

Hologram singers, Avatar-style 3D effects and techno music: How English National Opera took a bold step into the future

The new 'film opera' blends live singing and a 26-piece orchestra with a recorded electronic soundtrack, and both 2D and 3D film – all in 110 minutes with no interval

On stage, performers have to interact with the 3D screen action. This is Sunken Garden, the world's first 3D film opera

The lush vivid green rainforest seems to burst out at you from the giant 20ft-high 3D screen at the back of the stage.

Leaves fluttering on branches look so close you feel you could reach out and touch them.

Standing motionless among the trees and bushes are two life-sized holograms, of a man and a woman, staring blankly out. In front of the screen three singers are performing on a bare stage.

Then suddenly, and eerily, the holograms come to life and start to interact and sing with the live performers.

This is Sunken Garden, the world's first 3D film opera. It's being rehearsed in a cavernous film studio, just a javelin's throw from London's Olympic Park.

Watching intently in the darkness, with copies of the score and the libretto spread out on a desk in front of them, are Dutch composer, director and film-maker Michel van der Aa and celebrated author David Mitchell, whose labyrinthine novel Cloud Atlas, with its six different storylines spanning centuries, was recently transformed into an equally epic \$100 million Hollywood film starring Tom Hanks, Halle Berry and Hugh Grant.

The state-of-the-art set

The pair of them are wearing black wraparound 3D glasses to enjoy the full effect – 'I feel like Agent Smith from The Matrix,' whispers Mitchell.

The new 'film opera' blends live singing and a 26-piece orchestra with a recorded electronic soundtrack, and both 2D and 3D film – all in 110 minutes with no interval.

There's a cast of nine but only two women and a man physically appear – the others are holograms or talking heads on film. Verdi or Wagner this is not.

'My generation and younger composers grew up in an image culture, with

MTV. It's part of our DNA,' says van der Aa.

'We deal not only with music any more but also with the visuals and what it looks like on stage.'

The story of *Sunken Garden*, written by Mitchell, follows Toby Kramer, a wannabe film-maker who is struggling to get funding for his latest project, an art-house documentary about people who have gone missing.

Eventually he tracks down two of them to the garden, a 3D other world where he hears how they have tried to escape from traumatic events in their lives.

'The garden is an artificially created bubble between life and death which the lost and lonely can be seduced into, where the source of their pain never happened,' says Mitchell.

THE COMPOSER: Michel van der Aa. 'My generation and younger composers grew up in an image culture, with MTV. It's part of our DNA,' he said

But this beautiful, alluring paradise (filmed at the Eden Project in Cornwall) is deceptive.

'It is an anti-Eden. Their souls and memories fuel it, and fuel immortality for its creator. This is the story of a soul-stealer, a vampire of souls ... but without the vampirey stuff.'

Mitchell, who lived and worked in Japan for eight years, is fascinated by the transmigration of souls and what he calls 'incorporeal reality'.

But although he has a practising interest in Buddhism, this is not a religious matter for him.

'It is the fictional possibilities that come from reincarnation that I find irresistible,' he says.

Then, as if he fears sounding too intense or pompous, he pricks the bubble.

'I'm steeped in popular culture, too, including *Star Trek* – sorry, but millions of us are. Also, in a way, the sunken garden is like the Black Lodge from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*.'

Alongside the fantasy elements – the vertical pond into another realm between life and death and the idea that the soul can leave the body – Mitchell has created moving backstories for the missing people. They are what he calls 'the messy business of life'.