



**ARTS**

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REVIEW

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# Perth to stage an operatic dream

The artistic powers behind Lost and Found Opera have a grand, unconventional plan, writes **Stephen Bevis**

**A** scan of Thomas de Mallet Burgess' CV might prompt the thought that the co-founder of Perth's innovative new company Lost and Found Opera must feel a little lost himself.

On the contrary, the British-born de Mallet Burgess is more than happy to have found his niche in Perth after an extensive international freelance directing career at such places as the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Opera Ireland and Malmo Opera.

For him, Perth is a city of opportunity as he sets about his dream of running his own opera company devoted to staging neglected, under-performed operas in unusual venues.

Now, in conjunction with conductor and music director Chris van Tuinen, de Mallet Burgess is ready to launch that dream, confident it will do more than float.

De Mallet Burgess moved to WA with his soprano wife Fiona McAndrew, who grew up in Perth, and their two young daughters early last year.

"I don't see myself as lost," he says. "I see it as quite a natural result of choices I have made. I realised something had to give if I was to see my family and see my kids."

The wealthy west coast offered greener pastures for a hired gun who wanted to set up his own

company. Funding had dried up across Europe and the market there and in the US was already saturated with opera companies.

Perth, on the other hand, had a growing population, open to new experiences, more access to start-up funds and an established company (WA Opera) with a limited repertoire in a conventional theatre.

"Someone said to me 'Perth has its limitations but it isn't limiting'. That was the comment that persuaded me to jump ship and give this a shot. I thought Perth might be the place to situate this idea that I had."

True to the maxim that great minds think alike, de Mallet Burgess discovered someone else had spotted the same opportunity. "I thought 'This is it, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to Perth to set up this opera company'. Someone said 'Oh, there's another guy in town who's going to do that'. It was at that point I bumped into Chris."

A graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts in 2001, van Tuinen has worked at Opera Australia and the Australian Ballet. He is fine music programmer for the Perth International Arts Festival

and conducts the Fremantle Chamber Orchestra and University of WA Choral Society.

De Mallet Burgess and van Tuinen have complementary skills as stage director and music director and they think along similar lines when it comes to opera's alchemy of music and drama. They want to democratise opera, to make ticket prices more affordable and make the experience more consistent.

"We want the audience to be very close to the action so they get a visceral experience when the opera singers sing," de Mallet Burgess says.

Instead of grand theatres, he says Lost and Found will create performances in unconventional spaces. Abandoned buildings, warehouses, houses of worship and even a former mental hospital (heritage-listed Montgomery Hall in the old Swanbourne Hospital, now run by Aegis Aged Care) are potential venues being considered.

De Mallet Burgess and van Tuinen will stage rarely heard chamber pieces, best suited to intimate, small-scale performance.

An example might be Semele, Handel's 1743 opera and the last work de Mallet Burgess directed in

Europe before coming to WA. The January 2012 production was staged at Dublin's St Werburgh's Church, where 270 years earlier Handel had played the organ to premiere his oratorio Messiah.

Semele has been criticised for being a troubling conjunction of opera and oratorio, part profane and part sacred, and de Mallet Burgess says staging it in a church shed new light on this dichotomy as post-GFC Ireland grappled with its own secular and spiritual uncertainties.

Lost and Found has established a strong board — including Mark Coughlan, Judy Reid, Fiona Gebauer, Maria Saraceni and Tom Stephens — and has already secured some funding before its launch tomorrow night by Minister for Culture and the Arts John Day.

The occasion, at Linton & Kay Galleries, will be marked with McAndrew singing At the Statue of Venus, a 20-minute operatic monologue by Jake Heggie, whose opera Dead Man Walking de Mallet Burgess directed for Opera Ireland in 2007.

The first Lost and Found production is planned for April, when the company intends presenting Der Kaiser von Atlantis (or The Disobedience of Death), a one-act opera written by composer Viktor Uhlmann and librettist Peter Kien in Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943. It was

rehearsed but not performed and the two men later died at Auschwitz.

It was performed publicly for the first time in 1975 and de Mallet Burgess intends to stage the WA premiere in a Perth synagogue, given the historical resonances and its themes of life and death fitting the metaphysics of a religious building.

De Mallet Burgess came to opera quite late. He was about 30 when he listened to his first opera, The Medium by Gian Carlo Menotti, ahead of directing it on the stage. He knows as much as anyone the stereotypes that need to be broken down to help make the art form more accessible to a wider audience.

He has done a lot of grassroots engagement work for opera companies, leading workshops and creating community operas. This led to him writing The Singing and Acting Handbook, used worldwide in opera training, including at the WA Academy of Performing Arts. He is connected to the community in a way many other opera directors may not be, through his day job as cultural co-ordinator at the City of Joondalup.

"It is my hope that this will build and people will get excited about what the next space will be," he says of Lost and Found Opera.

"The energy is there, the time is right and we are going to make it happen." ☺

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THOMAS DE MALLET BURGESS



**BUILDING ALIGNMENT** Lost and Found Opera founders Thomas de Mallet Burgess and Chris van Tuinen in Montgomery Hall in the old Swanbourne Hospital, a venue being considered in their plan to make opera more accessible. PICTURE **ROBERT DUNCAN**