



MATTHEW Lutton may be the country's most passionate and ambitious stage director. A self-described "obsessive theatre-maker", he says he values "art and the need for it".

"I hope I'd be described as someone who always listens but, in the end, always decides that the best thing to do is what I want to do because no one else is going to," he adds, barely drawing breath. "If people stop supporting me in every way, then I'll..." Lutton pauses and grins. "Maybe I won't stop even then."

Conversing with Lutton is a real pleasure. The 24-year-old is fired up and confident about his ideas, but accepts that he still has a lot to learn.

It's unlikely anyone will stop supporting him. Over seven hectic years, starting in high school, he's worked hard to be taken seriously as a theatre director. It's paid off; his version of Sophocles's *Antigone* opens this week as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.

He's directing actor Kate Mulvany as Antigone, daughter of the deceased king of Thebes, who buries her traitor brother against the express wish of acting ruler Creon. Obedience to state must cede to what is morally right, she argues, yet Creon remains unbending.

That it all ends in tears — and mass suicide — appeals, one suspects, to Lutton's love of dark endings. Gory suffering characterised *The Lady Aoi*, the Yukio Mishima play that he directed last year (also for the PIAF). Bloody, limbless agony predominates in *Red Shoes*, his most recent play, based loosely on Hans Christian Andersen's children's story.

"Mum often says to me, 'Why so dark? Your work is always so dark,'" says Lutton. "But she knows that I'm attracted to material that makes me dream." And sketch, and rewrite, and wrestle with until the material is his own, he might add.

"I say to my collaborators that I like to make the first offer. I make a proposition for the design, the lights, how the sound will be used in the piece, because I have so much in my head. I'll tell them everything I'm thinking first, and then we all filter through it."

In keeping with this way of working, Lutton's *Antigone* will carry the mark of his vision in a distinct way. "We've put in a new song cycle by [Perth singer] Rachael Dease, who is on stage with a four-piece band. We've pulled the text

THE FACE

VICTORIA LAURIE
meets

MATTHEW LUTTON
THEATRE DIRECTOR

out of the back end of the play and we've changed the Greek tradition of action happening offstage and being reported. We actually witness it," he says.

The youthful, ambitious director's intense passion for making theatre earned him a Young West Australian of the Year for Arts award in 2005; last April he became the youngest person to be invited on to the Australia Council's theatre board.

Lutton has earned his breaks, knocking on doors even during his three-year course in acting, performing and writing at the Western

Lutton without a hint of nervousness. "Andrew [Upton] then does Cain and Abel, and Tom [Wright] will do Noah's Ark."

STC's confidence in Lutton's talents extends to anointing his production house, ThinIce, as STC's first associate company. He set ThinIce up when he was 17; today, he runs the Perth-based company with general manager Natalie Jenkins. When the Australia Council theatre board recently awarded ThinIce a \$160,000 grant for three years, Lutton appropriately absented himself.

"It's a contemporary theatre company structured a bit like Gideon Obarzanek's Chunky Move [in that] it's a vehicle for me to create work," explains Lutton. "It allows me to commission writers and workshop material and present the work I want to do."

That might make Lutton sound like a pompous young git, which he isn't. Or extremely ambitious, which he is. Some of his improvised shows, such as *The Gathering*, were inspired by the "messy and organic, non-narrative theatre" of Sheffield-based British

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Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Black Swan Theatre Company's Tom Gutteridge hired him to run its emerging artists' BSX theatre program.

Two years ago, he worked on a Moliere production alongside director Jean-Pierre Mignon. In late 2007, he assisted Neil Armfield on Company B's production of Michael Gow's *Toy Symphony*. Then, a year ago he stepped in to direct a production of *Tartuffe* at Melbourne's Malthouse after director Michael Kantor became ill.

The breaks are now coming thick and fast. Lutton has been invited by Sydney Theatre Company's artistic directors Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton to direct *The Duel*, adapted by Tom Wright from a chapter in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

They have also asked him to direct Part One of the medieval plays *The Mysteries: Genesis* later this year. "I'm doing the Fall of Lucifer, The Creation of the World, the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve up to the Expulsion," says

director Tim Etchells and his experimental group Forced Entertainment.

"It's based on creating something for hours and hours and not knowing what you're making for months," enthuses Lutton. "Being in chaos and waiting for moments to connect, and stringing it together at the last possible moment for an audience."

Some of Lutton's work has telltale signs of over-exuberance, hardly surprising in one so young. *Red Shoes* explored Andersen's homoerotic sexuality by superimposing that story on his fairytale about the little girl whose feet would not stop dancing until they were cut off.

The production ended in a mire of bloody gore, masturbation and severed limbs on a once beautifully white stage. "Matthew should occasionally take his hand off it," one critic muttered darkly to another on the way out.

Lutton doesn't remotely take offence when I recount the story. Instead, we compare notes on whether we go to the theatre to see a play or rather to savour a strong directorial vision.



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“If there’s two versions of *Women of Troy* showing in a city, I go to see Barrie Kosky’s version because I want to see what he does,” he says. “Otherwise I can go home and read the play: I go to hear his voice.”

He compares the experience to having dinner with a play’s director; having an obnoxious dinner host is better than none at all, he says.

“I have to trust that, if I share my view on something, some people will hate it and see me as an ego-driven young brat, others might like it and find it connects to their imaginations.

“It’s not that I know better, or that I know how to ‘fix’ *Antigone*,” he says. “It’s because when I come in contact with the material, it inspires me so much, it sends my mind into rapid thoughts, to music, movement, light. And I want to share my imagination.”

He still shares the family home in Doubleview, Perth with his architect father and his psychiatrist mother (Lutton proudly notes that she has a doctorate in ancient history). On the lawn verge are parked tow trucks owned by the fourth occupant of the house, his entrepreneurial younger brother.

“My grandmother was a Theosophist, so our

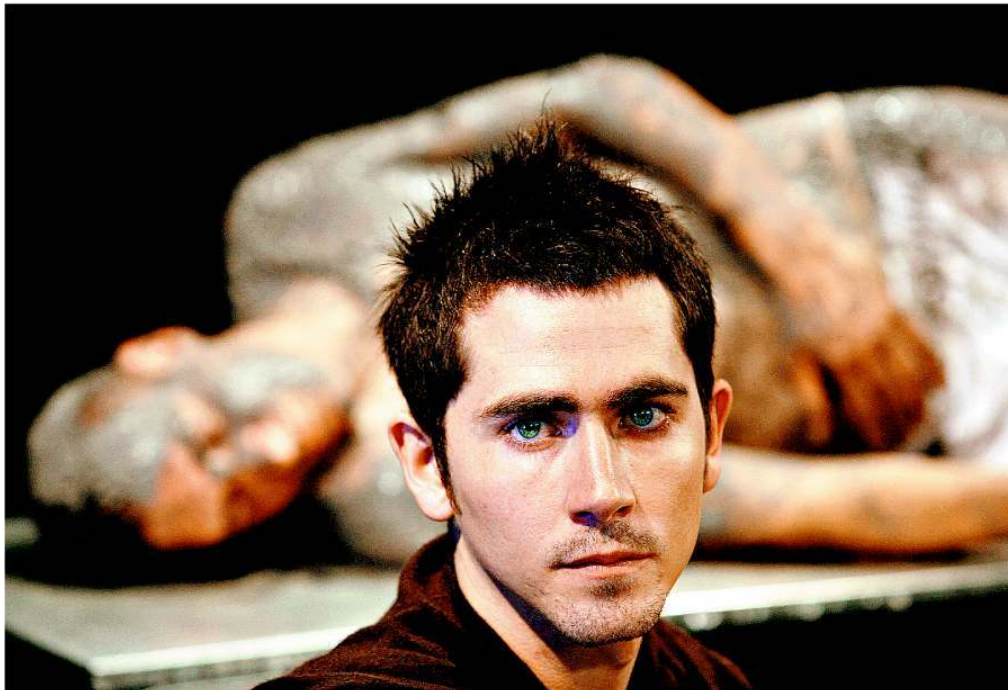
library at home — my favourite room — has an extraordinary mixture of books in it,” Lutton says. His own shelves are loaded with play texts, photography books and music scores. In his room is a piano, the legacy of high school days spent playing several instruments, when he wasn’t directing and acting in plays.

“Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* and Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* were two pieces of music that I’d put in almost every show I did as a teenager,” Lutton recalls, grinning. “I’d have the Stravinsky playing in every big scene, completely drowning out everything on stage, but I thought it was wonderful because the actors couldn’t give me enough.”

That exuberance has been tamed, but his self-assurance endures.

“It comes from an unpreventable thirst,” Lutton says, half-apologetically. “It sounds a bit wanky, but there’s sometimes not a question of whether I want to do it. I don’t really think about much else.”

Antigone, adapted by Eamon Flack and directed by Matthew Lutton, Subiaco Arts Centre, Perth, Wednesday to March 7.



Picture: Colin Murty