

And Abraham said: give me chariots of fire

Ben Hoyle meets the man bringing Ben Hur, gladiators and 20 lorry-loads of sand to the O₂ arena

The Munich-born film director Werner Herzog once said "There is a different sort of human being in Bavaria," and he should know. He has eaten a shoe on camera for a bet, hauled a 320-tonne paddle steamer over a mountain in the Peruvian jungle and threatened his favourite actor with a loaded gun. But for him "the most imaginative Bavarian of all" was "Mad" King Ludwig II, the 19th-century monarch whose fairytale castle Neuschwanstein has become the most famous tourist image of Germany.

Herzog, however, has never met Franz Abraham. And next Thursday Abraham, an eccentric visionary to rank with the best of them, faces the defining moment of his career in London, with the world premiere of *Ben Hur Live*. Drenched in love, revenge and Jesus, there is nothing subtle about the story of the 1st-century Jewish prince who becomes a galley slave and then a champion charioteer, two activities supremely unsuited to stage re-enactment. Ben Hur has already provided the definitive Hollywood epic: the 1959 film with Charlton Heston scooped 11 Oscars and saved MGM

from bankruptcy. Originally it was a book by a US Civil War general named Lew Wallace that outsold every American novel before *Gone With the Wind*.

Abraham, 45, insists that the O₂ arena is about to witness the birth of another gargantuan success story. *Ben Hur Live* will become a "phenomenon" that will last for 50 years, he says — but he knows that success hinges on the reception to the world premiere. On Wednesday a rabbi, an Anglican priest, a Russian Orthodox priest and a Catholic priest will consecrate the arena at Abraham's request. He needs all the help he can get.

His *Ben Hur*, which he refers to in passing as "opera for God", is billed as a sword-and-sandals spectacular with music, gladiators, circus tricks, a pitched sea battle, the Crucifixion, an orgy scene and the most gripping chariot race since the fall of Rome. Abraham is the production's creator, chief tubthumper and banker: probably the only man who can understand the precarious web of credit and loan deals that he hopes will cover the €22 million (£19 million) cost of the tour until Christmas. Just to keep his vast army of actors, dancers, tumblers, stuntmen and technicians in the field cost thousands a day. The animal cast includes 46 horses, two eagles and 120 doves (including 20 understudy doves) and the sand for the arena floor alone requires 20 lorries to transport it.

Philip William McKinley, the director, volunteers that "most producers would never begin to try this". The stakes are enormous — there is no big investor and Abraham has personally taken on millions in debt. But if he can pull it off, *Ben Hur Live* might just redraw the boundaries of live

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entertainment. "Franz is a mad genius attempting the equivalent of climbing Everest naked," his English choreographer Liam Steel says. The man himself says he is "not normal, in a very positive way". Everyone else reaches for a stronger description more or less immediately.

I find Abraham in the bowels of the Königs-Pilsener Arena in Oberhausen, a bland industrial town near Düsseldorf where final rehearsals began this month. He cuts a distinctive figure: powerfully built with fearsome eyebrows, curly hair and a theatrical strut. He speaks wonderfully vivid English with a rich vocabulary and a brazen disregard for grammar. Indiscretions tumble out: he respects Andrew Lloyd Webber but finds his musicals "aesthetically unacceptable"; he admits, with a pantomime frown, to e-mailing the O₂ within ten minutes of learning of Michael Jackson's death to ask for some of the singer's January dates (he got them).

He is a man of courtly, old-fashioned good manners: generous, charming, prone to overexcitement, curious, funny and almost excessively polite, loved by his crew and colleagues for his eccentricity and his leadership. Most of the time Abraham is fabulous company. But "once or twice a day", a senior staffer says, "Franz flips."

“The animal cast includes 46 horses and 120 doves (including 20 understudies)”

When he does you can see the anger boiling up from his toes. He clenches his fists, screws up his face and sinks to the floor like Basil Fawlty, emitting a low, furious roar. He bans individuals from speaking to him for months at a time. Not long ago, he says, he ran into a room where one of his IT staff was sitting. "I shouted at 120 decibels and then pushed a bookcase on top of him." Fortunately he calms down quickly too.

The whole project carries a whiff of craziness. Wallace's novel *Ben Hur* — *A Tale of the Christ* is 129 years old. The Charlton Heston film was made 50 years ago. As the show's former head of marketing told me shortly before he lost his job, *Ben Hur* is "not exactly top of mind". Starry names linked with Abraham's show — Umberto Eco, Martin Scorsese, Robert Redford and Daniel Radcliffe — never materialised. The dialogue is in Latin and Aramaic and the production logistics are terrifying.

Backstage I find Abraham's wife, Grun-del. She describes herself as his "aesthetic eye". Their three daughters, aged 11, 13 and 17, are here too, helping out with props and cleaning jobs after their daily private lessons in tennis, mythology, English, maths, the Koran, the Talmud and the piano. Grun-del covers her head in a gesture of despair when I ask how she felt



about *Ben Hur Live* at first. "I have no choice," she sighs and then grins. "But I have not a boring life. ... no risk, no fun!"

Four months earlier I had visited their villa in Mörlbach, a village near Munich with "130 people, 53 children and 27 dogs", according to Abraham. They bought their home eight years ago "with a kind of Ben

Indoor chariot races, the brainchild of the German impresario Franz Abraham, above

Hur attitude and a lot of credit". It has 30 rooms, turrets and its own lake. In one corridor we passed a poster for a David Hasselhof concert. "Normally this is in the toilet," Abraham says, looking pained. "He's not a proper artist."

His office was covered in charts and checklists with headings such as *Target Groups* and *How to Meet Them*, with thoughts on how to reach grandparents, bird lovers and Jews. We talked a bit about the orgy scene. Apparently the dancers were being cast "not primarily according to their dancing abilities but for looking like they have a nice body".

Growing up, Abraham was a bright middle-class child, "far more than one or two-dimensional", but lacking charisma. "In puberty I had complexes and problems," he explained. "I had a girlfriend very late." *Ben Hur* was the first film he saw in the cinema. The following year, 1977, his father, a successful car dealer and part-time racing driver, was killed in a crash. Abraham, who was at the track and says it was sabotage, became obsessed with motorsport, but a bad accident on the autobahn at 22 ruined his prospects of a career in Formula One.

Changing tack, he flung himself into staging shows by big international stars such as David Bowie, Plácido Domingo

and the Rolling Stones. Later he put on his own events, cornering the market in absurd-sounding arena spectaculars such as *Aida* — *Monumental Opera on Fire* and *Dracula* — *The Musical*. His production of *Carmina Burana*, complete with "erotic scenes with naked girls imitating an orgy" he says, has played to more than a million paying customers around the world.

But nothing matched the buzz of motor racing, until now. "Psychologically everything that's come after that is a search for a replacement," Abraham says. "I think my dedication to *Ben Hur* is really about my passion for racing." Looking ahead he dreams of an arena version of *Spartacus*, his favourite film, a Christ show and "something with North American Indians" in a giant tepee.

So far everything seems to be on track. In the Oberhausen arena a fearless Czech plunges over the front of his chariot and is dragged halfway round the arena at full gallop on his stomach, steering his horses all the time. A mobile sweatshop has sprung up in the bar area with dozens of women bent over sewing machines trying to rescue the costumes sent from America (Abraham had pronounced them "shit"). Next to them a group of stunt men are holding a meeting in four languages and beyond that a series of trestle tables groans under the weight of various cuts of sausage, salads, stews and pickled vegetables. Ticket sales are healthy (160,000 and counting) although Abraham is still "disappointed".

Cash flow is a serious worry. "We are short of €1.5 million," he says. "At the moment it's not even sure if we reach London." The following day he has to find €95,000 to pay three hotels, a catering bill and the Russian cast, who are threatening to strike. (When I call him a few days later, he says he found €60,000 overnight, had €10,000 confirmed on the tennis court the following morning, and managed to "postpone" the rest.)

He blames the credit crunch and the inexcusable cowardice of Germany's wealthy young things, "these boring, full of fear, uncreative, fantasy-less, rich heirs of fortunes of their parents who were not prepared to give me one shit penny". Every day is an incessant round of raising money over the phone, bartering favours and securing credit.

Rather worryingly, he says he has "invented constructions of financing which have never been before". He has survived previous brushes with disaster. Twice in the 1990s he was nearly ruined and for three years in the early 2000s "there were crises on all sides and I had not a single happy moment". At his lowest ebb he was rescued by a "miracle" that renewed his Catholic faith, something to do with a large amount of money appearing in his bank account just when he needed it most. The details will be in his book, planned since 1996 and expected "in 2017".

Ben Hur Live in 2009 will be a very different prospect from the idea he first had in 1993. "I did not say then that I want to make opera for God", he murmurs. Is that how he sees it now — as a missionary project? "Yes, I think so." But is the world ready for *Ben Hur Live*? "Ninety-five per cent of human beings don't have taste," he explains. "They only orientate themselves to what is cool. I hope we reach a point where this will be a must for the opinion leaders and for the masses. An explosion of ticket sales will start, or not. But the 'not' has a 0.0001 per cent probability, I would say."

Ben Hur Live is at the O₂ arena, SE10 (0844 85060202), Sept 17-20

Louise Cohen's

last minute weekend

Today Gaming Igfest

Funded by Arts Council England, this weekend of "Intelligent Gaming" includes death-defying bouts of Korean Lazer Ball and a comical hunt for Bristol Moose and Elephant, where two teams compete to get their giant inflatable across the city without being spotted. *Pre-register online, all games start from the Ig lounge, next to the Watershed Media Centre, Bristol Harbourside (igfest.org), Fri, Sat & Sun*

Film Portobello Film Festival

Free screenings of more than 700 independent films. Today offers Palestinian films; tomorrow is comedy and family films; Sunday is Spanish day. *Various venues, London W11 (portobellofilmfestival.com; 020-8960 0996), to Sept 20*

Saturday

Proms BBC Proms in the Park

Wrap up warm, pack a picnic and watch the Last Night of the Proms broadcast live at one of five outdoor venues, each with live performances and fireworks. *Buile Hill Park, Salford; Glasgow Green, Glasgow; Hillsborough Castle, County Down; Hyde Park, London; Singleton Park, Swansea (bbc.co.uk/proms), Sat*

Festival The Mayor's Thames Festival

You'll have to fight your way through the crowds on the South Bank, but it's worth it to see the spectacular fireworks display, plus everything from dance workshops to a fire garden outside Tate Modern. *Westminster Bridge to Tower Bridge, South Bank, SE1 (thamesfestival.co.uk), Sat & Sun*

Concert Longplayer Live

The composer of the longest piece of music in the world, Jem Finer, directs a live, 1,000-minute excerpt of her 1,000-hour composition. Don't feel you have to stay for the full 16 hours — tickets are per day, so you can drop in and out. *Roundhouse, Chalk Farm Road, NW1 (roundhouse.org.uk 844 482 8008), Sat 8.20am-1am*

Sunday

Visual Art E17 Art Trail

North East London artists host more than 150 events and exhibitions across Walthamstow, with a route-planner on the website or full guides at the venues. *Various venues around London E17 (e17arttrail.co.uk), to Sept 17*

Festival ArtsFest

Three days of free dance, visual art, classical, jazz and opera across Birmingham, plus KerrangFest on Sunday — a free concert headlined by Athlete. *Venues across Birmingham (artsfest.org; 0121-464 5678), Fri, Sat & Sun*

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