The opera *Violet Fire* highlights the creativity and the loneliness of Nikola Tesla.

Creativity on the wings of a dove

Violet Fire, an opera about the life of physicist Nikola Tesla, fails to spark.

Horace Freeland Judson

A ballerina, all in white, with fine legs, an odd head-dress and a long floating white train, skitters across the stage, bent double, her elbows up behind her back, stroking the air. Ah! She is a pigeon! She represents — what?

Violet Fire — a hyper-modern multimedia opera about the visionary physicist and electrical engineer Nikola Tesla — had its première at the National Theatre of Belgrade in July and opened in New York in October at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It prompts a fundamental question: how, in theatre, cinema or opera, can one possibly express the internal aspects of the creative process? Imagine, for a moment, a movie about the poet John Donne. The script would wallow in his disastrous elopement and marriage, and search his anxious face as he preached at St Paul's ("Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee"). But could it catch him writing a poem? We'd see him sucking the feather of his goose quill and counting out the metre on his knuckles.

In *Violet Fire* (www.violetfireopera.com), the librettist Miriam Seidel, supported by minimalist composer Jon Gibson, pose, but then evade, the problem of the psychic source of scientific and technological innovation. To be sure, minimalist composers often seek out unlikely, difficult operatic subjects — think of Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* or John Adams' *Nixon in China*. Yet Tesla's story is rocky indeed. Born in Croatia in 1856, he died in New York in 1943 — in penury, despite holding more than 700 patents. He

is best known for a series of inventions at the end of the nineteenth century that gave the world alternating current and its chief applications. He patented radio broadcasting years before Marconi. His plans grew ever more ambitious, culminating in a scheme to build a huge tower on Long Island to transmit wireless communication and free, wireless energy worldwide.

But the tower was abandoned when J. P. Morgan withdrew the money. *Violet Fire* begins with a darkened stage, a backdrop with projected schematic representations of the tower, flickering bolts of energy, and Tesla, sung by tenor Scott Murphree, meditating lugubriously. "Perhaps I was a little premature, perhaps too far ahead of time. My tower... sea breeze whistling through the ruins. Perhaps I was a little premature..." — and the long recitative repeats from the start.

Many attempts to convey creativity creatively have been made, and almost always foolishly. The problem is worse in the sciences, because the mental musings, the dialogues in the head, are necessarily more abstract and recondite, as is the finished product. And Tesla worked alone — indeed, at the extreme of loneliness. His inventions sprang from a private, uncanny, intuitive sense of the nature of electrical phenomena coupled with an extraordinary, concentrated visual imagination. In the 1920s, his days of fame long faded, journalists in New York could find him at any time of year sitting on a bench in Central Park, feeding the

pigeons. He had no close collaborators, few friends (although Mark Twain was one), and no intimates. One white dove he considered his companion, with whom he was in communion.

Those pigeons work hard. Seidel and Gibson need them as one of several visual, verbal and musical surrogates for Tesla's creative imagination and for the normal interpersonal sources of operatic tension. Seidel is an American writer who admits she did not study his science and technology; Gibson is a long-time collaborator of Glass.

The second scene finds Tesla on the park bench sprinkling birdseed, while a reporter sings a list of Tesla's chief inventions. "At night and in secret, Nikola Tesla lavishes his love on pigeons." The white pigeon flits through this scene and the rest of the opera, dancing around Tesla at moments of creativity or anguish. Sometimes a small crowd appears to wonder at Tesla's marvels. Minimalist music surely sometimes rises to lyricism; Gibson's is slow, obsessive. Another woman in white, Mirjana Jovanovic, sings the role of the white dove. At the end of the opera she beckons him to an apotheosis atop a scaffolding tower: "Fly into the cloudbank, sink into the dreambank... one hundred million volts... now we are all mourning doves."

The cumulative effect, unfortunately, is a sentimental mystification of the scientific imagination.

Horace Freeland Judson is at 807 West University Parkway, Baltimore, Maryland 21210, USA.