

A fable without morality: Eötvös' *Sleepless* fascinates and unsettles

By [Elodie Olson-Coons](#), 30 March 2022

[Peter Eötvös](#) was both star composer and conductor tonight in Geneva, presenting his thirteenth opera, *Sleepless*, and leading from the pit. A joint commission from the Staatsoper Unter den Linden and the Grand Théâtre, this was the second production and joint premiere of the opera, after [Berlin in November 2021](#), and although the Swiss audience's reception was a little lukewarm – Geneva's opera-house stalwarts still not quite settled into Aviel Cahn's admirable shift of direction in his time at the helm, perhaps – there was much to admire, and to think about, here.

Based on Jon Fosse's *Trilogy*, this *opéra ballade* tells the story of two lost and isolated teenagers, Alida and Asle, wandering in search of sleep and a safe haven in which to give birth to their illegitimate child. But there is no room at the inn, and the lovers are turned away at every corner, driving Asle to increasingly brutal acts of violence. It is a nervous, unpleasant little story, which Eötvös deftly transfigures into something haunting, though never quite transcending its ugly core.

The opera has the quality of a dark fable, a twisted lullaby for the insomniac, from Alida's beautiful opening aria to the gorgeous choral interludes – not the only element to echo *Peter Grimes* – that punctuate the story, constructed in thirteen interlinked episodes. A recurring 'fiddle' motif serves both to add texture and Nordic colour. Musically, there is much to admire in the structure, with its shifting, surging tonal underlay, each of the scenes infused with its own distinct colour. But where is it all driving? To violence, to betrayal, to death.

Kornél Mundruczó's staging, with at its heart Monika Pormale's beautiful set design, gives this katabasis a fairy tale quality: not in the belly of the whale, exactly, but in the guts of a neatly filleted salmon, meat shimmering red, mouth full of gold coins. We are in an imaginary Norwegian village, a timeless place at the intersection of ancient and modern forces: fishing culture and immigration; Christian morals and modernity; and everywhere, the sea, the sea.

At times, this staging of archetypes (the racist innkeeper, the lecherous publican) feels as if it might be limiting the story, paring it down to two dimensions; at others, the universality of its questions – about commitment and faith, about the exhaustion of searching for a home, about the possibility of sin in a world without true good – resonates and unsettles. What is it that leads us to expect morality or resolution in a tale such as this? None is forthcoming. Asle hangs like a dog after consorting with the village floozy. In her final monologue, grey-haired Alida still pines for the unfaithful murderer that he was; pockets full of stones, she walks into the sea. It is a harrowing without a resurrection, a tragedy without catharsis.

Breathing life into the human heart of this troubled world, the two leads were outstanding. [Victoria Randem's](#) fluid, natural soprano filled Alida's role with depths and light – impressive, given her character spends much of the first act weeping – while [Linard Vrielink](#), as Asle, convincingly radiated the nervous tension that swiftly tips the overprotective young father into delinquency and destruction. His soaring, confident tenor illuminated the auditorium from start to finish. Two standouts among the supporting cast: [Katharina Kammerloher](#), delivering two impressively distinct cameos as the Mother and Midwife, her voice rounded and smooth in the latter role, her incisive delivery in the former mesmerising; and Siyabonga Maqungo, injecting the Jeweller's role with ominous charm and luxuriating in his smooth, resonant tenor. Stunning performances must be noted, also, from the two choral sextets: the swaggering, boozed-up fishermen with their earsplitting carillon, and especially the women, delivering their haunting lullabies from the recording booths above the stage, like malevolent angels.

Slightly less convincing was the libretto itself, adapted from Fosse's trio of novellas by Eötvös's wife Mari Mezei, which seems to pare much the lyricism out of the original freewheeling text, distilling it down to plain-spoken, expository lines: from "I am going to give birth soon" to "I have grown old", to follow Alida's arc. But in the choral interludes, at least, some of the story's dark poetry was allowed to shine, glinting in the darkness like misbegotten jewellery, or a fish's eye.
