



Hell's Fury is musical theatre that leaves a deep dent in the heart

By [John Terauds](#) Special to the Star
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Hell's Fury, The Hollywood Songbook

Music by Hanns Eisler. Directed by Tim Albery. A Soundstreams and Luminato co-production. Until June 23 at Harbourfront Centre Theatre, 231 Queens Quay W. luminatofestival.com or 416-368-4849

Hell's Fury, The Hollywood Songbook is messy and focused, mesmerizing and repulsive, human and inhuman, tonal and atonal. It is about hope and creativity in the face of fear and thuggery.

It is about the full expression of human potential, condensed in 75 minutes of song stitched together with short snippets of live dialogue, recorded audio and video projections. The two live performers, Canadian baritone Russell Braun and pianist Serouj Kradjian, are as good as they could possibly be. **And the production design is nothing short of brilliant.**

In short, *Hell's Fury* is a remarkable piece of musical theatre, a show that will leave a deep dent in the heart, gut and memory long after the applause has died down.

This is one of those magical moments in theatre where every single element comes together so that one emerges from the venue deeply changed.

In his introduction to the show, Soundstreams artistic director Lawrence Cherney explained how the idea for the piece came from Toronto-based veteran opera

director Tim Albery 10 years ago. Clearly none of the ensuing decade of thought and development was wasted.

On the surface, *Hell's Fury — Hölle Wut* in German, extracted from Hollywood — is about the life of Leipzig-born composer Hanns Eisler, whose fate was to be born into a reasonably musical Jewish family in 1898.

By virtue of that birthdate, he fought in the First World War, was wounded, studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna, became a Communist, had many fruitful collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, fled his homeland when the Nazis came to power in Germany, found refuge in Hollywood where he wrote film music, was chased out of the United States for his political views, immigrated to East Germany, wrote the Communist state's national anthem, fell afoul of Stalinists and died of a heart attack in 1962.

The music we hear in the show is all Eisler's. Some of it is harsh and acerbic. Some of it is sublime, especially the songs written in German. Most of it is taken from Eisler's *Hollywood Songbook*, a sort of musical diary that takes us deep into his musings on his ever-displaced life.

Braun and Kradjian are two sides of Eisler together onstage. One struts and frets the story in words and song. The other is his mirror at the keyboard.

Both Braun, in tremendous voice and with powerful acting, and Kradjian, playing with power as well as deep sensitivity, are captivating.

Star Canadian opera designer Michael Levine has set the action in a white-box sound studio that becomes the brilliantly simple yet strikingly versatile medium of this deep message about a valiant life buffeted by human shenanigans.

No detail in this production fails to illuminate the story, especially Cameron Davis's projections and Thomas C. Hase's lighting. It is rare for theatrical visuals to contribute as effectively to the story as the characters onstage as is the case here.

As we see in today's news about refugees and thuggish politicians around the world, once the generations that witnessed huge tragedies have died off, history has an unfortunate way of repeating itself.

Theatre like *Hell's Fury* is more necessary than ever to keep those history lessons alive — not as abstract themes, but as intimate and deeply moving portraits of how they affect each human soul.

It is wonderful news that this production has already been booked for future runs in California and England. And it's a must-see for anyone in Toronto.

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