

SOME MURDERS AND BAD TASTE

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TAKE a fat woman, a gigolo, and a few murdered widows. Add a composer who seeks to make his work accessible and a librettist who hoards snippets of the bizarre in scrapbooks and you have the basic ingredients for the new Australian Opera, *Love Burns*, which opens in Adelaide tonight.

An unlikely title - it sounds more suitable for a musical - it was deliberately chosen by composer Graeme Koehne, director Neil Armfield and librettist Louis Nowra to attract an audience that ordinarily wouldn't attend opera.

The music, too, is written to appeal. Lying somewhere between the traditions of opera and the musical, it creates a work that Nowra described as "having everything - bad taste, swear words, tunes, atonal material". He paused before adding drily, "just like life".

The libretto is based on the true story of a couple of con artists who operated on America's West Coast in the 1950s. They were called the Honeymoon Killers - a fat plain woman, desperate for love, and a gigolo who had a way with widows. "She pretended to be his sister, while he wined and dined the widows, dancing his way into their hearts," said Nowra. "Then she would urge him to kill them."

The territory is, of course, pure Nowra. His work has always been about people whose lives have been, to use a football expression, "offside". His scrapbooks, a rich source that have already yielded a book and a ballet, are filled with newspaper tales of religious cults and sexual obsessions, tortured twists of fate and secret lives.

"What fascinates me," said Nowra, "is how ordinary people can suddenly and inexplicably do the most extraordinary and horrible things. The dark, dark rumblings of the human psyche? Not according to Nowra, who, claiming a macabre sense of humour, said he didn't view his scrapbooks that way.

"For me it's that people can live a normal life for 50 years and then do something hideous which most people would think of as the dark side. But I think it's just that we have short lives and if this act makes them seem interesting to other people it seems some justification for what would otherwise be a totally boring existence.

"The original couple in *Love Burns*, if they hadn't killed, would have seemed so boring that you wouldn't have invited them at the tail end of the guest list for your New Year's Eve party.

"They are the sort of couple you can imagine going to a Tupperware party or listening to the music of the times. They would have sung songs like *Three Coins In A Fountain* and *Love is a Many Splendoured Thing* and believed in them. I liked the idea that you can believe those kitsch songs as if they're real, believe the emotions are true, while at the same time be strangling and disembowelling people."

If the songs of the fifties have particular appeal to Nowra, he is equally enthralled by the era's single-minded devotion to materialism. "In the sixties or seventies, the original couple might have been motivated by sex or passion, but the fifties was a totally practical era. They wanted money, they wanted to go on a cruise, they wanted to stay in the best motels. And killing the widows was much more practical than being chased afterwards."

The same tongue-in-cheek quality that undercuts Nowra's conversation lends it a wickedly sardonic twist at the heart of the opera. "It is not passionate like a Verdi opera," he said. "Its essence is post-modernist. You're not as involved as you would be as in a 19th century opera. The music and words should suggest they are great lovers like *Tristan and Isolde* but, at the same time, the audience is able to step back and say, 'Hullo, they are really passionate about something, yet they're killing people'."

Love Burns is Nowra's third opera and follows *Inner Voices* and the Bicentennial opera, *Whitsunday*, which was also directed by Neil Armfield with whom Nowra shares a theatrical history that goes back to Armfield's days at NIDA.

Nowra says that in an ideal world he would have loved to have composed. He has particular affection for musicals of the 1950s, when he was a small child being brought up in the Melbourne working class suburb of Faulkner. At the time, his uncle was a stage director and stage manager for J. C. Williamsons and he took the young Nowra to shows like *Can Can* and *The Cherry Blossom Show*, and then, in the 1960s, to *Hello Dolly* and *Camelot*.

"I suppose I saw the end of the classical musical era," said Nowra. He grew up writing lyrics for songs, and playing clarinet, saxophone, and bass

guitar- a preoccupation with music that even a cruel set-back could not diminish.

"In sixth grade at Faulkner I sat next to a girl called Mancini. At the time, I was fascinated by the Peter Gunn theme so I said to her, "Maybe it has something to do with your family." She asked her father, and he said that Henry Mancini was his brother.

"I was more excited than I had ever been my life. I went to their place and there was her father in a blue singlet with a beer-gut sucking a bottle of beer. There was a piano there so I asked him about Henry Mancini.

"He said that he sent him all the best ideas he had. So I spent four or five evenings just sitting in the corner watching him. I thought he was a genius. At last I asked: 'Do you have any ideas that you are going to send to Henry.' He went to the piano and played a tune and he said, 'This is the latest one I'm sending to Henry.' I thought it was brilliant.

"Then three months later my sister, Michele, started to learn the piano. She started playing this tune and I was really astonished, and I said, 'But that's it, that's the tune Mr Mancini sent to Henry'." His sister kept playing Chopsticks.

"All I could remember thinking," said Nowra, "was, how could they do that to a child." It's the sort of blackly funny story at which he excels. And even as he talked about the problems of writing an opera compared with a musical -"Unlike musicals, where you not only have spoken material but you can change the tune, an opera is an integrated whole and very hard to change" - Nowra couldn't resist entertaining with yet another Arbusesque image.

"When I wrote the part of a fat, plain women I thought there would be a few large sopranos around. In the fifties it would have been perfect. But, now all the singers are taking off weight.

"The awful part is our singer will have to be padded." *