

# Adventurous multimedia opera Somnium delivers on its ambitions

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**Countertenor Terry Lee in the opera Somnium.**

It is Murphy's Law that new technology fails on first night no matter how well it behaved during rehearsals. And so it was at the premiere of the multimedia opera *Somnium* in Hong Kong, when the "out of battery" sign flashed and the video projection screens went dark for about an hour.

Thankfully, that was the only interruption in an otherwise slick and adventurous production described as part-installation, part-opera and part-trance.

Some pre-show idea about the story, adapted from German astronomer Johannes Kepler's 1608 book of the same name, is useful for understanding the work's fragmented and nonlinear narration.

A single mother in Iceland called Fiolxhildis, who sells herbal talismans to seafarers for a living, is reunited with her son, who had been missing for five years. She calls forth a supernatural daemon to take them on a journey to the moon.

They are joined by a father and daughter in the Hong Kong of today, struggling over the rather familiar question of "should I stay or should I go?"

The audience have three hours to freely walk in and out of two separate spaces at the HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity in Kowloon. This reviewer chose to enter the one with the recorded videos of performers first.

Six stations made up of transparent screens are activated by a team of lunar-rover-like robotic projectors on wheels. These roam about in the dark, dodging around members of the audience and pausing to project videos of five different characters whose stories are conveyed through monologues of song and spoken word.

The daemon (Steve Hui, also known as Nerve, the composer, in heavy disguise) appears periodically in person to say his piece, looking very otherworldly in a full mask and his voice altered.

It takes a while for the ears to adjust. The rather feeble speakers dangling by each bank of screens make the lyrics and speeches (mostly in English, although the father speaks in Cantonese, and not subtitled) hard to make out, especially on the occasions when multiple characters appear at the same time. (The full lyrics and spoken words are in the programme for those who want to look them up.)

But, just as one can indulge in the emotional intensity and sheer drama of a traditional opera rather than being fixated on the surtitles, the polished screen performances in *Somnium* are compelling and Hui's music accomplished and accessibly melodic.

Mezzo-soprano Christy Li's performance as the mother is particularly strong, delivering every bit of the anger, guilt and relief her character has been through. With his beautiful countertenor voice, Terry Lee, as the son, sounds sweetly idealistic.

The characters are absent in the other room, designed by artist Kenny Wong, which is bathed in a silvery light most of the time with a large sphere (the moon) suspended in the middle.

Eye masks are offered to audience members for two reasons. They are encouraged to relax, sleep and dream on the ample beanbags and triangular pillows on the floor. The masks also offer protection from the strobe lighting which occasionally pulsates from inside the globe.

According to the programme notes, this is supposed to replicate the effects of a 1960s Dreamachine, which devotees believed could transport them into a hypnotic, dreamlike state while they were wide awake.

The sound effects are sometimes too loud and invasive (a constant problem with multimedia productions these days) for sleep and dreams to occur. But on the whole, Somnium delivers on its creative ambitions.

It breaks down traditional theatre's suspension of disbelief by separating and heightening content that appeals to the different senses and, in doing so, challenges logic, reason and our sense of time. It is a tribute to the mysteries of the world, the moon and ourselves of which we know so little.

“No Discipline Limited: Somnium by Nerve – installation/opera/ trance”, Multimedia Theatre & Gallery, HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity, 135 Junction Road, Kowloon. Reviewed Oct. 8. Further performances Thursday, Friday and Saturday.