



IMAGINING ORPHEUS

Acclaimed director **TRISTAN SHARPS** is offering us a trip to the Underworld and he tells **KIM FISHER**, whatever she does, **DON'T LOOK BACK**.

Don't Look Back takes the core of the myth of Orpheus going down to the Underworld further than your average performance. The Old Treasury Building, a disused and run-down, yet beautiful building in the middle of Perth will be transformed into the setting for the performance, which has the audience participating, instead of just watching. Director Tristan Sharps says choosing not to make *Don't Look Back* a traditional theatre piece lets the audience interact, rather than having it just wash over them. "For me, as an audience it implicates you; it becomes not just a show you are watching. You can also empathise with characters onstage and you can connect with it that way, but here, because it's an actual physical journey, you feel that it implicates you in a much more visceral way," explains Sharps. "You can have an event that happens on the stage that is quite powerful, but you might be sitting 50 rows back and you're very much aware that you're in a formal set-up. Where as here, you're walking past a performer and they're this close to you, maybe they're not looking at you, maybe they're whispering something and very slowly they start to look at you and it's very powerful. To me that's an interaction, even if the performer doesn't say anything, for an audience that's a huge interaction. The power of this, in this building, in the context of the show, just a look can be hugely, hugely powerful."

Sharps says the Old Treasury Building is an integral part of the show, and having performed *Don't Look Back* in a variety of venues, says the older, larger and more decrepit (but still safe), the better. "The reason it's so perfect – well there are a whole load of reasons – it's so vast, it's disused, it's structurally safe, there are some areas upstairs that aren't so safe but the audience don't go up there, it's got electricity, which is just amazing, it's a huge variety of spaces, it's a beautiful building and it's quite organic, the way it's grown," says Sharps, with the refreshing enthusiasm of a little kid in a lolly shop. "It's typical of buildings like this in big cities; it obviously was built originally with a very specific plan in mind, and as the years went on and it got used in slightly different ways, little extensions got put here and there and little mezzanines and wings got added on. You really lose the sense of where you are, and it's a much bigger building than it seems from the outside. It's vast; it just goes on and on; the walk all around it, you'd be walking kilometres."

As the performance takes place in a different building in each place it's performed in, and the setting is such an important part of *Don't Look Back*, it is different each time it is performed. "In a way it is, but the overall structure of the piece as certain similarities every time we do it. There's a certain way it begins and a certain way it ends, and in the middle there are certain things that are constants, but then lots of things linking these essential elements change, depending on the building and depending on the space,"

explains Sparks. "Thematically, and also the content and form can change. Here, for example, because it was a very administrative building, with a feeling of 'office' and documents being processed, that side of the show will reveal itself more in this particular building."

As well as the setting, *Don't Look Back* makes use of film, lighting, and sound effects to make the performance encapsulate every sense of the audience. However, Sharps says he doesn't want the audience to be smacked in the face by effect, instead hoping they subtly meld together. "The piece has many layers, all the layers connect at some point and sometime they go off and have a journey on their own and other times they all come together, like tracks of a railway. Film is one particular layer; the film is very much about a water journey, not just a water journey but that's one of the main strands of the film," he says. "The sound has a variety of different levels but it's part of the meaning. The theme pops up again and again but you're unaware as an audience that you're hearing it; you think it's something different but actually it's the same theme, just very slightly and subtly reworked. You might go into an area where there's a dolls house and you hear a music box in the corner, but actually the music box is quite subtly playing the theme of the piece. The music and the sound are not blaring, but become part of the building in a way."

A performance that is constantly evolving to suit its surrounds and requiring music, film, and other effects requires a lot of planning, but Sharps hopes that the audience is blissfully unaware and lose themselves in the story. "It is a lot of planning, which is scary because you can plan to a certain degree and then you find when you start rehearsing that little things have to change. There are a lot of people involved; there's a technical team, there's carpenters and technicians setting the space up, there's some design assistants as well who I'm working with," he says. "There'll be about between 20 and 30 performers in the cast, there'll be a live musician as well. So it's a big team of people but at an audience you should feel, as you walk through the space that it's empty, you shouldn't feel that it's full of people."

Sharps wants it to be clear that *Don't Look Back* is not a new spin or recount of the ancient myth of Orpheus, rather inspiration has been taken from the timeless concept of the 'Underworld.' In the myth, Orpheus travels to the Underworld after his wife, Eurydice dies. His music endeared him to the guardians of the underworld, Hades and Persephone, who allowed him to take Eurydice back to the land of the living as long as he never looked back. Human nature prevailed and he looked back to see if she was following, and she vanished. It is this notion of human nature making us distrustful and flawed creatures that Sharps explores. "The piece is not an adaptation of that myth; it's a new piece inspired by that myth," he says. "Or,



really, it's a new piece inspired by that universal myth of going to the Underworld. Every culture, at some point, has got a story about somebody going to the Underworld to retrieve something or someone that they lost."

Sharps says the myth can be applied to every day life, it's just a matter of remembering that we are all human, and therefore flawed. "It's not very fashionable to talk about the world of the spirits; which these myths do. These myths are always about people right on the edge of something. It's life-changing; it's never, 'Oh I'll just pop out to get a

coffee and bump into a girlfriend I used to know and oh dear I must be careful because I'm seeing her sister now,' the soap opera of life, it's not that. That's great but it's about your soul. I think people are gasping for something that moves them on another level."

WHAT: *Don't Look Back*

WHEN & WHERE: Saturday 9 February to Sunday 24, Perth International Arts Festival. Old Treasury Building. Perth

