

THE HIVE

NB: THE OPERA IS SET AT A FORENSIC PSYCHIATRY CONFERENCE ENTITLED, "THE NATURE/NURTURE OF EVIL".

ACT ONE

- 1) Opens in a darkly lit conference hall with a stage/ platform on which speakers will stand and sit to address conference. A banner across the stage announces the conference title, THE NATURE/NURTURE OF EVIL. Spooky, soft, a cappella choral humming is coming from the Chorus, the members of which are in a barely lit forensic-style installation at the back of the stage. The chorus is made up of a number of female forms bound and gagged like mummies. They hang from meathooks behind the semi-transparent forensic-style sheet. In the dim lighting they are spectral figures – apart from the sounds coming from them, they could be ghosts. In front of them, on a dark stage, with only a spotlight pooling light onto him is DR T, who sits on an upright chair (the 'Hot' seat) Centre stage. He directly addresses the audience (ie The Conference audience, but also 'us'). DR T is giving a paper on borderline personality disorder/ psychopathy. It's a monologue to a peer group at the conference. He talks about male psychopaths and questions, or rather raises the question, of whether a woman can be a full-blown psychopath. The prevailing attitude of the forensic industry is that she cannot. Women are not natural born killers. The chorus of captive, dead, or soon to be murdered girls, hums, twirls and sways behind him as he talks about killing and women who kill. They may be commenting on what he says. While he is talking, a female member of the audience takes offence. She gets up, swearing and cursing, runs down the aisle to the stage and clambers up. Carried away by his own rhetoric, DR T does not notice. She runs up to DR T, gets hold of his tie, pulls him forward and head-butts him. As he jerks back she knees him in the balls.

BLACKOUT

- 2) A domestic scene – Hunter, a lawyer, is looking for his notes and saying goodbye to his family to go to the conference. His wife, Patient Griselda questions why he is doing this, why is he bringing it all back into their lives? She refers to the terrible serial killer case, on which he was the convict's lawyer. He says he feels compelled. He sings a monologue / aria, almost as a cry for help. It's clear from this that he still feels the need for redemption. Behind this, his kids are watching Cbeebies, or other nice programme, on TV. He finds his folder and leaves in a hurry – he is late. Elsewhere in the house, there is the sound of a child crying, which merges with the sound of wolves howling as in a dark forest.

- 3) We are back on the platform 'stage' at the Conference, with Hunter now in the hot seat and telling his tale to the conference audience. He explains how he came to get the case of Gretel Grimm – an accused serial killer of many young women – in the first place. During this scene there are flashbacks (all, as if in Hunter's head) to Hansel Grimm in custody – and Hunter lays out the basis of the police case against the Grimms. This interacts and interconnects with scenes of Hunter's wife, Patient Griselda in her kitchen doing a pile of ironing and giving her own thoughts on the case/ situation. All appear on stage at the same time, but in differently lit, differentiated areas.
- 4) A flashback scene to the Grimm's household before it all kicked off. (A metaphorical mirror of the scene at Hunter's home Scene 2 in the libretto) It's a normal Grimm family morning at breakfast, but with an undertow of violence and hidden events – there's a strong sense of horrible secrets. In this scene, it's mentioned that there's a family saying, or 'joke', that if you don't do as you're told you'll end up under the patio. It's alleged by eldest daughter, Cinders, that there's already at least one body buried there – that of their sister Rapunzel. At the end of the scene Hansel hits Gretel and leaves, Gretel takes off her belt and approaches the kids, the dog cowers, whining. (This implied violence is important – it's the first time we see the capacity for it in Gretel)
- 5) We are back with Hunter on the hot seat at the Conference, explaining his defence of Gretel. He describes the bizarre and violent sexual events in the Grimm household. They were into, pornography, sado–masochism by any other name, enforced prostitution, abuse of the children and the lost girls floating through. Behind him, the ghostly, hanging chorus comments.
- 6) The Grimm household again – this time it's the evening and Hansel is back from work and watching TV with the kids. It's Come Dancing. Above this, is a soundtrack of sexual moans and groans. It's Gretel in her bedroom with one of her 'clients'. Hansel is very excited by it. He grabs up Cinders and dances a tango with her in a very sexual manner, dropping her to the floor and clutching himself, as the orgasmic sounds of his wife upstairs take over.
- 7) Back to Hunter at Conference, still trying to make sense of Gretel's behaviour and sexuality – he debates how much was real and how much a show for Hansel. It's clear he's unwilling, or unable, to believe she was a killer, but rather that it was all Hansel forcing her to be involved. However, he also realises this is unlikely to be true. Enough came out about her behaviour to at least give him doubts.
- 8,9,10) These scenes cut between Hunter and his parallel, Griselda, still doing her ironing. She also addresses Gretel's behaviour – she wonders if it was possible Gretel, who was engrossed in raising 8 children at the time, knew nothing about the torture and murder of so many young women in her own home? Griselda concludes that no matter how busy a mother may be, it's unlikely. She muses on the true nature of evil, opining that we're all capable of it, but don't like to admit to our own dark, murderous thoughts.

- 11) Hunter, more and more disturbed, wonders how many the Grimms did actually kill...? He admits he's haunted by what happened and his own part in it. Suppose she was guilty all along? Behind him, the ghostly chorus of bound and twisting female forms hums, creating a reminder of the tortured and murdered girls. Hunter remembers his first appearance at the Police station, late at night expecting at most a 'domestic' – and how shocked he was at Gretel's murder charge.
- 12) Flashback (again in Hunter's head) to Hansel Grimm at the same cop-shop admitting in writing to having committed 9 (approx.) murders. The ghostly chorus, still twirling, repeat Hansel's admission.
- 13) DR T is back on the stand, making light of what happened to him earlier with the head-butt & knee in the crutch. He uses it as a good exemplar of just how violent and dangerous women can be. He now offers an historical view as women as killers, stressing one case and how similar it is to Gretel's and asks are these women psychopaths? He goes into various case histories for and against. He describes how and why women kill and concludes by saying women tend to kill close to 'The Hive'.

(NB: All of the next several scenes are part of Hunter's testimony to Conference, and shown to us/conference in a series of flashbacks)

- 14) We are in a courtroom, in which a female barrister is making a defence for Gretel, by comparing public censure of a previous woman murderer, Mary Ann Cotton, to that which has been heaped on Gretel's head – whether or not she is guilty. She points out to the judge and jury (ie, the Conference) that very little has changed in hundreds of years, in the public's attitude towards women who transgress societal norms. Behind her the ghostly, turning chorus in the forensic 'tent' comment on what she has said.
- 15) Still in the courtroom, Cinders Grimm is giving evidence. She accuses her father and mother, Hansel and Gretel, of abuse and murder. She speaks again of the bodies under the patio and swears she knows it's true. She goes on to describe her own horrible sexual abuse at her parents' hands – how when she was a child Hansel raped her, aided and abetted by Gretel. She says they were shits, but she still loves them.
- 16) Hunter comments on all this and wonders how on earth Cinders has survived – and how she has found redemption. If indeed she has? Later he angsts over whether he heard Gretel admit to him that there were bodies under the patio. Was it really said? Did he hear it? Did he make it up? Is it false memory syndrome?

NB: Throughout all these scenes the ghostly girly chorus is a background presence, commenting on the action and reminding us of the terrible things that were done to them. Reminding us that no matter who was to blame, they were tortured, murdered and are DEAD.

17. The Courtroom again. Now, Maid Marian – sister of one of the murder victims – is giving evidence. She vividly describes finding her sister Beauty’s bones and burying them and her own dreams in which Beauty came back to her and she, Marian, was aided by her to find a kind of peace. The chorus comments on what she says and is a constant visual reminder of the murders. One bound girl in particular seems to represent, “Beauty”, Maid Marian’s sister. The bound girl occasionally repeats what Maid Marian says, in a whispering echo.
18. We are back at the Conference, this time in a plenary session in the ‘green room’, in which an analysis of the day’s ideas and evidence is taking place. The forensic practitioners gathered for this, discuss the day, agree and disagree, cite examples of violent behaviour, the Nazis, the IRA, Daesh, suicide bombers etc. They examine the violence of women, give reasons why they are, or are not, just as bad as men, touch on society’s attitude towards them and how absurd it is, tease and rib each other, sophisticatedly employing the tool of their trade – a ‘certain dark humour’. The scene ends with a cocktail party, during which they all get quite drunk and leery and gradually descend into shouting at each other. Even these professionals do not escape.

NB: This scene takes place throughout the INTERVAL and ends with hysterical drunken behaviour and all delegates screaming their favourite slogan at each other. The audience (other Conference delegates) is invited to join in. It should be funny, as well as shocking and a powerful view of how the people and material they have to deal with affects the psychiatrists and infects their lives.

ACT TWO

- 1) Back in the darkened Conference Hall, Crystal Tipps, a creative artist, is on the platform explaining to the delegates that she’s going to show them an artist’s impression in play form of the, ‘grisly fairy tale’, based on the Grimm’s story. She explains the mise en scene – a dark forest – and the characters they are about to see in and out of it. These include many we have met in Act One. The chorus, as in ACT 1 float about behind her, humming and singing. They are still an ethereal, otherworldly presence, but this time they are dressed as witches and seems quite vengeful.
- 2) Crystal’s ‘play’ begins. Little Red Riding Hood is on her way through the forest to visit her Granny, who refuses to move from her remote cottage. She is hungry and picks berries to eat, at the same time conducting a phone conversation with her mate, about where she’s going. Her phone signal goes as she gets into the deep forest. As she runs off, the chorus follow her appearing to warn about dangers ahead.
- 3) Hunter (from Act1) now dressed as a huntsman comes on. He’s been shooting birds for supper – and is also lost in the deepening gloom and without a phone signal. He’s leaving for home when he hears a piercing girl’s scream from

offstage – he’s undecided what it is, or what to do, but eventually heads towards it. Meanwhile, Patient Griselda back in their kitchen, is also frustrated by the lack of phone signal. Where is Hunter? Why is he always late home?

- 4) We are at the Gingerbread House where Hansel and Gretel are holding a party. Everyone is dressed as wild animals and a lot of drinking and sex is going on inside the house. Hansel comes out for a fag and calls Gretel to join him. After some sexual teasing she runs off into the wood and he follows her, howling like a wolf.
- 5) In the brothel-like cellar beneath the GB house, Little Red Riding Hood is bound and gagged. She ‘sings’ her terrified thoughts about what has happened, her abduction in the wood, the horrible wolf and his female mate, and wonders if she’s about to die. Who will come to save her?
- 6) We are back in the Courtroom of Act 1. Long John Silver (a senior policeman) is giving his evidence on the Grimm case, on which he was an investigator. He explains about Gretel’s unofficial prostitution, how Hansel liked it, procuring men for his ‘insatiable’ wife. The chorus flit about adding their views to all of this. In particular they comment on his remarks about Gretel – whom Long John Silver clearly hates.
- 7) In the woods, Hunter is still searching for the origin of the scream he heard. He begs the audience to help. They do/don’t. He comes to the Ginger Bread house, knocks on the door and is invited in. Shrugging to the audience, he enters.
- 8) Gretel runs into the clearing by the house. Her costume is all rucked up – she’s clearly been having sex. She tells the story of her and Hansel. How they met, what he meant to her, how he was her first, and only real romance. How she fancied and loved him. Now she feels differently and hates the horror story it has become – as she hears his wolf howl, she runs into the house. The chorus are heard offstage, warning fearfully.
- 9) Hansel runs into the clearing in pursuit of Gretel. He is angry she’s escaped him and ruminates on the pleasure they have waiting for them – Little Red Riding Hood in the cellar. He stares off, as if living the consequences already.
- 10) Long John Silver in the courtroom, meticulously describes the patio, the garden, the discovery of the bodies beneath it. He has no doubt Gretel was involved in the killings.
- 11) Hunter comes out of the Ginger Bread house and Hansel confronts him. “Who the fuck are you?” He demands to know. Hunter explains he heard a scream and followed the sound to the Ginger Bread house. Hansel denies it’s anything to do with them. He does admit the parties are so full-on no one would know if there was a chainsaw massacre. He describes the sordid sexual pastimes and invites Hunter to join in and experience the pleasures of Gretel. Hunter politely declines. He heads off towards home and Hansel goes into the house.

- 12) Not satisfied by the explanations, Hunter creeps back. He stands in the glade, worrying what to do, what he should have done. At the same time, Griselda is in her kitchen and Long John Silver is in the dock. All three continue their own troubled versions of the story, intercutting with each other, adding to the horror. There is, it seems, no escape. The chorus join in – they echo the lack of redemption.
- 13) Back at the Conference, this is the ultimate session before the close. Crystal's work is discussed and analysed, with her joining the group as the artist. She is asked to explain what she's done and why. The fairy tale 'archetypes' are commented on and metaphors dissected. A very angry Griselda erupts into the session – she has missed her Pilates class because Hunter is late home from the Conference. She is invited to stay and join the discussion. The group talk about dreams and witches, each woman describing her own nightmare experience: the terror of being chased, stoned, ducked and drowned. Maid Marian offers a redemptive solution, but Hunter is still unhappy and unable to take it. The chorus join in – are they witches, or members of the public stoning the witches? They are both.
- 14) There is an offstage kerfuffle and Dr George rushes in. His plane was late from Stockholm – it's a syndrome. He offers his paper on women and psychopathy. Is Gretel a psycho? He says why he thinks not, others disagree. It develops into a row about the way we all point fingers and have to have a scapegoat. Dr George will not allow that we're not responsible. He insists we are all in it together. The whole of society creates the situations and then turns its back on them. There is a vigorous exchange of views and emotions. All the characters end on their feet shouting them at the audience. The audience too is involved and cannot escape.

THE END

Artist's statement.

The Concept

Setting the Opera at a Forensic Psychiatric Conference is intended to be 'high concept'. The Conference acts as a crucial framing mechanism and also an active exemplar of the moral, social, political and feminist arguments, which arise on the subject of women as killers and psychopaths. Forensic events are the only time such arguments get aired and there is any real debate about them. In a sense, it's only the 'Professionals' who really care about the issues. As well as which, the Conference platform is a great device for getting disparate people in front of us to tell their stories, give their evidence, bare their souls – much as a courtroom would be. A courtroom is also static, but nonetheless very effective at storytelling – as we see from multiple successful plays, films and TV episodes, which constitute "Courtroom Drama".