

# Women in the maelstrom of history

The eagerly-awaited spring premiere *Purge* (Puhdistus) brings to the Finnish National Opera the story of the highly-acclaimed novel of the same name by Sofi Oksanen. An old woman faces her past and in doing so places the recent history of a whole nation open to inspection.



**THE 1930s**, West Estonia. Two sisters fall in love with the same man, but he has eyes for only one of them. War breaks out and the country is occupied. The unloved sister grasps at the opportunity; she seeks revenge and betrays those closest to her. Betrays her country.

Decades later, Estonia is once again free. A young woman appears at the aging Aliide's door. With her comes the past.

This is the setup in **Sofi Oksanen's** *Purge*. The private merges with the public, the fate of the small human being with that of the nation. *Purge* offers no easy answers, Aliide is no mere traitor, nor is she merely a victim.

It is easy to see her as a wrong-doer, but just as easy to understand why she did what she did. There were few alternatives.

*Purge*, a work of sweeping emotions and vast themes, lent itself readily to the language of opera, says librettist-composer **Jüri Reinvere**. The main characters and events are the same as those in the novel, but the chronology and weighting differ.

"I am aware that Sofi had in mind the powerful theme of the female status," says Reinvere. "Whereas my emphasis is on the way the Estonians have come to terms with the past. I argue that the only way to leave the past behind is to look it straight in the eye."

Jüri Reinvere was born in Estonia but moved away a couple of decades ago, first to Finland. He has also lived for a while in Sweden, Poland, Berlin and elsewhere.

"*Purge* has shocked Estonia in many ways. People there are used to speaking about the past in a certain way. But Oksanen does not repeat the big and little lies the Estonians have been telling themselves."

## A split leading role

*Purge* is, says the composer, a traditional opera. "I have not tried to set any records for modern experimentation." The models for the dramaturgy

are mainly German and Russian. "It's both odd and right," he laughs, "that an opera saying how dangerous it is to live next door to Russia should follow the traditions of Russian opera."

As is so often the case in operas, the leading character in *Purge* is a suffering woman and her development. The leading role is so immense that it is divided in two. The young and the old Aliide are sung by two different sopranos. "They both have huge parts to play – a life story spanning decades," says **Tiina Puumalainen** the stage director.

The fact that the two Aliides are often on stage at the same time is, she feels, extremely interesting. Old and young view the same situation via their own understanding. They can see each other, their past and future selves, but they cannot change themselves. The irrevocability of history thus becomes concrete; the fact that whatever happened has to be accepted as it is.

## People in crisis

"The characters in *Purge* are people in crisis. They all have to make their choices without knowing what the future will bring, and all the options are difficult or dangerous," says Puumalainen. "The libretto has no mercy; it exposes human weaknesses and smallness. But on the other hand it makes us understand very clearly just how difficult making the right decision is."

War and oppression, as described in *Purge*, drive people to extreme acts. "They seek a little happiness and big boots trample it underfoot. The greatest love leads to the worst iniquities."

The relationship between the young Zara and the old Aliide also fascinates Tiina Puumalainen.

"Both have found themselves in difficult, virtually impossible situations. Zara has become the victim of modern trafficking, Aliide of the most

ruthless era in a nightmarish regime. Life's complexity is clearly visible in their encounter. The consequences of our actions affect many people for decades to come, and some crimes never grow old."

## Surging masses and intimate moments

Both the composer and the stage director are excited about the potential afforded by the big National Opera stage. "The stage technology is the best in Finland and we can be confident that the plans will work in the best possible way," Puumalainen enthuses.

The choir, which transforms from wedding guests in the young Estonia to Soviet soldiers, forest brothers, interrogators and victims of sex trafficking, occupies a big role in the opera. Puumalainen reports that in creating the visual image she sought ideas from various sources, from Soviet propaganda to mass movements in the present day.

"We're building a story that takes in both intimate little moments and surging masses that fill the whole stage. The story shifts backwards and forwards in time and even strays far from its point of departure, but everything revolves around Aliide, in her memories and thoughts. She is surrounded by the might of a major power, by war and destruction, in which people have to make their choices."

*Purge* is Jüri Reinvere's first full-length opera. It also marks his debut at the Finnish National Opera. Did he find such a challenge terrifying?

"Terrifying? Well. After all, one of the themes of *Purge* is that you must not give way to fear. If you do, you will become what you fear."

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Read Reinvere's blog at <http://puhdistusopera.wordpress.com>



Jüri Reinvere