

The Tales of Hoffmann is fantasy stuff

By Jessica Duchen

Friday 10 February 2012

The German author E T A Hoffmann's imagination underpins some of the world's most popular and enduring operas, ballets, and even piano music. Yet few of the adaptations bear much resemblance to his originals. Indeed, the writer's absence from his own legacy is so striking that Richard Jones, the director of English National Opera's new production of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, has apparently recommended to his lead tenor, Barry Banks, that he need not read the tales by Hoffmann on which the opera is based.

That could seem surprising – after all, the hero of Jacques Offenbach's opera is loosely modelled on the real Hoffmann. But perhaps it is a practical matter: so vivid and terrifying are these seminal works of German Romanticism that our star singer would risk having nightmares for weeks.

The opera – a co-production with the Bavarian State Opera, Munich – features Hoffmann as a dissolute, drunken poet looking back over his thwarted love affairs and finally finding redemption in his art alone.

Hoffmann's actual writing is so disturbing that the operatic version, despite its gripping narrative and unforgettable music, can barely scratch the surface.

Likewise, Hoffmann's *Nutcracker* and *Mouse King*, on which the famous ballet *The Nutcracker* is based, also has its most potent and horrific elements stripped away. Hoffmann dreamed up a seven-headed mouse king that sets gruesome traps for its own offspring. Not so great for family viewing, perhaps.

'The Tales of Hoffmann', English National Opera, London WC2, tonight until 10 March (www.eno.org)