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INSTILLING THE 'LIVING BREATH OF THEATER' INTO AN OPERA SCORE

William Mayer is the composer of the opera "A Death in the Family" and other works

By WILLIAM MAYER

My new opera, "A Death in the Family," based on the Pulitzer Prize novel by James Agee and the dramatic adaptation "All the Way Home" by Tad Mosel, is but one of the estimated 155 American operas that burst forth each year - on score paper, that is. An educated guess would be that two thirds will someday be produced, though few will ever receive full fledged professional performances. Yet why, one wonders, is the long sought after premiere so often a ticket to oblivion. Like Cinderella returning from the ball, its glamorous dress of production is changed back to silent score paper yellowing on a shelf. Unlike the Cinderella story, the Prince of Production is never to be seen again.

These are the bleak facts of life with which most American composers and librettists must contend. To the credit of the National Opera Institute, its executive director, John M. Ludwig, decided to tackle the distressing situation head on.

After extensive discussions with opera composers and directors known for their innovative ideas, he put together an imaginative program that attacked the problem at its roots: the inability of composers and librettists to get sufficient practical experience to develop the craft of writing operas. The program's aim was to emulate the tryout-rewrite process that playwrights go through before subjecting their plays to Judgment Day on Broadway. If successful, it would save opera composers from turning out amateur efforts - an almost inevitable result of their scanty stage experience. And as their operas exhibited greater professionalism, these works would stand a better chance of escaping the burial that so often follows a premiere.

Music Theater Workshop, as the Institute's program came to be called, was to be both a laboratory and a showcase for opera writers. The lab stage had the composer and librettist working closely with a professional opera company, testing old ideas and trying out new ones. The showcase aspect consisted of the company giving partially staged performances of the opera-in-progress before an invited audience. An unique twist involved instant feedback from the audience in a post-performance session with composer and librettist as well as the filling out of probing questionnaires.

Major funding from Exxon Corporation augmented by important smaller grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund and Jerome Foundation turned the scheme into a reality. Houston Grand Opera and the Minnesota Opera - both known for their spirit of adventure - agreed to be active participants.

It was only last year that I had learned of the Music Theater Workshop from a publisher friend, Robert Holton, and I must confess my first reaction was a patronizing one. "How nice," I said, "for young and inexperienced composers."

"If that's what you want to call Carlisle Floyd," Mr. Holton replied. (Mr. Floyd at that time had eleven operas under his belt.) Thus my first impression - that for me the workshop would be like a course in tying one's shoelaces - was dispelled.

A few months later I found myself in Mr. Holton's office again, this time auditioning "A Death in the Family" for M. Wesley Balk, a director and leading proponent of the Music Theater Workshop. "I like your free use of fantasy in adapting the novel," Mr. Balk said. I was pleased that he liked this element of the opera, for it was my most original contribution. We both agreed that a special strength of opera was its ability to make fantasy appear as a natural occurrence. In a straight play the same material might appear overblown or embarrassing.

In the fall I received a message from Wesley: the Minnesota Opera Company had selected "A Death in the Family" for the workshop program. I was delighted, though it wasn't exactly Beverly Sills or Mr. Balk offering a full dress premiere. (As it turned out, I was lucky they hadn't at that point!)

I phoned Mr. Balk. Could I arrange to fly out in November, in January and again in May? He explained that the long interval between January and May would give me time for major rewriting in New York. I would be reimbursed for all expenses. At least I would save everyone money inasmuch as the composer and librettist, in this case, was the same person.

Two months later I entered a giant rehearsal room of the Minnesota Opera and was introduced to its music director, Philip Brunelle, an affable wiry man who is a prodigious musician.

Small talk evaporated before it hardly had begun, and we were at work. Mr. Balk and I flipped pages of the score at a long table. Mr. Brunelle played through the score while I croaked out all the words to be spoken over music. Mr. Balk frowned. "That just won't work on stage," he said, and our first major confrontation had emerged.

Though I had hesitated myself over the long stretches of spoken dialogue, the thought of setting them all was appalling. It always takes longer to sing words than speak them - which means the opera would swell with elephantiasis unless I pared down the text. The tricky part is that the fewer words that remain after the cutting still have to convey the same information to the audience. And the music that once worked so well below the spoken words might be unusable in the new version.

I protested. I explained the rationale behind my having retained so much dialogue. "Having speech grow into song parallels James Agee's technique of having prose well up into poetry."

The reply: "The realism of talking will shatter the audience's emotional acceptance of singing."

I could see Mr. Balk's point. The audience wants to believe and is therefore willing to accept the odd convention of people singing their inner most thoughts to each other. But once opera goers have put common sense behind them and have entered the glorious and slightly unhinged world of opera, beware yanking them away to the prosaic realities of speech; they may never find their way back.

"If you want to go back to speech, you always can," Mr. Balk pointed out. "Setting everything to music will give you a chance to see which way works best. But until you do, you won't have any way of knowing."

This was the process to be followed throughout: 1) discussions following singing (and later staging) of various parts of the opera including entire run-throughs; 2) weighing criticism received: was it valid? If so, could the rendition rather than the material have been the source of trouble?; 3) rewriting, frequently on the spot; 4) testing out the new material, at times against the old; 5) deciding whether the problem was now solved or whether further rewriting was called for.

The co-directors and I were three hunters tracking down that rare beast - a successful opera. Yet I must admit I met each new criticism with dismay (including my own in the new role of observer rather than composer of the opera). A simple suggestion such as "this scene needs more excitement" could easily translate into 10 days of hard and rather galling work at that, for rewriting presents special problems. Once a writer has labeled a work as "officially finished", it tends to assume the finality of a monument, glaring down at any who would dare disturb it. The would-be revisionist has a fourfold task: he must dislodge his former perspective, cajole himself back to an earlier creative frame of mind, produce the new material and make it fit so that all surgical scars are hidden.

Happily I found my rewrites were worth the effort. With surprising frequency they matched the finest moments of the opera. So all through the workshop I found my mood gyrating between resentment at being prodded and profound gratitude that I was.

What added a sense of immediacy and excitement to the project was knowing that "A Death in the Family" was being rehearsed for actual performances at the end of May. The cast members, mostly in their 20's, were ideally suited to the project. In part reflecting the directors' "well-let's-try-it-out" stance, they displayed immediate willingness to sight-sing and then learn the new notes, some of which were less than ten seconds old.

Although sometimes I would compose something new on the spot, my usual routine was to stay on after the evening rehearsal and compose until about 2:30 A.M. I felt a bit like Rumpelstiltskin and would show up bleary eyed the next morning with rewritten pages that singers would start learning immediately.

In time, the opera had undergone major alterations. There was a new surrealist scene in which two people sing to a fantasy figure, each perceiving that figure differently. A sexy scene was cut (but not because of prudishness). Some taped nightmare music had literally been cut with a razor. And not a single spoken word remained.

Excitement mounted as we approached the actual performance. We were particularly honored that James Agee's widow, Mia, was flying in for the premiere. This put special pressure on tenor Dan Dressen, who was cast as Agee recalling his boyhood.

Because of all the last minute changes, the cast felt it essential to keep the score near at hand during the performance. However, many artful uses of it were incorporated; most of the music was memorized, and the overall impression was one of freedom and complete involvement. Morale, good all along, soared after the first night, buoyed by positive audience response and the news that Mrs. Agee not only liked the opera but was staying on for another performance.

On both nights free-wheeling discussions with the audience followed close on the heels of curtain calls and bows. After my bow, I found myself trapped on stage between the co-directors, answering questions from the floor. A number of the comments were perceptive and remarkably specific. Fellow composer Gregory Sandow felt I had let the tension dissipate too quickly after the heroine learns that her husband is dead; a biting chord he liked had inexplicably "lost its teeth." Many felt moved by the lyricism of the opera, but felt that element should be expanded.

I am still too close to the workshop experience to be able to evaluate it with any degree of detachment. Above all, it has brought the living breath of theater to my score. It has given me direct knowledge of stage matters, including lighting, and confidence in my dramatic instincts. "You are highly sophisticated in musical matters, but far less so when it comes to the stage," Mr. Balk commented, and he was right. The workshop has helped correct this imbalance. In particular, it has awakened me to the fact that "operatic time" is not always identical with "musical time."

I have also learned to be more flexible. New answers can be found. And occasionally these answers bring a composer closer than he's ever gotten before to what he's always wanted to say. Conversely, I have been reminded there are times when one must stand firm under fire.

I've benefited from working with extremely sensitive professionals who have helped free my deepest musical and dramatic impulses, at times helping me to see how I had short-circuited them. Other times they helped me channel these impulses so that they could be projected more tellingly on the stage. And I've enjoyed a holiday from the occupational loneliness that composers suffer in the working together on a shared project.

Rewards are, I believe, mutual; members of the opera company came to feel part of the creative process, much as I became part of the performing realm.

Yet with all its benefits, the laboratory could present some dangers if the wrong writers or directors were chosen. An inexperienced composer might start stripping away perfectly good material from his score, unaware that an ineffective passage might sound brilliantly effective

when properly rehearsed. And a composer or librettist lacking self-confidence might fail to stand up for his ideas under a barrage of criticism. Directors with their accustomed authority can appear intimidating or all-knowing father figures. They, too, must be chosen with care. In my case, the directors were most supportive. If I appeared too quick to accept a change, they would stop and, like a team of optometrists flipping lenses, demonstrate possible choices until I was sure.

If one had to pick the weakest link in a strong chain, I would point to the exchange between composer and audience coming so quickly after the performance. The timing is unfortunate (but perhaps unavoidable). One wants to leave the audience - and oneself - with an emotional afterglow, opera-in-progress though it may be. Intellectualizing that soon appears to be at cross purposes with an opera's emotional intent.

My one worry is whether one can get helpful feedback from those members of the audience who are neither professional musicians nor theater people. The instincts of amateurs are no less sound, but I question whether non-professionals can picture the full impact of an opera if the production lacks scenery, costumes and an orchestra.

But all told, I can think of no educational experience in my composing career that comes close to my Minnesota experience. My hope, of course, is that "A Death in the Family" will soon receive a fully-staged premiere. But I doubt the journey will end there. Working with the Minnesota Opera has taught me not to settle too quickly on a final solution. The chances are I still will be making changes after the world premiere though I hope they will be the last. After all, there comes a time when you have to let the ink dry. If I'm fortunate, I'll be able to savor further variations that will come about from a number of different and imaginative productions. Yet I'll look back to the Music Theater Workshop with fondness, for becoming is more exhilarating than became.