

BLUE ELECTRIC

A teenage girl in 1980's Paris attempts to lead a normal adolescent existence - falling in love, rebelling, searching for her identity - against the backdrop of her volatile artist father's secret history of war, holocaust and exile.

(Blue Electric, which becomes a symbol of their struggle, is a favourite eye shadow her father tries unsuccessfully to stop her from wearing.)

Little by little, as the conflict between father and daughter intensifies and increases in its ferocity, she will learn the truth of his terrible history. But it will not be enough to allow her to surmount the wall of incomprehension between them. As much as she tries, she cannot make his painful past fit in with her teenage reality.

At the age of 17, she says goodbye to her family and moves to America, where she will begin a new life.

Many years later, as her father lies gravely ill, she will begin to make sense of it all and come to a deeper understanding of what he was trying to convey to her. They will make peace and he will die shortly thereafter.

*

BLUE ELECTRIC is the story of a 16-year-old rebel, a young girl coming of age as ghosts in Nazi garb hover around her. Narrated by her grandmother, her father and the adolescent herself, BLUE ELECTRIC is about the collision of identity, history and memory. The screaming fights between father and daughter – interspersed with the crunch of jackboots, the cries of refugees, and the sound of paintbrush on canvas – will be counterbalanced by more introspective moments of self-awareness as well as mundane adolescent preoccupations (night clubs, smoking cigarettes, makeup, boyfriends).

The shadows of fate and survival loom throughout.

Set to music by renowned composer Tom Smail, and directed by multiple Academy Award winner Hugh Hudson (*Chariots of Fire*, *Greystoke*), this opera will be one of juxtapositions: of contemporary orchestral music and bursts of punk rock, of adolescent preoccupations and S.S. death camps, of high art and teenage love, of father and daughter.

The opera is based on the critically acclaimed memoir *Major/ Minor* by Alba Arikha, published by Quartet Books in 2011. Hailed by the author Edmund de Waal as 'extraordinary and heartbreaking,' as well as by Paul Auster and John Banville ('fiercely honest and compelling'), the book was shortlisted for the Spear's awards and selected among the 'best books of 2012' by the New Yorker. It has been translated into German and Italian, and Arte TV, retracing the author's steps in 2013, made a short film about it. A paperback version was printed in May 2017.

This is the second opera by Alba Arikha and Tom Smail. The first was performed at the Riverside Studios in 2013, and was inspired by her narrative poem, *Soon*, published by CB Editions. A voyage through time and place, it was endorsed by, among others, Rupert Thompson and the Pulitzer Prize winning author, Michael Cunningham.

Hugh Hudson has recently directed his first opera, staging *The Crucible* at the Staatstheater in Braunschweig, Germany, with music by Pulitzer Prize winning composer Robert Ward and stage sets by Brian Clark.

BLUE ELECTRIC is about conflict and attempted resolution, memory and identity, life and death, as seen through the eyes of a teenage girl. Its subject matter has rarely been addressed in operatic form, or been presented through such young eyes, and it promises, with Smail and Hudson at its helm, to be a spectacular and thought provoking combination of sound and drama.

Tom Smail has a highly original, intensely atmospheric and visual voice.

His music for BLUE ELECTRIC will be contemporary and lyrical, sensitive and powerful.

It will chart the father's story from his childhood through the death camps to his volatile present and his baffling daughter. It will chart her story of frustration and struggle against a father who does not know the meaning of a 'normal' adolescence. The orchestral music will be interspersed with occasional bursts of 80's punk and pop - the music the daughter is listening to. This unusual juxtaposition of styles, seamlessly melded, will challenge and stimulate the audience.

Writing in the Guardian of Mieczysław Weinberg's opera, *The Passenger*, which played at the ENO in 2011 and is partly set in Auschwitz, Vernon Ellis wrote: 'Art certainly does not have all the answers. And in relation to the scale of the Holocaust, it certainly cannot do justice to the full horror of it all. But it can ask questions, it can provoke, it can remind us.'

BLUE ELECTRIC, though not primarily an opera about the Holocaust, will not shy away from provoking or reminding us. The degradation and despair, the inhumanity and horror are well documented; but the long-term effects of this catastrophe are perhaps less discussed.

This is an opera about a father and daughter and the effect - years later - of the Holocaust on their relationship.

With anti-Semitism on the rise yet again, the humanity, empathy and understanding that this opera will provide constitute useful tools in our increasingly divided and dangerous world.

This is art with a social impact.

Opera is a more-than-real experience. Combining orchestra, soloists, chorus, set and multi-media forces, it can inspire, stimulate, enlighten, challenge and provoke like no other medium.

And BLUE ELECTRIC will do just that.

BLUE ELECTRIC: 2 SCENES

Track 1: Act I, Scene 4 (incomplete)

Alba is getting ready for a night out with Olivier at a friend's house, their first time alone at night.

Who knows what might happen? Her friends will be there.

Her parents have told her they won't let her go, but she absolutely must.

She removes her back brace and throws it to the ground.

She gathers clothes and makeup and throws them hurriedly into a bag.

She slips on a pair of fishnet stockings underneath her jeans, a blouse underneath her turtleneck.

She adds stiletto shoes to the bag.

Then Vigo appears and confronts her, grabbing her arm. 'Where do you think you're going?

How can you dress like this? What do you think you're doing? How dare you dress like this?!

He sounds crazy, she doesn't understand. She often doesn't. She shouts, he shouts back.

Anne attempts to intercede and he screams at her.

Noga arrives. 'Why are you all shouting?' she pleads.

The fight increases in volume and intensity: Alba and Vigo diametrically opposed, Anne and Noga trying to calm things down.

WORDS BELOW

ALBA (*getting ready for a party*): Fishnets and freedom, boys and lipstick and maybe a kiss. Yes I must hurry, oh what to wear, blue skirt or black, this, no, no that... Olivier will be there and he likes me. His hair is long, but I don't care. Oh how to leave before it's too late, before Papa sees me, before he hears me, before he stops me. (*Alba tries to leave quietly, but is stopped by her father.*)

VIGO: Where do you think you're going? How can you dress like this? What do you think you're doing? How dare you dress like this?!

ALBA: Sophie is having a party and I want to get dressed up.

VIGO: So?

ALBA: Sophie is having a party and I just have to go.

VIGO: No!

ALBA: I promised I would and I will.

VIGO: You're only sixteen.

ALBA: So?

VIGO: Too young for parties - too young for decadence.

ANNE (*enters*): Nothing decadent, Vigo, really.

VIGO: She's not leaving this house.

ALBA: But all my friends will be there! All my friends will be there! And Olivier will be there.

ANNE/VIGO: Who?

VIGO: A boy?!

ALBA: Yes a boy, so what?! How old do you think I am?

VIGO: So what? So everything, you're still so young, you're still so naïve.

ANNE: Darling, please don't speak that way; she may be young, but she knows her way.

VIGO: She knows nothing, nothing!

ANNE: Oh darling let her be.

VIGO: She doesn't know her way!

ANNE: You need to learn how to respect.

VIGO: How dare you interfere!

ANNE: Not in front of the girls, Vigo, please.

VIGO: I know what I am doing.

ANNE: Then do it gently like any normal man.
Let's speak to each other gently now, like an ordinary family.

VIGO: Ordinary? Who's ordinary? I hate ordinary!

ALBA: Maybe, but I don't! I am sixteen and ordinary and that's the way it should be.

ANNE: You're not ordinary at all.

NOGA (*enters*): Why are you all shouting?

VIGO: Your sister thinks she's going to a party.

ALBA: I am going to the party. I'm just like all the other girls, and all my friends will be there.

VIGO: But you're not like those other girls, you fool, and their fathers are not like me.
None of them are artists and none of them understand.

ALBA: What? Understand what? And you're the fool!

ANNE: Don't you insult your father / NOGA: Don't you insult our father.

VIGO: I have lived and nearly died, and I've seen things you just don't know.

ALBA: And I don't want to know, you see? I just want to live. I just want to be happy.

ANNE: Vigo, that's normal. You see that, don't you?

ALBA: He never listens, he never understands me.

ANNE: Your father was never an adolescent. He never knew what you know now.

ALBA: So how can he tell what's right and wrong, what's young, what's old?

VIGO: Because I'm wise and you are not.

ALBA: That's not true!

ANNE: My darling you must listen and be fair.

VIGO: But it's wrong, it's wrong! All that horrible music!

ANNE / NOGA: Please don't scream. Don't shout. Please stop.

ALBA: Please let me go! You have to let me go. If you don't I'll hate you!

Track 2: Act 2, Scene 5

One night, after all have gone to bed, Alba hears a strange sound.

It is a frantic whispering coming from her parents' bedroom.

She approaches on tiptoe in her nightgown, nervously. Suddenly there is a terrible wailing.

The door is slightly ajar: her father is seated on the bed, rocking to and fro like a child, crying, while Anne clasps him against her.

He sings of his father dying, the smell of dead bodies in the camps, and a beautiful comb his father had given him, which he lost the day they were deported. 'I lost my comb, I lost my comb',

Vigo repeats, almost like a mantra.

(As he sings, images are projected onto the large screen, centre stage, rear.)

And it is as if he is no longer the father Alba knows, but the child who lost the only object his father had given him, the child forced to throw corpses into the pit at the concentration camp, which took away his father (Karl).

Anne tries to quieten him, but Vigo doesn't seem to care, or even know where he is, still rocking to and fro, his face now clasped between his hands. 'The Nazis took away my childhood!'

Anne tries to soothe him, in tears. Alba stands outside the door, transfixed.

She understands that this is the source of everything: the intolerance, the selfishness, the anger directed at his children, the way he treats the world. But how will it change her? It is beyond her.

It is too big to take in. She doesn't want to see her father diminished. What she has just witnessed has shaken her to the core. A father doesn't fall. 'You must be strong, you cannot fall.'

A father is strong and powerful and protects his children. And he has fallen. Can he still protect her?

She closes the door behind her and returns to her room.

WORDS BELOW

(The middle of the night. Whispers coming from Anne and Vigo's bedroom.)

ALBA *(in her bedroom)*: What is this noise? What are they saying?

(Alba silently approaches her parents' bedroom. Whispering continues - then a heart-rending wailing.)

ALBA *(outside their door, which stands ajar, to herself)*: Who is this?

VIGO: My father...

ALBA: His father?

VIGO: My father died.

ALBA: What is he saying?

ANNE: Vigo darling, you had a dream.

ALBA: It was a dream.

VIGO: I lost the comb.

ALBA: What comb?

VIGO: I lost the comb my father gave me. I know I had it there in my pocket.

ALBA: My father doesn't cry. My father never cries.

ALBA: He had a dream / VIGO: I lost my comb.

ALBA: What is he saying?

VIGO: He gave it to me when I was ten, to look more like a gentleman.

ANNE: Oh Vigo / ALBA: Oh Father.

VIGO: I carried it, always, in my pocket. But then our feet turned to ice.

VIGO: We walked and walked into the cold. The Kapo followed close behind.

Our feet were blue, wrapped in old newspaper.

He said to me, before he died: 'Sei frei, my son, sei frei'.

ANNE: Be free, he said be free - and you are free.

ALBA: So this is why.

VIGO: I have my freedom, but not my father.

ANNE: He would have been so proud of you.

VIGO: I threw men's bones into the pit, small children too and their poor mothers.

ALBA: My father threw bodies into a pit!

ANNE: Darling, the girls will hear you.

VIGO: I had no choice I had to live.

ALBA: So this is why!

ANNE: You are alive, you are our love.

VIGO: The Nazis took away my childhood, the Nazis took away my father.

ALBA / ANNE: You must be strong, you cannot fall.

VIGO: I had no choice I had to live.

ALBA: I never knew, but I know now.

What does this mean for me? I live and love, but I've lost nothing.

ALBA: This is why he's so angry.

This is why our minds can't meet. This is why he treats me so. This is why he is my father.

ANNE: This is why your minds can't meet. This is why he treats you so. This is why he is your father.

VIGO: This is why our minds can't meet. This is why I treat you so. This is why I am your father.

(Alba tiptoes back to her room.)

SINGERS:

Alba/Noga: Lauren Lodge-Campbell

Anne: Ciara Hendrick

Vigo: Jonathan Brown