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Images from the Life of Nikola Tesla

A WORK-IN-PROGRESS OPERA FROM IHOS

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Photographs by Bruce Miller



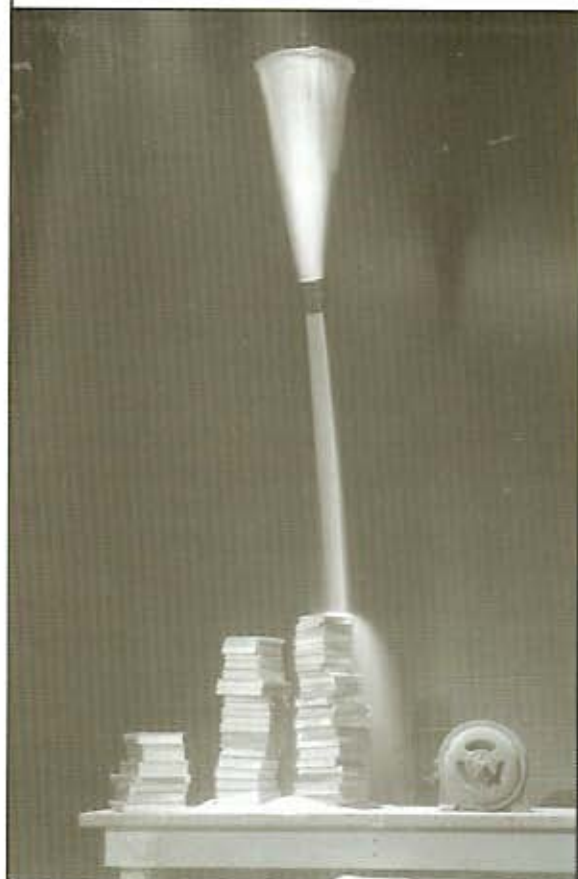
Nikola Tesla's presence haunts the stage in the preview of the IHOS work-in-progress *Images from the Life of Nikola Tesla*. A paranoid and eccentric electrical engineer, Tesla (1856-1943) was fascinated by high voltage and frequency apparatus. He is best known for inventing the Tesla coil, a system of arc lighting, and the alternating-current invection motor which harnesses power by alternating currents through metal coils to conjure up rotating magnetic fields.

After an hysterical episode resulting from his fervent refusal to enter the church as his father intended, the hypersensitive and dapper young man was allowed to follow his scientific calling. Tesla's life was marred by phobias and odd behaviour, which included a phobia of human hair, his insistence on extra napery in order to polish

cutlery and crockery before using it, a compulsion to estimate the mass and volume of his food before eating, and a gambling problem. Tesla gained a technical education in Graz, studied at the University of Prague, and worked in America and France.

In the fragmentary narrative of this IHOS performance Tesla's idiosyncrasies and various pivotal moments in his life are frequently alluded to. Despite the ambiguity of the references (an ambiguity which is both poetic and inevitable as the inclusion of a soloist who will play Tesla is to be developed in the next stage of the project) the turmoil of the electrical engineer's life and the intensity of his research is conveyed by the sense of escalating drama through the production.

As if tracing Tesla's footsteps, the chorus – composed of nine young men wearing dusty white lab jackets – scratch abstract equations on paper, sit absorbed in text-books, tinker purposefully with wiring and metal frames or purposefully stride across the floor in chaotic unison. The intense routine of interminable days is kaleidoscoped into an hour of twilight. The repetitive movements of the chorus betray the tedium, angst and exhilaration of



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scientific research and the struggle to gain incremental achievements. Perhaps marking the warping of time, sand trickles at varying rates from several inverted canvas cones hanging from the ceiling to settle in piles on the floor, on desks and on a table piled high with books and papers.

Throughout the performance the baritone and bass voices rise up in indecipherable incantations which weave through the plaintive and lyrical strains of an oboe, the clatter of old typewriters, playful percussion and a sound track that includes pigeons, the brittle tapping of Morse code and snippets of Dvorák's *New World Symphony*.

Sensual and powerfully evocative, the visual aspects of *Images from the Life of Nikola Tesla* while obscure, offer intriguing references and layers of meaning. Swirls of mist which emanate from the clutter of laboratory paraphernalia envelop the theatre

in an atmosphere reminiscent of a Gothic cathedral barely illuminated by candles. Prosaic objects such as glass flasks, scientific instruments, wire cables and electrical apparatus are imbued with a strangely ethereal quality. Like a tabernacle, a thin metal locker dedicated to manuscripts and relics of scientific research sits precariously high against the rough-hewn rock wall of the Peacock Theatre. In one intense moment thousands of pages of white paper thrown into the air by the choir are swept up into a tumultuous whirl by a large fan. Referring to Tesla's fascination with pigeons – which apparently navigate by using the earth's magnetic fields – amid the flutter of papers the sound of cooing, ruffling of feathers and rustle of wings as a flock of birds take flight becomes audible.

Much of the imagery seems to draw on Catholic traditions and the misty darkness of nineteenth-century horror stories. Issues explored by Romantic writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley, such as ontological tensions between science and religion and a paranoia that scientists were unraveling the mysteries of life and usurping God's authority, seem to resonate in the set design, lighting and choreography of this production. This association is most explicit when the choir, with the solemnity of priests blessing hosts, lift glass balls of light aloft as if to celebrate the mystical transmutation of darkness by electric light.

Tesla was celebrated for his achievements in his own lifetime. The prolific results from Tesla's work resulted in a large number of patented inventions including the rotating field motor which was bought by George Westinghouse. Dvorák composed music inspired by him. Despite his success he remained a solitary figure and died in poverty.

Mary Knights

TALKING UP OPERA

EARLIER THIS YEAR, CONSTANTINE KOUKIAS, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF TASMANIA'S IHOS OPERA, INVITED MARIA KUNDA TO WORK FOR IHOS DESIGNING FOR IMAGES FROM THE LIFE OF NIKOLA TESLA. HERE THEY TALK ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAT WORK THROUGH IHOS' MUSIC THEATRE LABORATORY.

Maria: What was the impetus for the IHOS Music Theatre Laboratory?

Constantine: The Laboratory came about because over the last ten or twelve years I have taught people from a great range of schools, the best public schools, the best private schools, who turn up in my studio unable to read music. There was also the frustration of having coached some people for years, and then they would leave. Some very nice voices have had to go away to continue their training, leaving a void here. This is especially evident with male singers.

In Tasmania, there are a number of talented amateur singers about. Some of them are very good

performers, but if they cannot read, or if their skills are limited, it is very difficult to work with them in new music. I find it difficult to believe that the mystique of musical language is so prevalent, because it is not difficult – nothing like learning a foreign language. Music is a very logical language, but it seems that teaching it is going out of fashion in our education system.

So the Music Theatre Laboratory is an avenue for people with real talent, who simply do not have solid skills yet, and an ongoing training ground. I thought we needed to first form a preliminary young singers program. The boys involved in the inaugural class were picked because they can nearly all read music and play an instrument. The primary aim of the course is to extend their vocal technique, to teach them to read really well, and to get some idea of movement.

Finding female voices is not hard work, but finding male voices is. We started two women's classes in April and, using the boys' class as a model, we formed a younger group for the 15-25 age group and an over 25s group. Again, lovely voices but, by and large, not educated in basic stuff because singing teachers very often don't have the time to teach people to read music as well as teaching them to sing. In the women's classes we will start work with IHOS material and other composers' music. We will probably use some of the Tesla material, and like the boys, they will do movement work with Jindra Rosendorf, and at a later date



we will have combined classes with all the groups. Combining the ages will be interesting. We will see if it can be done!

The Laboratory is not primarily about testing IHOS' product. Ultimately, when we have secured funding and got the setup more stable, we will invite other directors, designers and composers to work with the singers and to create pieces. IHOS will nurture it, but the Laboratory should develop its own momentum. I hope that many of the young men in the inaugural class will still be involved in three years time. By then, they will be able to perform quite complicated music. Possibly they can be booked outside of Tasmania as an ensemble working in the new music area. That would be fantastic, and I can see it happening, because there is not a lot of this kind of activity going on in the world. Tasmania is a perfect size to foster and continue with this kind of work. Down the track it could be a very well recognised music theatre centre.

Maria: How is the Music Laboratory funded?

Constantine: We are still seeking funding. A small amount of money comes to us from the Education Department, about enough to pay for a quarter of one tutor for a year, or so. I have faith that the rest is going to come from one of the youth philanthropic trusts out there. We don't really need very much money, only enough for two or three tutors per week, for forty-two weeks of the year. We have begun the Laboratory in the hope that once the idea has a life and people know about it, it will attract funding.

Maria: The recent performances by IHOS Music Theatre Laboratory, of *Images from the Life of Nikola Tesla* were the first in a series of



presentations of work for a major commissioned opera, planned for Western Australia in 2002. How did this commission come about, and what is the logic of developing the work in a series of works in progress?

The commission came from Richard Mills, the Artistic Director of the West Australia Opera. Richard wants to stage a large scale opera in a warehouse – of the scale of *To Traverse Water* – in Perth. I asked permission, when the Music Laboratory was set up, to use some of the material as a testing ground with the first male class, as I was writing it. I could imagine the boys getting in and relating to it as their first experience. I imagined presenting a series of sketches,

and I thought it would be demystifying for them, to show them how music theatre could be put together. So we involved the boys, at that point of creation, and there we all were, wondering 'is this going to work?' I didn't want them to have any anxiety about the outcome, but perhaps because of their age, they weren't jarred, or afraid of the public face. The boys were all pleased with the production, I think. They trusted in the process and that really paid off. We all saw how the performances developed over the three nights. It was very exciting and gratifying that we had such large audiences for this stage of the work. On the last night we were turning people away.

Maria: Maybe part of the attraction was precisely that it was work in progress. It seemed to me that audiences are quite fascinated with the experimental nature of IHOS' work.

Constantine: A problem we have as a company is that we don't have a space where we can create work in an ongoing way, developing the music and the visual elements, stage crafting, all at once. It wouldn't have to be very big space, we could just have some plastic seats and invite the public in whenever we wanted to, at any point. We could have a showing, say, once a week. People could come and see work developing, in whatever state it was in. Even if only two people came sometimes, it would give the performers and the creative team focus. It would also develop audience awareness and knowledge of the craft. There is



nothing like that in the whole country, no contemporary ensemble in music theatre or opera that works like that. It is something I think we need, because it would open up a forum of discussion of this type of work, and would allow a whole lot more people to interact with the creative process.

Maria: What is the next stage of development for the work on the Nikola Tesla production?

Constantine: Linden Terracini, an internationally renowned singer is coming to work with the male class. He is a very experienced singer who lives in Lismore. He is coming to work with the boys to do training and tutoring, and I am hoping he will be persuaded to perform the role of Nikola Tesla.

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