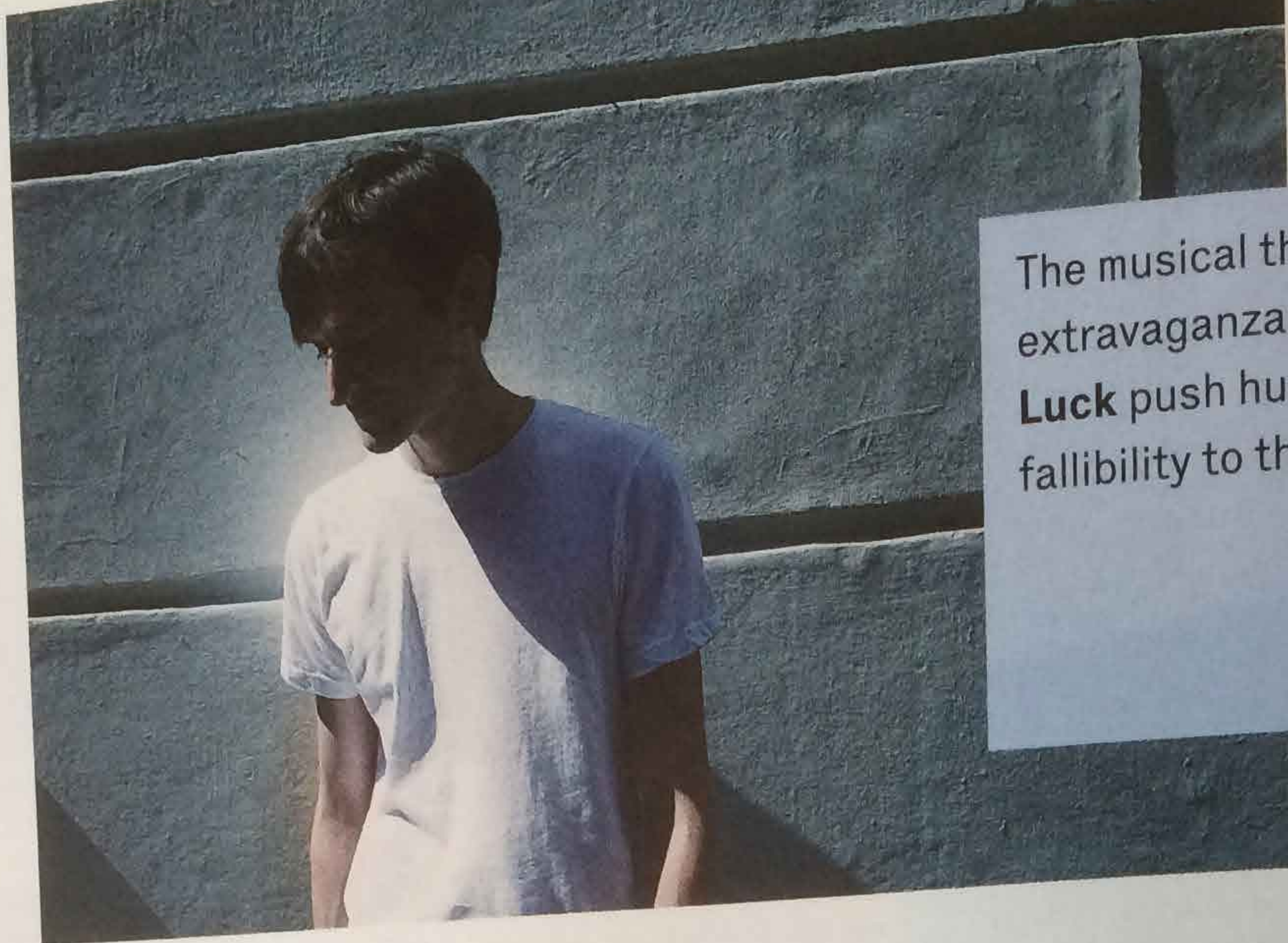


Dare To Be Stupid

The musical theatre extravaganzas of **Neil Luck** push human fallibility to the fore



Bites

"Adam is sacrificed three times through different methods, then crucified in this Latin mass at the end, while Benedict and Chihiro are playing strings at the side." This is how aftershow discussions go in Neil Luck's world. The London based composer is describing *Ritual*, an event produced by his performance group ARCO as the closing credits to *Operatic Mass Actions*, a multi-artist, multi-scene 'city opera' staged in a range of public spaces around Aarhus in Denmark in May 2017. Drawing upon the city's Viking history, Luck decided to make the traditionally staid post-performance debrief a more muscular affair. With his longtime ARCO collaborators – vocalist Adam de la Cour, violist Benedict Taylor and violinist Chihiro Ono – joined by masked wrestlers from Danish troupe Bodyslam and local death metallers Baest, Luck cast himself as the genial chatshow host, interviewing performers before their fictional operatic selves met symbolic sacrifice amid a riot of sweaty headlock and sheet metal guitar.

Was this as cathartic an experience for the audience as for the artists? "We plied the audience with free alcohol as they came in so everyone was a little bit drunk," recalls Luck. "A lot of the audience were metal fans or wrestling fans, so people got something from it on that level. On the other hand, professional wrestling is choreographed schlock, but at the same time those people are putting a lot of force in and actually hurting themselves. People enjoy watching it, but when you're so close to it, that boundary between what's real and what's not, what's safe and what's not and where you stand as the audience, gets thrown into question and becomes more visceral."

ARCO's in your face, gleefully mix 'n' match style was born in part out of its origin as a low budget attempt by Luck to find outlets for his composition, following what was at the time a "quite traditional" Masters course at the Royal College of Music. "London was quite a different place when I graduated 12 years ago; there weren't a lot of platforms for the kind of work I was making," he explains. "So a few other colleagues and I who were into the same stuff ended up putting our own things on."

"That quasi-DIY aesthetic has become part of what I do, either practically or aesthetically or both," he adds. "The audience that seems to engage with and enjoy our stuff is a really mixed bag: not just the core audience for new music, or performance art, or theatre. That's not by conscious design, but we really like it."

Even considering the amount of self-motivation required for the average young composer to survive, the quantity and scope of Luck's output in the period since is impressive. It's unsurprising to find him cite John Zorn as a hero, both musically and as an organiser. Alongside ARCO, Luck is part of the new music collective and netlabel squib-box, whose newest release *New Vocal Solutions* sees various artists set loose with Yamaha's Vocaloid singing synthesizer and the generated vocals of Hatsune Miku. Another recent release on Entr'acte called *Bloody Sirens* showcases some of the fruits of an ongoing collaboration with Musarc, the experimental choir based at London Metropolitan University's school of art, architecture and design. Meanwhile, festive visitors to the V&A Museum of Childhood in London last year could have enjoyed *Sounds Of Christmas*, in which Luck brought antique dolls' houses and puppets to life in "this really cartoony, barmy soundwalk". The narration was written specially for the children's TV veteran Timmy Mallett, who gave "the most virtuoso vocal performance", enthuses Luck.

While his work encompasses ensembles, soloists and sound art, from installations to Resonance FM's 2016 *Drivetime Underground* series, Luck sees himself primarily as a composer of music theatre, while voicing his dissatisfaction with a term that can be at best unilluminating and at worst downright unappealing. "It's a really horrible word, actually, and I only call it music theatre as a quick way of referring to something," he says. "To be honest, I don't totally know what it is. I just make stuff that I think is going to be interesting and it often turns out to have a performance aspect that goes beyond concert music." He acknowledges the playwright

and director Richard Foreman as a role model in his ambition to entertain and disconcert in equal measure: "What I admire about Foreman is that he found this language that's direct and communicative and entertaining but at the same time super complex and baffling and rich."

Misgivings aside, Luck agrees that music theatre's hybrid status – not quite recital, not quite opera, not quite acting – lends itself to exploitation of the form's inherent tension and awkwardness. That's certainly the case with *Live Guy, Dead Guy*, which ARCO premiered as part of the Kammer Klang series at London's Cafe Oto in June. A two act performance whose first half evolved from *Perfect Geek*, another piece performed by ARCO in Aarhus, *Live Guy, Dead Guy* follows a computer programmer son – his vowels mangled in a parody of a Silicon Valley drawl – returning to the family dinner table and introducing his fiancée to his straitlaced parents. That already inherently uncomfortable scenario swings wildly out of control as Luck throws in sinister AI avatars, broken crockery, alienating prosody, a lurching, puppet-like movement style he dubs "reverse motion capture", poisoned doughnuts and the corporatisation of the afterlife.

"In classical concert music and opera, there's a notion of perfection in virtuosic performance. That always feels like a lie to me; the human body on stage is this pathetic, messy, fallible thing. I'm interested in pushing that real awkwardness to the forefront," he declares. "There are always these schools of composition being bandied about, such as new conceptualism or new discipline, and we sometimes joke with squib-box that what we're doing is some form of new stupidity. There's a pathetic quality, a dumbness to a lot of our performances, not just for a gag, but to open up an area of expression which is bulldozed out in classical virtuoso performances." Although, as he notes, "We do talk about new stupidity but the work isn't stupid."

□ Musarc/Neil Luck's *Bloody Sirens* is released by Entr'acte neilluck.com
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