



# In The Machine Room of Hotel Pro Forma

By Tine Voss Illum

*“Some years ago stage artists began using spaces different from the traditional theater stages. At that point I thought I wanted to challenge what appeared on the stage. Since then that’s what I’ve been doing,” says Kirsten Dehlholm.*

## Music dramatic works

Kirsten has come directly from the Pathological Institute at the University of Copenhagen when I meet her and she is excited about the images of cells, molecules, and microbes. She talks about how beautiful they are and what a pleasure it is to meet scientists who understand the aesthetic of the material of cells and microbes. This bio-molecular material is part of Hotel Pro Forma’s forthcoming major music dramatic production *Vespertine*. A production based on twelve songs from Björk’s album *Vespertine* (2001), transcribed for symphonic sound for orchestra, choir, and opera singers. *Vespertine* is a co-production between Mannheim National Theater and Hotel Pro Forma. The premiere will be in Mannheim, Germany in May 2018. For Kirsten Dehlholm all productions take their point of departure in the staging of the space, which shapes the ground for the concept and basically raises the question: what is an artwork?

“In *Vespertine* soloists are located in a kind of laboratory high above the floor, while an adult and children’s choir fill the floor as a landscape. A boy floats above the laboratory and controls smoke machines. I insert visual elements based on the intuition that they should be there – if it will all fit together, you never know – but usually it does.” *Vespertine* consists of twelve independent songs about love – 12 very sensitive songs. Kirsten Dehlholm wants to challenge the audience with sensuous associations without a linear narrative. *Vespertine* takes shape with a scientific dimension about biodiversity, as a fundamental factor. Our cells are in constant motion – no matter what we do. We try to take control, but we can’t – and sooner or later we all die,” Dehlholm says dryly. In this molecular landscape a mythical layer is added: *Gaia*, the goddess of the earth, *Chronos*, the god of time, half human and half animal, *Uranus*, the god of the sky and the son of Gaia, who is the child flying above the laboratory. A concept has taken its form. *Vespertine* is created for international opera houses.

Hotel Pro Forma keeps a sharp focus on music dramatic works. Not only in future productions, but also through seminars, workshops and networking activities centered around technology, sound art, and sound installations. Manager Rasmus Adrian, who has a background within music, describes how there is a wall between a stage artistic environment and a music environment. Openness and dialogue across environments are needed, but new routes seem to be appearing. Hotel Pro Forma is working to break down the walls by inviting

*From the Atelier 2017 (Kirsten Dehlholm)*

artists and scientists into an experimental collaboration between opera, science, and art.

### **The breath of Hotel Pro Forma**

Since 2011, Hotel Pro Forma has had eight to ten students every six months, as part of *Atelier Hotel Pro Forma*. Students who have a background in sound, light, visual arts, dramaturgy, architecture, and arts management. A course designed to inspire, develop, and reconsider contemporary art practises, as Hotel Pro Forma writes on its website. Trainees are part of the study room for future productions, where challenging questions and assignments are presented in the atelier. Once a month *The Atelier* invites the public to a lounge, an open house, where the daily research and the artistic experiments acquire body and form.

Today's lounge JUMP is an installation that asks its audience: Where is your Nangijala? An experiment, based on Astrid Lindgren's book *Brothers Lionheart* with images, moods, and sounds. As a guest, you are drawn into a tunnel that occupies the entire large white studio. It grows more and more sinister until you see the back of the construction, which, ironically, is simply cut out pieces of cardboard. Hotel Pro Forma is creating a new staging of *The Brothers Lionheart*, a visual sound drama for children and adolescents – a well-known and beloved production, which does not need to be articulated in every detail.

Premiere January 2018 at the State Youth Theater in Vilnius, Lithuania. The concept is to tell the story through sound, visuals, and voices, evoked from a darkened room. The production will be a visual sound drama, where everything is seen in glimpses and heard in short moments. We follow the story in brief dialogues carefully selected to give space for soundscapes and visuals. From the book we keep the fundamental contrast between the beautiful, enigmatic landscapes, the danger in nature, and the cruelty of the tyrant, shown as visuals and projections. The actors' faces and bodies appear in glimpses of light while images open the space in short moments. «The rest is for the imagination to finish. It will be eerie and very appealing at the same time. Imagination is everything.»

“I don't teach at an academy or a school where you are in constant contact with young people, but the interns show me some things that I wouldn't find otherwise. They have eyes and minds elsewhere and provide a lot of new references. It is very inspiring. They are skilled not only in their professionalism. They are a breath. The atelier is a breath, which is important in order to be challenged to get beyond your own horizon,” Kirsten Dehlholm points out.

“But at the same time the Atelier is also a greenhouse – an incubator. It is a place where talents are developed and are handpicked for new projects. The artistic team behind the production NeoArctic consists of several former interns,” Rasmus Adrian emphasizes.

In the case of assignments, co-productions, or Hotel Pro Forma's own production, ideas and inspiration derive from many places. From sleeping travelers at train stations in India, from artists and other collaborators, from images of molecules, from literature, or science. The ideas are shaped as the production moves forward along many parallel tracks. Hotel Pro Forma creates productions about major topics: perspective and gravity, Darwin, Jesus, money, war, the Arctic, Cosmos, and now the underworld.

### **Hotel Pro Forma until 2021**

From 2018 to 2021, Hotel Pro Forma will develop a trilogy with the underworld as a frame narrative with three productions in three different formats.

The first part of the trilogy is *Gilgamesh* the famous Babylonian epic of the hero of the same name, written on clay tablets about 4000 years ago and considered the world's first major narrative. It is an age-old story that forms the basis for all tales of life and death, friendship, and human and divine actions, which proves its continuing vitality. The poet Morten Søndergaard is rewriting the epos of Gilgamesh. A musical performance installation will be shown as a museum piece in a classical museum such as the *Glyptotek* in Copenhagen and similar museums outside Denmark.

The second part of the trilogy is *Amduat*, which means that which is in the underworld. *Amduat* is an ancient Egyptian fable that will be turned into a stage performance with new text written by the author Harald Voetmann. The Egyptian underworld is linked with texts referring to the deathbed of the author's father. Egyptian music with throbbing, rhythmic drums and distorted voices together with the latest research within soundscapes from hospitals will be combined with Voetmann's text projected as images. The third part of the trilogy will be a restaging of *Operation: Orfeo* from 1993 with the Latvian Radio Choir 2020/2021. Hotel Pro Forma has a long backlist of excellent and iconic performances.

"If there's one work that has to be restaged before I die, it's *Operation: Orfeo*," Kirsten says laughing. I myself was delighted to hear that the younger theater generation, including myself, might get the opportunity not just to experience this work on video, but live – a performance, I have heard so much about.

If you ask Kirsten Dehlholm what has changed since *Operation: Orfeo* was first performed in 1993, her reply is:

"A lot. The interdisciplinary has become much more alive, but at the same time everything must be explained more than previously, in words. We didn't do that in 1993. But nonetheless *Operation: Orfeo* was an overwhelming success and from 1993 to 2010 the performance toured most of the world."

Finally, Kirsten Dehlholm wants to add, that her basic artistic vision is as before:

To create works that cause wonder and surprise, which make people reflect and contemplate things they have forgotten.

To introduce familiar notions into new contexts.

To establish connections between younger and older artists from all artistic disciplines and from science.

To give a series of classical operas a conceptual dramaturgy at international opera houses.

To work with new technology in a low-tech way.

That there must always be room for different ideas.