

"The world is a haunted house,  
and Helnwein is our tour guide through it."

—Sean Penn

Red Fire Films and First Run Features Present

# Gottfried Helnwein and the Dreaming Child

A Film by Lisa Kirk Colburn



Directed by LISA KIRK COLBURN  
Produced by LISA KIRK COLBURN Executive Produced by LUK WELSH Co-Executive Producer LISA KIRK COLBURN  
Edited by ALIYI GANI Original Music by KIRK WHEELER SMILEY



72 minutes, color, HDCam and ProRes, Stereo, 16:9, 2011

## FIRST RUN FEATURES

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## Synopsis

***Gottfried Helnwein and the Dreaming Child*** is a feature documentary about the world famous Austrian artist, Gottfried Helnwein, and his contentious role as Production Designer for a never before seen opera in Tel Aviv, Israel in 2010. A violent production, *The Child Dreams* was written by Israel's most famous playwright, that late Hanoch Levin, and portrays the hopes and dreams of children in search of freedom and peace. For Helnwein, the child has always been the symbol of innocence and innocence betrayed, and this motif runs through much of his work.

Helnwein grew up in Vienna in the post-WWII era, and he was greatly affected by the feeling that something unbelievably terrible had happened in Austria. But the Holocaust was not spoken of or even acknowledged by the Viennese, a criminal silence that continues to haunt Helnwein. The conflict Helnwein encounters in Israel emerges from his unyielding desire to maintain the original idea of Levin's work. Levin specifically states in his libretto that the opera requires a small child who would portray the dreaming child throughout the opera. However, the Israeli Opera's creative team casts a woman to play the child. This and several other disagreements escalate into an unsettling dispute featuring a Viennese artist raging against Israeli production staff, a dispute captured intimately in this compelling documentary.



A scene from the opera *The Child Dreams*

## About Gottfried Helnwein

Gottfried Helnwein was born in Vienna, Austria. He studied at the University of Visual Art in Vienna (Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Wien). He was awarded the Master-class prize (Meisterschulpreis) of the University of Visual Art, Vienna, the Kardinal-König prize and the Theodor-Körner prize. Helnwein is a conceptual artist, concerned primarily with psychological, sociological and historical issues. He has worked as a painter, draftsman, photographer, muralist, sculptor, video- and performance artist, using a wide variety of techniques and media. In 1984 German and Austrian National Television produced the film *Helnwein*. It was awarded the Adolf Grimme Prize for best television documentary, the Eduard Rhein Prize and the Golden Kader for outstanding camera work.



Helnwein working on a painting in his studio

In 1988, in remembrance of Kristallnacht on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Helnwein erected a 100 meter long installation in the city center of Cologne, between Ludwig Museum and the Cologne Cathedral. Since then large scale installations in public spaces became an important part of his work. In 2004 The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco organized a solo exhibition: "The Child, works by Gottfried Helnwein" at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. The show was seen by almost 130,000 visitors and the San Francisco Chronicle quoted it the most important exhibition of a contemporary artist in 2004. In 2006 the council of the city of Philadelphia honored Gottfried Helnwein for his artistic contributions in keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive, amongst them Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress" at Staatsoper Hamburg,

"Der Rosenkavalier" by Richard Strauss at the Los Angeles Opera, "Der Ring des Nibelungen"

at Bonn Opera, Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and many other productions for Hans Kresnik's Choreographic Theatre. 2004 For the 8th Robert Schumann Festival the Tonhalle Düsseldorf Helnwein created a multimedia performance of the oratorio "Paradise and the Peri." Helnwein lives and works in Los Angeles and Ireland.

## What people have said about Gottfried Helnwein

*"Gottfried Helnwein is my mentor - on any artistic thing I've done. His fight for expression and stance against oppression are reasons why I chose him as an artistic partner." – Marilyn Manson*

*"Masterfully incorporating everything from painting to performance to photography, regularly causing art world outcry and public fury...his art is successful less for its evident tendency to provoke than for its extraordinary ability to perplex." – Artweek*

*"Gottfried Helnwein is a genius!" – Arnold Schwarzenegger*

*"Gottfried Helnwein's...work is disturbing and controversial, because he places the lion outside of its cage, right in front of the viewer." – Village Life*

*"Helnwein is a master of surprised recognition." – William S. Burroughs*

*"Helnwein is one of the few exciting painters we have today." – Norman Mailer*

*"Well, the world is a haunted house, and Helnwein at times is our tour guide through it! I don't think that you can recognize a feeling from something that you look at unless it's part of yourself, and so when someone is willing to take on the sadness, the irony, the ugliness and the beauty in the kind of way that Gottfried does. Not all of Gottfried's work is on a canvas. A lot of it is the way he's approached life. You take one look at the paintings and you say "this guy has been around." You can't sit in a closet - and create this. This level of work is earned. As an artist my strongest reaction to Helnwein's work is that it challenges me to be better at what I do. There are very few people that achieve utter excellence in what they do. And I think that Gottfried Helnwein is certainly one of those people." – Sean Penn*

*"For Helnwein, creativity is not a vocation but a mission. His subject matter is the human condition. The metaphor for his art is dominated by the image of the child, but not the carefree innocent child of popular imagination. Helnwein instead creates the profoundly disturbing yet compellingly provocative image of the wounded child. The child scarred physically and the child scarred emotionally from within." – Robert Flynn Johnson, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*

*"For Helnwein, the child is the symbol of innocence, but also of innocence betrayed. In today's world, the malevolent forces of war, poverty, and sexual exploitation and the numbing, predatory influence of modern media assault the virtue of children. Helnwein's work concerning the child includes paintings, drawings, and photographs, and it ranges from subtle inscrutability to scenes of stark brutality. Of course, brutal scenes—witness *The Massacre of the Innocents*—have been important and regularly visited motifs in the history of art. What makes Helnwein's art significant is its ability to make us reflect*



*emotionally and intellectually on the very expressive subjects he chooses. Many people feel that museums should be a refuge in which to experience quiet beauty divorced from the coarseness of the world. This notion sells short the purposes of art, the function of museums, and the intellectual curiosity of the public. Works by Gottfried Helnwein will inspire and enlighten many; it is also sure to upset some. It is not only the right but the responsibility of the museum to present art that deals with important and sometimes controversial topics in our society" – Harry S.Parker III, Director of Museums, Fine Arts Museums of S.F.*

### **Major Retrospectives**

München Stadtmuseum,  
1982

Albertina, Vienna, 1985,

Musée d'Art Moderne

Strasbourg 1987

Leopold-Hoesch-Museum,  
Düren, 1987

Museum Folkwang, Essen,  
1989

Musée de l'Elysée,  
Lausanne, 1990

Centre culturel allemand,  
Paris, 1992

Museum Pfalzgalerie

Kaiserslautern, 1992

Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland, 1992

Josef Albers Museum, 1993

Rheinischen Landesmuseum in Bonn, 1993

Centre International d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, Quebec, 1994

Mittelrhein-Museum Koblenz, Koblenz, 1994

Museum of Fine Art Otaru, Japan, 1996

State Russian Museum St. Petersburg, 1997

Wäinö Aaltonen Museum in Turku, Finland, 1998

San Francisco Fine Arts Museum, The legion of Honor, 2004,

Ludwig Museum Schloss Oberhausen, 2005

Lentos Museum of Modern Art, Linz, 2006

State Gallery Rudolfinum Prag, 2008



A Helnwein painting

### **International Collections Featuring Helnwein's Work**

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco  
Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Art, San Francisco  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
Denver Art Museum  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne  
Ludwig Forum for International Art Aachen  
Ludwig Museum Schloss Oberhausen  
The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg  
Albertina Museum, Vienna  
National Art Museum of China, Beijing  
Museum Folkwang, Essen  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California  
21 Century Museum Louisville, Kentucky  
Polaroid Collection Photographic Resource Center, Boston University  
San Jose Museum of Art  
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock  
Lentos Museum of Modern Art, Linz, Austria  
Essl Museum for Contemporary Art, Vienna  
Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland  
Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne  
ZKM, Center for Art and Media Museum, Karlsruhe  
Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn  
Leopold Hoesch Museum Düren  
Museum Pfalzgaierie Kaiserslautern  
Museum of Lower Austria, Sankt Pölten  
Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art Turku, Finland  
National Museum of Photography, Fotomuseo, Bogotá, Colombia  
The Virtual Museum of Art in Second Life.  
Benedikt Taschen Collection, Cologne, Los Angeles  
Robert Wilson Collection, New York .  
Vicki and Kent Logan Collection, Denver  
Thorn Weisel Collection, San Francisco  
Sean Penn Collection, San Francisco  
Mikki and Stanley Weithorn Collection, New York  
Arnold Schwarzenegger Collection Los Angeles  
Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection, London  
Luke Brugnara Collection, San Francisco  
Ben Kingsley Collection, London  
Nicolas Cage Collection, Los Angeles  
Marilyn Manson Collection, Los Angeles  
Jason Lee, Los Angeles  
Giovanni Ribisi, Los Angeles

## Filmmaker Bios



Filmmaker Lisa Colburn

### Lisa Kirk Colburn

Lisa began working in film production on the set of *The Execution's Song* with Tommy Lee Jones in 1980. Studying at UCLA, Lisa has gone on to write eleven screenplays, many of them award winning. Her first, *Clouds of Tragedy*, was a finalist in the Eugene O'Neil Playwrights competition in 1994. The feature film, *The Journey* which Lisa co-wrote while working at the Sundance Lab was produced in 1997 starring Roshen Seth and won many national in international film festival awards, including the Audience Award at the Miami Film Festival.

Lisa produced and executive produced the feature length documentary, *Sacred Stage: The Mariinsky Theater* in 2005, which portrays the survival of the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia and its artistic director, Valery Gergiev. The film premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC and at Lincoln Center in New York City. Lisa directed, produced and executive produced *Gottfried Helnwein and the Dreaming Child* which took place on stage and behind the scenes at the Israeli Opera House in Tel Aviv in 2010. Lisa owns the film production company Red Fire Films and currently resides in Los Angeles, CA.

### Alex Gans – Editor

Born and raised in Miami, having a mother as a prominent actress definitely influenced Alex's passion for the fine arts. This continued as he graduated with a BFA in Sculpture/Media Arts and an MFA in Film/Media Arts from the University of Montana. During his first year of graduate school he was selected for an internship at VH-1 where he worked in the On-Air Graphics/Editing department. After completing graduate school Alex garnered work on a television pilot for Nickelodeon and subsequently moved to Los Angeles. Utilizing his creative talents he then landed a job as editor at Digital Workshop working on numerous short subject documentaries, including *The New Normal*, which was shown to teachers across America in regards to teaching in a world of fear stemming from Columbine and 9/11.

Finding his talent in editing and motion graphics, Alex then worked for various post houses, eventually ending up as senior editor at Click Media, an award winning new media post facility working with clients such as Dreamworks, Warner Brothers and the Discovery Channel. During his time at Click he was able to work on high-profile titles such as *Madagascar*, *Harry Potter* and *Scooby-Doo*. In 2008, Alex went to work for mobileStorm, one of the largest communication service providers dealing in the world of social networking, producing and editing all of its video content. After a stint in social networking he realized his true passion laid in narrative storytelling so he went back to

cutting short films, behind the scenes content and title design. This eventually landed him in the role as editor and producer on the feature-length documentary *Gottfried Helnwein and the Dreaming Child*.

### **Kirk Wesley Bailey – Composer**

Bailey scored the original compositions for *Gottfried Helnwein: The Child Dreams*, his first feature length documentary. Prior to this, Kirk scored a national trailer for NPR's *This American Life*, live HD in-theater broadcast, and a handful of commercials and short films, one of which was voted best short film on Reel 13 Shorts on Channel Thirteen/WNET (PBS, New York City). Kirk's love of music began in the sixth grade with the trombone. In high school he led the school jazz ensemble, the brass ensemble, played in the orchestra, sang in the choir, sang in the accapella group, played first chair in the Utah Youth Symphony, and began playing the bass guitar. Upon attending college, he further focused on the bass guitar. Accepted into the jazz band, the jazz ensemble, playing contrabass in the orchestra, forming a band, and playing in another bands, Kirk's love of music fully blossomed and gave him the spark to seek further musical education. After receiving a BA in music from Hamilton College, Kirk earned a Professional Diploma in film scoring and bass performance from Berklee College of Music. Kirk performs in jazz groups and rock bands, offering his musical insights and composition abilities.

## **Credits**

### **Israeli Film Crew**

First Camera  
Second Camera  
Sound  
Media Wrangler  
Media Wrangler

Ura Ackerman  
Natasha Dudinski  
Ravid Dvir  
Leslie Bailey  
Brooks Puchner

### **Israeli Crew Opera Premier**

Director of Photography  
Assistant Director of Photography  
Camera A  
Camera B  
Camera C  
Sound  
Media Wrangler

Nyika Jansco  
Brooks Puchner  
Uri Ackerman  
Odel Kirma  
Natasha Dudinski  
Ravid Dvir  
Yan Finkelberg

### **Los Angeles Film Crew**

Director of Photography  
Second Camera  
Sound Los Angeles  
Sound San Francisco  
Make Up  
Make Up  
Media Wrangler  
Still Photography

Robert Brinkman  
David Mark Wexler  
Billy Johnson  
Jack Morris  
Olive Kim  
Marianne Kai  
Benjamin C. Oberman  
Cyril Helwein

### **Second Los Angeles Film Crew**

Director of Photography  
Second Camera  
Grip & Electrician  
Still Photography

John Sharaf  
Aasulv Wof Austad  
Keith Barefoot  
Cyril Helwein

### **Israeli Opera Stage Sound Recording**

Yisrael David

### **Israeli Opera Creative Team**

Composer & Librettist  
Conductor  
Assistant Conductor  
Director & Librettist

Gil Shohat  
David Stern  
Eithan Schmeisser  
Omri Nitzan

Costumes & Set Design  
Choreographer  
Lighting Designer  
Lighting Designer (Bambi)  
Assistant to Gottfried  
Assistant to Gottfried & Costumes  
Operations Chief  
Technical Director  
Production Manager & Sets  
Head of Lighting  
Props Manager  
Head of Wardrobe  
Wardrobe Operation  
Head of Makeup Operations  
Wig & Hair Stylist  
Asst. Wig & Hair Stylist  
Asst. Wig & Hair Stylist  
Chorus Master  
Stage Manager, Supers  
St. Assistant Stage Mgr.

Gottfried Helnwein  
Gregor Seyffert  
Karen Granik  
Avi Yona Bueno  
Zeev Levy  
Yifat Elkayam  
Uri Hartman  
Ido Eliav  
John Brown, Nitzan Refaeli  
Eyal Levi  
Adi Ben Shafrut Piade  
Iris Ratinsky  
Galia Lichtman  
Anat Berman Yoran  
Larissa Hayat  
Marina Nudel  
Simonova Irina  
Yishai Steckler  
Erez Lotan  
Gad Schechter

### **Israeli Opera Management**

General Director  
Artistic Administrator  
Head of Productions  
Marketing, Advertising, Public Relations Mgr.  
Public Relations & Internet Site Manager  
Production Secretary

Hanna Munitz  
Michael Ajzenstadt  
Byeager Blackwell Seelig  
Noga Klinger  
Yonat Burmil  
Miri Stern



# OPERA TODAY

OPERA NEWS, COMMENTARY, AND REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

## Shohat's *The Child Dreams* — A mature work

Wes Blomster - 02/02/2010

Gil Shohat, now 35 and Israeli's top classical composer, was 15 when in the '80s he saw Hanoch Levin's *The Child Dream* on stage in his native Tel Aviv. Shohat, of course, knew Levin's work well, for throughout early decades in the history of Israel he – its outstanding dramatist — had served somewhat as the conscience of a nation tormented defining itself within its painwrought beginnings.

"I knew then that I would compose *Dream*, said Shohat in a postperformance interview in the Tel Aviv Opera House, where the premiere of the opera had taken place on January 18. Shohat's plans were seconded by Israeli Opera general director Hanna Munitz, who had also sensed the operatic potential of drama when she saw it on stage. Touched by the deep despair of the story and the genuine poetry of the text, Munitz commissioned *Dream* for her company. It is the first opera composed on any Levin text. Point of departure for Levin was the 1977 film *Voyage of the Damned*, the story of the *St. Louis*, the ship unable to attain landing rights for its fleeing refugees during World War II. But this, it must be stressed, is no more than raw material for what is now *Child Dream*.

True, the opera underscores the degree to which the Holocaust remains today a defining experience for the Israeli consciousness, yet the local critic who placed the new opera "among the most depressing and despair-radiating operas of the repertoire" missed the point of the transformation of the story through music achieved by Shohat and his director Omri Nizan. (Nizan, an old hand at the Cameri Theater, helped Shohat with minor changes in the text – nothing was added – and then served in the vastly more important role as director of the production.) For through music the child at the center of the drama becomes much more than a single child and his story is far greater than the tale of one individual example of injustice. The Child is now a young Everyman with hopes for a better and more just world. That this world is closed to him – and not just by the near-criminality of captain of the ship that might have brought salvation – elevates *Dream* to the level of mythic universality. The story is quickly told. The Mother hopes to escape with her son on the ship. The Captain demands payment "in the flesh." The ship reaches a ghost-like island, but passengers are not allowed to disembark by the despotic governor, the second evil figure in the story.

In one of the most moving moments in the score – 2 hours and 30 minutes with one intermission – a crippled child – mezzo Shira Raz comments:

I'm a poet. I write about you who come out of the fog and return and disappear in it. I weep over your fate and sketch it. Your faces approaching tell the tale of delusion; but all human failure is stamped on the back of your departing neck.

The Crippled Child speaks above and across the play for Levin himself who sees little but frustration and failure in the attempted escape.

The final act – an apotheosis of sorts – breaks with the seeming realism of the earlier three acts (and it was wise, therefore, to insert the intermission at this point). Dozens of “dead” children suspended above the stage whisper of their fate while the female nonet that opened the opera sings again of their sorry situation. There is a Straussian sadness about this conclusion; it its muted melancholy it recalls the elder composer's *Metamorphosen*, the “mourning for Munich” that he wrote after the destruction of his native city. It is deeply felt and moving music that might well become a concert piece in its own right.

And as the many who visit the memorial to children victims of the Holocaust in Jerusalem's Yad Vashem experience not consolation but rather the hope beyond hopelessness so essential in any confrontation with the vast inhumanity of the 20th century, here too there is an elevation beyond meaningless suffering. *Child Dream* is an ambitious work calling for a cast of 20, all drawn from the roster of the resident company. Outstanding among them were Larissa Tetuev as the Mother, a role she shared later with Ira Bertman, Hila Baggio as the child and Noah Briger as the Captain.

In only his second season as IO music director, David Stern extracted exemplary playing from the Rishon Le-Zion Orchestra, the company's pit band. Sets and costumes were effectively designed by Austrian-born Gottfried Helnwein. Lighting by Avi Yonah Bueno contributes to making this a colorful show engaging to the eye. Shohat has documented his superlative command of the composer's craft in an incredible long and diverse catalogue. In *Dream*, however, he travels on no new turf, but concentrates rather on giving musical meaning to an unusually demanding text.

*Dream* is written for reduced orchestra, and outstanding is the manner in which Shohat has woven the piano into the ensemble to achieve unusual effects. (The composer is a concretizing pianist as well.) It is unavoidable that some find the opera with its focus on the death of children depressing and even morbid. In so doing, they overlook the strong element of empathy that Shohat's music brings to Levin's turgid story. In the final analysis, *Child Dream* is an affirmative work that deserves to be seen outside Israel.

<http://www.jpost.com/ArtsAndCulture/Article.aspx?id=164783>



## Sleep of death

By HELEN KAYE  
12/31/2009 04:12

He lives in an 18th century castle in Tipperary and has a studio in downtown Los Angeles. He has four grown children, all artists, and a four-year-old granddaughter. His wife, Renate, came here to spend Christmas with him. He's a painter, photographer, installation- and performance-artist, and, latterly, a stage designer. He is very famous. He's Gottfried Helnwein, and he is the set and costume designer for *The Child Dreams*, which has its much-heralded world premiere at the Israel Opera on January 18. The music is by Gil Shohat. The director is Omri Nitzan. Director and composer wrote the libretto together, taking it almost verbatim from the play 1993 play of the same name by Hanoch Levin, and it is a very great play. It follows a group of refugees in their attempts to find a refuge after being driven from their home and native place. But it is the child, wrested from peace, hounded inexorably towards death, who drives the narrative. "In a very poetic way [Levin] describes the world we live in," says Helnwein, "with the child as metaphor for innocence, purity, confronted with the corrupt adult world. The adult characters, even the mother and father, are all archetypes; the child doesn't understand this world [into which he's been thrust]. With complete trust, he thinks that the bond between himself and his mother is unbreakable, but, of course, it's broken. What moves and touches me is how poetic the language is. His language is so evocative that I immediately see three dimensional images, strange, moving, so inspirational. But that is what great artists do - they transcend a horrible reality through their aesthetic." Before he read the libretto for *Child Dreams*, Helnwein had never heard of Levin, but now, he says, "I am happy to know him because what he says in words, I say with my images."

THERE IT baldly is - because Helnwein is chiefly known for his disquieting, wrenching, beautiful images of children. He draws, paints and photographs children as society would much rather not see them, not know about them. His huge canvases of children abused, children in pain, dead children, children oppressed, suppressed and denied, elicit a visceral response - whether of praise or of hate - from any who see them. Last year, for the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, Helnwein created a 100-meter-long installation in the center of Cologne with huge images of children's faces. A couple of days into the exhibition, the children's throats were slit. Helnwein repaired the pictures with duct-tape, left it visible, and made the installation "more powerful" in the

process. Some 20 pictures, including Israeli children painted here this year, will be installed on the plaza at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center - that's all there's room for - to run concurrently with the opera. Children have been the focus of Helnwein's art from the beginning. He started out by making small pictures of wounded and bandaged children, as well as creating performance art pieces with a child collaborator on the streets of Vienna. Why children in particular? Because, according to Helnwein, kids always get the short end of the stick; they're small, powerless, easy to push around, exploit, bamboozle, disregard and disrespect. "Children need to be adored for what they are," he says roundly, "they haven't been and are not." Helnwein went through his own childhood, he has said in many interviews, feeling as if he'd been decanted onto an alien planet. He was born in the Russian sector of Vienna in 1948 - a dreary time, full of despair and depression, and, he has said, "all the grownups I saw were ugly, grouchy, and rude... "I remember empty streets, ruins of bombed houses, rust, rubble, no colors, no sounds I never heard anybody laugh. I never heard anybody sing."

BUT IT'S not that Helnwein's own parents were cruel to him - they were nice people, he says, and he loved his grandfather's farm, out in the country. Rather he felt spiritually disconnected from them, from all adults in general - especially when he started asking all those awkward questions about Austria's very recent Nazi past. He got thumped, he has said, but he persisted. And yet he has retained an affinity for kid-dom. Basically, "it felt good to be a child," but there was also that alienation, which drove him to rebel "against the prevailing attitude towards children" when he was in his teens. "I vowed then that I'd have children, and that when I did I'd respect them." Helnwein's own beloved brood - three boys and a girl - was born in Vienna. The extended family has lived in Austria and Germany, but since 1998 it has mostly made its home in the rambling, ivy-covered Castle Gurteen in Tipperary County. Helnwein also has a studio and home in downtown Los Angeles because, he says, "so many of my friends live in the area." LA is also where Israel Opera head Hannah Munitz first saw Helnwein's work, which, she attests, "made her jaw drop." After that, hiring Helnwein to do *The Child Dreams* was, you might say, inevitable. Helnwein first visited Israel in 2005 when the Israel and Los Angeles Operas mounted *Der Rosenkavalier*, for which he had designed the stage, and now has been back and forth many times for *Child*. From the beginning, sensing that it is what Levin would have wanted, Helnwein insisted on having actual children onstage. "When you look at the stage you have to see a fragile, beautiful child." So although soprano Hila Baggio sings the part, she is still the "voice" of an actual child. A huge picture-wall of a sleeping child, through which the soldiers break, is the first of four amazing sets, culminating in a "universe of dead children in an infinity of space." When he designs an opera stage, says Helnwein, "I try to tell the whole story in pictures so that even a deaf person could completely understand." And for this opera, "It has to be done so that were Levin to see it, he'd be excited."

The Child Dreams – TEL AVIV Israeli Opera  
JEHOASH HIRSHBERG - 01/08/2010

Since its inauguration twenty-five years ago, the Israeli Opera has embarked on a project of commissioning operas from Israeli composers with the intention of producing a new opera once every three to four years. The company has enriched the still-limited repertory of native Israeli operas with a diverse selection of titles, including *Travel to Polyphony*, by Richard Farber; *Joseph*, by the venerable Joseph Tal (who died last year at ninety-eight); the powerful and moving drama *Dear Son of Mine*, by Haim Permont and librettist Telma Alyagon; the epic *Journey to the End of the Millennium*, by Yosef Bardanashvili and playwright A. B. Yehoshua; and the symbolic *Alfa Omega* by Gil Shochat and librettists Anna Hermann and Dori Manor. The Israeli Opera has succeeded in raising interest and appreciation of new operas in the Israeli audience. Still, I expect the Israeli Opera to intensify its contribution to its cause by reviving some of the Israeli works that were produced just once long ago and have been nearly forgotten since then.

Hanokh Levin (1943-99) wrote sixty-three plays before his untimely death from cancer. They ranged from the biting and provocative political satire of Israeli policy to painful, dark and pessimistic expressions of human society in general. They provoked angry responses, whether from right-wing Israeli politicians or viewers who could not bear his frequent use of obscenities and cruel, humiliating scenes. Yet he soon won the admiration of audiences worldwide, and of theater scholars, who have generally considered him one of the great playwrights of the twentieth century. Levin wrote *The Child Dreams*, one of his most poetic plays, in 1986, and directed its premiere at Habimah theater in 1993.

Levin's point of departure was the tragedy of S.S. *Saint Louis*, which left the port of Hamburg in May 1939, carrying more than 900 Jewish refugees on their way to Cuba, with the intention of stopping there until visas to the U.S. could be approved. However, the President of Cuba refused to admit the refugees, and the U.S. and Canada were not ready to grant the refugees immediate visas. After lengthy deliberations, the captain was forced to return the ship to Europe, where the remaining passengers disembarked in Antwerp; the refugees were granted asylum in various countries, but more than two hundred and fifty of them eventually perished in the Holocaust that engulfed Europe.

Levin turned the terrible event into a universal story about the tragedy of a child, whose happy dreams are turned into a nightmare when anonymous soldiers invade his home and murder his father. His mother takes him and joins a host of refugees aboard a ship. They reach an unnamed island where the governor rejects them all, save for the child, whom he is ready to take. Yet the child clings to his mother and returns to his death. The characters have no names and are defined by their roles, such as "The Bleeding Man," "A Woman Born to Love," etc. Composer Gil Shochat (b. 1973) is a highly prolific composer in many genres. He arranged the libretto for *The Child Dreams* in collaboration with stage director Omri Nitzan, basically using Levin's text with just a few omissions. Shochat's musical style stems from a deliberately anti-avant-garde ideology. His music is embedded in the late-Romantic vocabulary. The music - especially the orchestration - of *The Child Dreams* is openly indebted to Wagner (as in his use of a female nonet in lieu of a chorus, resembling the nine Valkyries), as well as to Richard Strauss, Ravel and early Stravinsky. The

continuous playing of the orchestra carries the musical action, especially in the first scene. The rich, colorful score is dominated by high textures of soprano voices, celesta, harp, the high octaves of the piano and many solos for flute, oboe and high violin.

Shochat makes frequent use of tried-and-true devices that create good communication with the audience. However, they detracted from the power of the drama. The opera has four scenes. The first, which is the longest - indeed, at about forty minutes, it is too long - presents the dream of the child and his loving parents. The Commander and his soldiers, their faces hidden behind heavy helmets, burst into the peaceful house. Suddenly - in my view much too abruptly - the soldiers drop their uniforms and turn into circus acrobats who represent the dream of the child, whose enormous face is projected as the backdrop of the scene. The Woman Born to Love (who is the Commander's mistress) shoots the father, just for the fun of it. The second scene focuses on the mother, who desperately searches for an escape route, joining the ship with the other refugees, for which she must pay the price of selling herself to the captain. The opera reaches a dramatic climax in the powerful third scene, which depicts the desperate attempts of the refugees to disembark on the island. Here the vocal parts dominate, and the roles of the Mother and the Child are very moving. The musical climax is reached in the surreal fourth scene of the dead children, who appear suspended from the roof like marionettes (another function of the acrobats) with their beautiful, dreamy roles sung by the nonet from the lowered stage. The dead Child and the Mother join them, and the children welcome him because he fills the quota needed to bring the Messiah. A man who looks like a busy sales agent enters, and the children are sure he is the Messiah. However, the Commander and the soldiers enter and shoot him dead. The commander drags the mother, as entertainment for his soldiers. All hope is lost.

The opera is dominated by nightmarish qualities that are emphasized by the Brechtian device of "distancing" - holding emotion and realism at bay. At the onset of the opera, a bleeding violinist enters, screaming that the soldiers have wounded him; the blood pours on his white clothes until the commander cracks the violin with his boots and the violinist dies. Late in the first scene, the Commander forces the Mother to commit crude sexual acts. I found these two incidents revolting and totally foreign to the spirit of the opera. Director Omri Nitzan and set designer Gottfried Hellenwein created beautiful stage pictures, especially in the third and fourth scenes. Conductor David Stern, new musical director of the Israeli Opera, led an inspired reading of the score; the orchestra responded to him beautifully. As the language of the libretto is poetic Hebrew, it was only natural for the Israeli Opera to engage an all-local cast, a decision that happily proved Israel is blessed with a host of excellent singers. Ira Bertman sang the Mother with a full, expressive soprano. The director divided the role of the child between an acrobat (May Poleg) and a high soprano, superbly sung by Hila Baggio. Guy Mannheim doubled as the Father and the Governor, performing both roles beautifully. Mezzo Bracha Kol was a terrific Woman Born to Love, her acting appealingly extroverted. The Israeli Opera's regular bass, Vladimir Braun, was excellent - as always - on this occasion taking on three small roles. The rest of the large cast was likewise very fine. The opera would benefit from some cuts in the first scene and a few revisions, but all in all *The Child Dreams* was an impressive event that was well-received by the audience.