serendipity.

So, when did you actually hear the opera?

I've never heard it. I won't hear it until the orchestra arrives, which is when we're in the theatre. I just hear a piano reduction and I try to guess what it's going to sound like.

How do you deal with this gruesome murder onstage?

Gruesomely [laughs]. We're killing

'The mother died two weeks ago, so evidence of the violent head smashing is visible'

Helen of Troy with a power tool.

Orestes and Electra are under house arrest in the home, so there aren't any other weapons available to them. And then, of course, when you kill someone with a power tool, a lot of blood comes out, so we're trying to figure out how to portray all that onstage.

You're really going for the blood.

Yes, the murder is quick and lifelike. We've been very precise about blood splatter in the crime scene. This production would withstand the scrutiny of a forensics team, I tell you. If you've never seen an opera in your life, this is the one to come to because it's got all the hand holds, things the non-opera audience knows about: crime scenes, Christmas gatherings that go really wrong – in this one mommy gets killed – and it's got elements of a thriller, but it's also got a serious bit of modern music.

What about opera veterans?

They're going to be challenged a little, just taken a bit outside of their comfort zones. They'll have enough knowledge of the history of opera and enough points of reference to put Trojahn's music into an historical context that they should delight in. There's enough lyricism in it, enough moments of aria-likeness for the more mainstream operagoer to feel comfortable. For both, though, it's a very good story: a bloke just killed his mother and he's hallucinating what will happen to him – will he get away with it or will he get the death penalty? You can't misunderstand the story; it's very clear.

Orest premieres at Het Muziektheater Thursday 8. See listings for details.