

# The Devil Inside

David Kettle

'There was a moment when I thought to myself: how on earth are they going to get out of this?' Author Louise Welsh raises a very good question. Such are the moral and magical dilemmas raised by Robert Louis Stevenson's seemingly simple short story *The Bottle Imp* that it does indeed feel as though its characters might be unable to find a way through them.

And it's exactly the story's mix of almost fairy-tale simplicity and moral complexity that made it such an appealing subject for Welsh and composer Stuart MacRae. It's a tale rich in Faustian overtones, of a sinister bottle imprisoning a malevolent spirit that will grant you all your heart desires, but at a heavy price – your soul will be damned to Hell if you still own it when you die. You can sell the bottle on, of course, but only at a price lower than the one you paid.

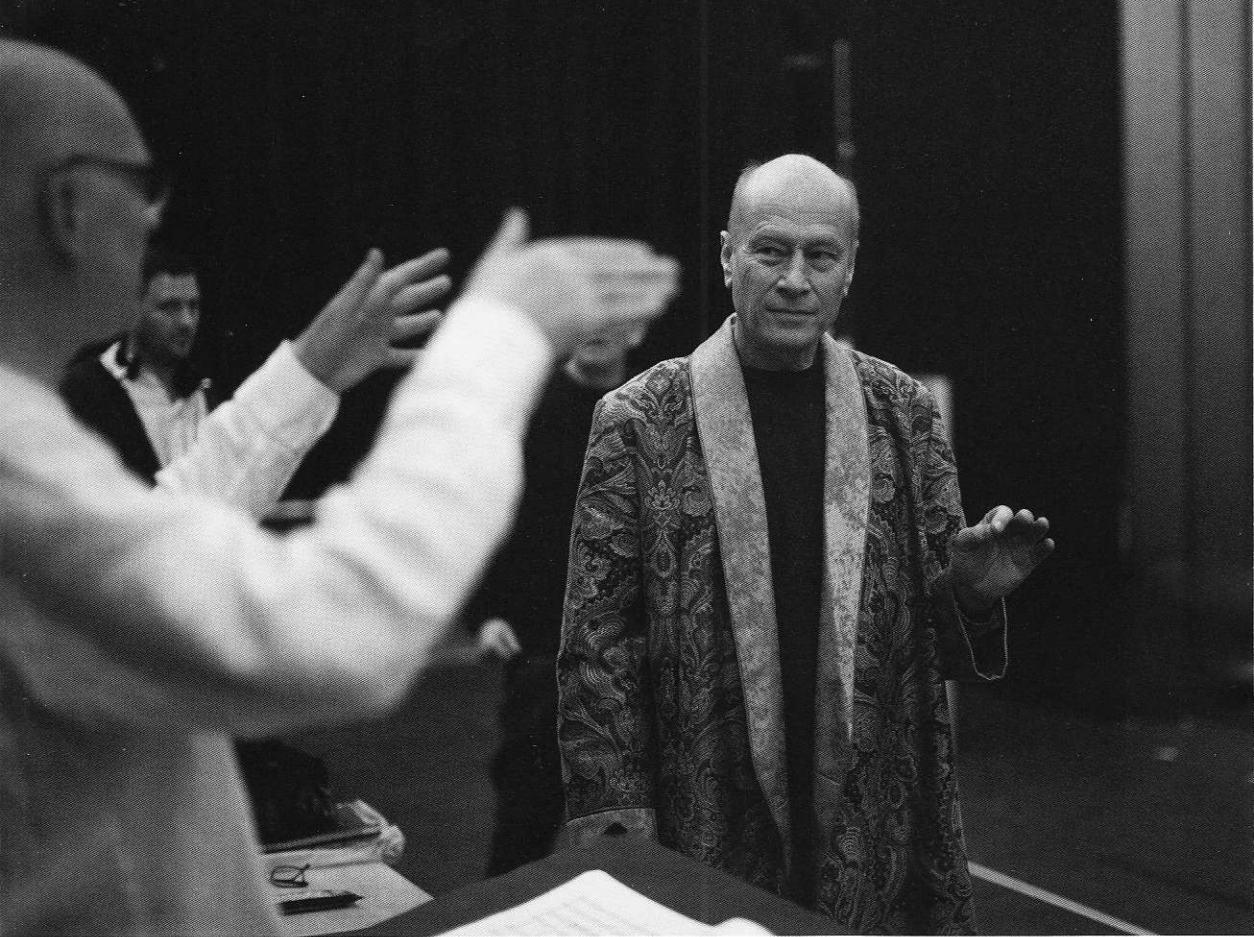
'I read the story as a child, and then returned to it as a grown-up,' Welsh continues, 'and I was even invited to record it for the Association of Scottish Literature. Stuart and I had been talking about opera ideas. *The Bottle Imp* felt like the right shape and size for an opera, so I sent it to him.'

'With any idea you want to make something from, it starts with a fascination – and this is a fascinating story,' says MacRae. 'It really appealed to both of us from the point of view of relationships, characters, intrigue and plot – all the things that make opera work.'

## From friends to collaborators

It's far from the first time that Welsh and MacRae have collaborated on opera, of course. They're both hugely accomplished figures in their own rights – Louise Welsh a highly successful novelist acclaimed for her thrillers often dealing with the darker side of human existence; Stuart MacRae a respected composer who has had works premiered at the BBC Proms and Edinburgh International Festival. *The Devil Inside* is their third opera together for Scottish Opera.

'We actually knew each other before we worked on our first opera,' explains Welsh. 'I think that helped with our collaborative relationship. Even before we started talking we knew we would be on the same page about a lot of things.' That first opera was the short, sharp shocker *Remembrance Day*, part of Scottish Opera's *Five:15 Operas Made in Scotland* series of new works in 2009, where the power of music to



evoked old memories has horrifying consequences for an elderly couple. They followed it with the dark psychological drama of *Ghost Patrol* in 2012, in which two ex-soldiers grapple with a secret from the past, which won a South Bank Sky Arts Award for Opera.

'As we've gone along,' continues MacRae, 'the pieces have got bigger. *Remembrance Day* was 15 minutes, *Ghost Patrol* was just under an hour, and *The Devil Inside* is about an hour and a half. It's become a more complex process, with more contact required.'

'There was a lot of sitting and a lot of talking with *The Devil Inside*,' continues Welsh. 'We often met for several hours, sometimes a full day.' Text and music evolved together, and both collaborators had input into each other's work. 'We both have to put our ideas out there without fear that the other person will reject them,' explains MacRae.

### **Bringing Stevenson's original up to date**

What Welsh and MacRae have created is very much a 21st-century rethink of Stevenson's 19th-century original, taking the short story's underlying themes and plot details and shaking them up in a way that makes them immediately relevant to a contemporary audience. Published in 1891, *The Bottle Imp* is set in Hawaii (where Stevenson had spent five months of 1889), and follows the fortunes of the impoverished

Above: Steven Page in rehearsal.



native Keawe, who purchases the bottle, sells it after making himself rich, then is forced to track it down again after a horrific illness threatens to destroy his marriage to the beautiful Kokua.

Welsh and MacRae have uprooted Stevenson's story from its exotic Hawaiian backdrop and placed it firmly in a 21st-century Western world of property development, with the experiences and emotions of the central figure, Keawe, shared out so that the three main characters in the opera – Richard, James and Catherine – are more equal. And this updating of the story to our own times, according to Welsh and MacRae, is in line with Stevenson's original intentions. 'He was one of the very first writers of horror or fantasy to set his novels in the contemporary world,' Welsh explains. 'Now, we see Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, for instance, in their top hats and cloaks and think of them as historical figures, but of course those were the fashions of Stevenson's times, and it was mind-blowing for readers then to read a gothic story happening right in their own time. We wanted to achieve the same thing.'

Their initial work was on establishing what the work was actually about – or at least what their version would be about. 'It's vital that both Louise and I feel equally invested in it at that stage, that it's our story, rather than something that one of us has handed to the other,' explains MacRae.

Above: Ben McAteer in rehearsal.

### **Exploring unsettling themes**

The opera's underlying themes – already there in Stevenson's tale, certainly, but brought vividly to the fore in Welsh and MacRae's adaptation – deal unavoidably with the darker sides of human experience. Such as addiction. Both James and Richard are drawn to the bottle – for different reasons – and even Catherine finds herself seduced by its power. 'We discussed the need that characters have for the bottle,' explains Welsh, 'and the way in which it means different things to different people – in the same way that some of us can have a few glasses of wine and wake up the next day without a compulsion to drink again, while for other people the reality is very different.'

'One person's relationship with the bottle may be like an addiction,' continues MacRae, 'but with another it may stimulate their greed, or some other kind of desire. Temptation is another thing we're getting at. The bottle plays on what the characters themselves desire, and manipulates them into doing or saying things that are not good for them.' Whether good can truly come from evil is another recurrent question in the opera.

And to balance the darkness of these questions, Welsh and MacRae also focus more strongly on one brighter theme in Stevenson's original: the redemptive power of love. It's love, for example, that leads James to hide the bottle's curse from his wife Catherine, and love that prompts her search for it to save his soul. And it's love – or maybe sheer cruelty – that drives the enigmatic final wish at the very end of the opera. 'The self-sacrifice element of redemption,' explains MacRae, 'is definitely there in the original, but we chose to focus on it rather more, and to weave it more closely into the story.'

### **Moral slipperiness**

Both Stevenson's story and Welsh and MacRae's opera deal in such moral, indeed specifically Christian, concepts as an immortal soul, Hell and damnation. 'Yes, it's a moral tale,' agrees MacRae, 'but that doesn't mean it has to have the same meaning to everyone who sees it. I'm wary of anything that answers too many questions, but I'm really keen on events and situations being interpreted by the audience, by each individual who sees the opera.'

And that sense of moral slipperiness, in Welsh's view, is something that ties the opera right back to the 19th century. 'Stevenson was very aware that the bottle affects different characters in different ways. He knew that your environment, your childhood, your upbringing, all those things can have an impact on who you are later in life. The generation prior to Stevenson would have said that giving in to the bottle was a moral flaw, but Stevenson knew it's something more complex.'

'I think all the characters are morally compromised by the end,' adds MacRae. 'But then, which of us is not?'

Presenting those themes in an opera libretto proved an entirely different challenge for Welsh from the perhaps more familiar process of writing a novel. Her text for *The Devil Inside* is succinct, clear and direct – or, in MacRae's words, 'It's poetic, but poetic in a concise and precise manner.'

'The language in *The Devil Inside* is deliberately simple,' explains Welsh. 'If audience members are looking at the words and thinking, "Gosh, what a beautiful turn of phrase!", then the job has not been done. You also have to think about what it's possible for singers to sing – there are some words that are far easier to sing than others.'

### **An enigmatic new ending**

One big change that Welsh and MacRae decided to make was to the ending of Stevenson's original story, in which a drunken boatswain, convinced he's on his way to Hell anyway, is strangely content to buy the bottle from the desperate Keawe for a miniscule sum of money, fully realising he'll never be able to sell it on himself. 'We found the ending of Stevenson's story a bit flippant,' explains MacRae, 'and I always felt that he let his characters off scot-free, regardless of any deceit or selfishness they may have been involved in.' It's almost as if it's an admission on Stevenson's part – to answer Welsh's opening question – that the only way out of the moral conundrum he's posed is by miraculous intervention. 'We wanted something a bit more sophisticated, even if that means that different people will come out thinking different things about the opera's ending.'

Welsh and MacRae's new ending – with its morally ambiguous final wish – casts a wholly different light on the value of friendship, the blindness of addiction and, indeed, whether the Imp's curse will ever die. 'Some of my best experiences in the theatre,' continues Welsh, 'have been when you go with friends, and you come out arguing about the rights and wrongs of what happened. I like that idea of people leaving the theatre and still partly being inside the world of the opera, thinking about it and discussing it.' And with *The Devil Inside*'s unsettling yet seductive mix of profound moral questions and fairy-tale fantasy, there's little doubt that will happen.

## **WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR**

### **Intense instrumentation**

Rather than a full pit orchestra, MacRae's score uses an ensemble of just 14 players – partly a practical consideration, since the work is designed to tour to smaller venues, but also because of the opportunities a smaller

ensemble offers. Since each of the score's parts is played by a single musician, there's an intensity to the instrumental writing that matches the opera's nery storyline, and MacRae's scoring ranges from almost orchestral-sounding richness to spare use of solo instruments – most notably in Catherine's aria in Scene 4.

### **Fluid form**

The traditional operatic forms of arias, duets, ensembles and more are all there in *The Devil Inside*, but instead of being clearly separated off from each other, they flow fluidly together in a supple, ever-evolving form that's responsive to the opera's swiftly moving storyline. The score's seven scenes, each with a distinct musical identity, are separated by interludes that often represent a journey or the passage of time.

### **Expressive vocal lines**

*The Devil Inside's* vocal lines are often syllabic, following the natural rhythms of speech, and integrated closely into the instrumental fabric, with short melodic motifs passed back and forth between voices and instruments. MacRae uses more heavily decorated, melismatic vocal writing at times for expressive effect – most notably in Catherine's

*Below:* Rachel Kelly  
in rehearsal.





emotional aria in Scene 4. James and Richard's vocal lines reflect their increasingly distant relationship, intertwining to represent their close friendship in Scene 1, but growing more differentiated as the opera progresses.

### **Voice of the Imp**

The Bottle Imp is very much a character in *The Devil Inside*, but it never sings. Instead, its voice is embedded within MacRae's instrumental music, symbolised by subtle changes to the pace or sound, most notably through the use of high-pitched instruments – sometimes the harp or percussion (glockenspiel, vibraphone or triangle, for instance), sometimes violins or woodwind. It makes its most startling appearance towards the end of Scene 2, when James and Richard demand that it reveals itself, in a remarkably imaginative, unforgettable orchestration.

Above: Nicholas Sharratt and Ben McAteer in rehearsal.

### **Melodic motifs**

MacRae is keen that we don't think of them as Wagnerian leitmotifs, but his score is welded together with recurring snatches of melody, melodic ideas that come back again and again in altered forms to symbolise particular characters and ideas. Catherine has her own sighing, falling motif – first heard when she utters her name at her first appearance – and Richard has a heroic-sounding melodic shape that revolves around the notes of a major chord, heard several times towards the end of Scene 1 when he sings of the riches the bottle will bring him. Most noticeable, however, is a simple, three-note falling motif, which crops up throughout the opera. This comes from Richard's words 'Less each time' in Scene 1, and it's almost MacRae's subliminal way of reminding the listener of the curse of the bottle's ever-descending price. Significantly, the direction of the motif is reversed as a hopeful, rising three-note figure when James and Catherine sing about starting a family in Scene 3.

### **Tonality and atonality**

Despite its often striking dissonance, MacRae's score actually drifts between tonality and atonality, and he makes some sudden shifts into radiant, added-note tonality for clear dramatic points. Towards the end of Scene 1, for example, Richard imagines the riches that the bottle will bring him to a rippling, rushing tonal backdrop; in Scene 2, James's description of watching an elderly couple care for each other has softer-edged harmonies than elsewhere; and there are eager, rich tonal harmonies in Scene 4 when James believes that Catherine is pregnant – cut brutally short by the harsh dissonance of Catherine's real news.

### **Microtones**

MacRae uses them sparingly, but microtones – musical intervals that fall between the cracks in a piano keyboard, sounding alien and out of tune – tweak the ear at several key moments, symbolising something that's disordered or tainted. Listen out for them just after the Imp's appearance in Scene 2, and also in Catherine's aria in Scene 4.

**David Kettle** is a music critic for *The Scotsman* and *The Telegraph*, and has written about music for a broad range of publications including *Classical Music*, *The Strad*, *The Times* and *BBC Music Magazine*.