

## Oppenheimer comes to the opera

By John von Rhein Tribune music critic December 9, 2007

In a rehearsal room backstage at Lyric Opera of Chicago, the singers and dancers spread across a bare stage, Peter Sellars is orchestrating his vision of the dawn of the nuclear era.

"Keep the paranoia level very high," the director tells the performers playing the scientists and military personnel counting down the minutes to the first test explosion of an atomic bomb. A rehearsal pianist attacks the swirling chords of composer John Adams' score as Robert Spano conducts.

Sporty in his patterned polyester shirt, beaded necklace and scruffy jeans, Sellars watches intently as the dancers creep forward and backward in sync with the shifting meters. "Struggle through the air as if it's a toxic cloud," he shouts over the music.

It's a little more than two weeks before the Lyric Opera premiere of "Doctor Atomic" on Dec. 14 at the Civic Opera House. Whether the company will have a hit, a dud or something in between seems less important right now than getting the production onto the stage in a way that will do justice to Sellars' and Adams' high-minded intentions.

The opera takes us to that momentous summer morning in 1945 in the heat-blasted desert of Alamogordo, N.M., where a genie of apocalyptic power was set loose and humanity's fate hung in the balance.

The libretto for "Doctor Atomic" is the handiwork of Sellars, Adams' longtime collaborator. The former also is staging the show, as he did with Adams' earlier operas, "Nixon in China" (1987) and "The Death of Klinghoffer" (1991).

Sellars conceived the original production of "Doctor Atomic," with spare designs by Adrienne Lobel and abstract choreography by Lucinda Childs, for the San Francisco Opera, which gave the work its world premiere in 2005.

The creative team was not satisfied with the premiere, even though the performers and Adams' score received widespread critical praise. Sellars restaged the problematic second act, while Adams composed new music for one of the main characters and made various nips and tucks in the vocal lines.

The revised version was unveiled in June at the Holland Festival in Amsterdam, where it was taped for DVD release next year. That is the production Lyric audiences will see.

During a rehearsal break, Sellars expressed his delight that the opera has returned home, in a sense, to Chicago, the birthplace of atomic science.

"The incredibly powerful texts the chorus sings in Act 1 were written by the University of Chicago scientists who said nuclear power should not be introduced to the world as a weapon,"

he said. "These were people of profound conscience and courage."

How can mankind cope with its newfound power to annihilate all life on Earth? That is the main question that torments the opera's J. Robert Oppenheimer (baritone Gerald Finley), the brilliant physicist who spearheaded the top-secret Manhattan Project to its successful conclusion in the New Mexico desert.

Apart from his scientific genius, the historical Oppenheimer had a keen sense of ethics, was deeply versed in the arts and humanities, read Sanskrit and John Donne, and had copies of Baudelaire and the Bhagavad-Gita in his pocket the night that the bomb developed by his team was detonated.

The code name Oppenheimer gave the project -- Trinity -- is in fact taken from a Donne sonnet, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," a poem bristling with images of warfare. The fictional Oppenheimer sings it in an intensely beautiful setting that closes the first act.

Besides Finley, the cast for Lyric's eight performances (through Jan. 19) includes baritone Eric Owens as Gen. Leslie Groves, the blustery military head of the project; tenor Thomas Glenn as Robert R. Wilson, the dissenting younger physicist; baritone Richard Paul Fink as the mordant scientist Edward Teller; and baritone James Maddalena as meteorologist Jack Hubbard.

Representing the women's point of view are soprano Jessica Rivera as Kitty Oppenheimer, the opera's Cassandra-like conscience, channeling human history in her long soliloquies; and contralto Meredith Arwady as Pasqualita, the Oppenheimers' Navajo maid, who sings poetry resonant with the rhythms of the ancient land of her people.

The opera's second half is laced with the almost unbearable tension felt by everyone before "The Gadget" (as the scientists call it) is exploded.

Teller warns that his calculations indicate the explosion could set the atmosphere afire, scorching the planet. The anxious, chain-smoking Oppenheimer can only lament, "Lord, these things are hard on the heart." The bomb goes off.

Rejected the Faust idea

In 1999, Pamela Rosenberg, the San Francisco Opera's former general director, approached Adams about composing an opera about "an American Faust." Her candidate was Oppenheimer, known to posterity as the father of the atomic bomb. Adams rejected the Faust idea as a contrivance, but in Oppenheimer he recognized a mythic modern Prometheus around whom an important opera could be constructed.

Sellars cobbled together his libretto entirely from authentic sources -- declassified government documents, memoirs, letters, poems by Baudelaire and Muriel Rukeyser.

At the time of the San Francisco premiere, some critics found Sellars' libretto opaque and his production concept unmoving.

In a recent New Yorker magazine profile, Metropolitan Opera general director Peter Gelb said he found the production "undramatic." Accordingly, when "Doctor Atomic" arrives at the Met in October 2008, it will be in a new and different production by the British director Penny Woolcock.

Sellars, who officially "withdrew" from participating in the Met version of "Doctor Atomic," said he has no hard feelings and welcomes the fact that the Met will open another perspective on Adams' masterpiece.

"For me, the more productions there are of this work, the more readily it becomes part of the repertory," he said. "There's no definitive version."

Even those who had reservations about the San Francisco premiere agreed on the merits of Adams' score, the most complex and powerful to date to come from the man many consider America's greatest living composer.

### Playing with fire

The influences of Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky and Edgard Varese meet and meld in a score that, like Oppenheimer himself, plays with fire. As with Wagner's operas, the principal carrier of the mythic message is the orchestra -- the main source of what Adams has called the score's "serpentine, churning inner activity."

"The music is a combination of lyricism and rhythmic instability," said conductor Spano. "Sometimes he has three to five different meters going on at a time, and not one of them is the one I'm beating!"

Beyond its merits as a work of art, "Doctor Atomic" will stand the test of time as an important work of social responsibility, in Sellars' view.

"I do think this opera will play its part in the resurgence of the call to eliminate all nuclear weapons," he said.

The moral and social impact of the atom bomb on modern life, he added, "is an issue that has not gone away, which is one reason why the opera has no ending. There hasn't been closure to what was introduced to the world on that July morning in 1945.

"The opera bleeds into our lifetime, just as the strontium from that first test blast has bled into the bones of every one of us. It's not over."

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