

The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(02/24/2006)

Acrostic Meets Aria

Anna Rabinowitz's unique Holocaust-themed poem 'Darkling' is transformed into an opera.

George Robinson - Special To The Jewish Week

Art, it is often said, consists of bringing order to the chaos of ordinary life. But when "ordinary life" consists of little more than fragments, scraps and shards, what can an artist do?

For poet Anna Rabinowitz, the answer was found in the work of another poet, Thomas Hardy. In Hardy's 32-line poem "The Darkling Thrush," Rabinowitz found the structure for a book-length work of her own in which she pulled together the contents of a shoebox her parents had left her — one filled with hints of their past life in Poland during the Holocaust, of their families whose ordinary lives had been obliterated by the Nazis.

Now, out of the structured chaos of her book "Darkling," the American Opera Project is creating another work of art: an opera by the same name, which will have a limited run beginning Feb. 28.

"I didn't know any of these people except my parents," Rabinowitz says of the lives evoked in her poem. "I've always been interested in poetic forms, and they are a big part of the way I write my poetry.

"I attended a lecture by Joseph Brodsky at Columbia University quite a while ago, and he was talking at great length about the Hardy poem as a millennial poem looking back on the 19th century. It occurred to me that I was in the same situation looking back on the 20th century, so I had this affinity to what Hardy was doing."

Rabinowitz used the Hardy poem "as an armature holding the fragments together," with its 32 lines providing the basis for an acrostic and each word providing the initial letters for her own lines. The result is a long poem as densely packed as the woods that hid Hardy's eponymous bird, using a literary device that medieval Jewish mystics favored. ("Lecha Dodi" is probably the most famous Jewish acrostic text, the initial letters of its lines spelling out the name of its author, Shlomo Alkabetz.)

"I was trying to narrate something that couldn't be narrated," Rabinowitz says of her family's destruction. "I was trying to make sense out of these shards, these fragments."

The idea of turning "Darkling" into an opera hadn't occurred to Rabinowitz, although she now realizes that it was a logical next step.

"I have to admit that there were so many voices in the poem calling to me, disembodied voices that in retrospect I can't say it didn't occur to me that it could lend itself to an opera," she says.

What led American Opera Projects to her text was, as she puts it, pure serendipity.

"AOP was doing an opera based on the life of [the Russian poet] Marina Tsetsaeva and a member of the board of Tupelo Press, my publisher, was there and gave a copy of my book to them," she says. "Charles [Jarden, AOP's executive director] fell in love with it. He wanted to do something that would be challenging."

More than that, the opera group already had a track record of developing projects with Jewish themes and Holocaust resonance, having created an opera on the last days of Heinrich Heine, another from the life and writings of Primo Levi and a third based on Yehuda Nir's memoir, "A Lost Childhood."

The opera company, now in its 19th year, has developed a knack for spotting and nurturing projects, and then guiding them from concept to stage production — never an easy road. "Darkling," for example, has been in the works for two-and-a-half years.

"But 95 percent of the people working on it have been involved from the beginning," Jarden notes. "That's ideal for opera, it makes it more organic, richer."

Jarden believes the company's affinity with Holocaust material is a logical consequence of the nature of the Shoah itself.

"A lot of material that's brought to us has to do with huge cataclysmic events," he says. "The projects relating to the Holocaust have been the ones that were the most 'together,' the best ones for us to throw our resources at. I'm sure there'll be another one coming along after 'Darkling.' Artists need to find ways of expressing themselves, and they keep coming back to the Holocaust as a world-defining moment. How do you re-create such moments through art?"

For a composer, the answer is anything but simple.

Stefan Weisman, who composed "Darkling," isn't even sure the piece should be called an opera. That uncertainty is a reflection of his own thinking, since he first read the Rabinowitz poem at the suggestion of director Michael Comlish.

"I remember thinking that this is not an opera," Weisman says. "I found the text very dense, very difficult, but the more that I lived with it, the more clear it became. It's been a surprising thing for me."

Less surprising is that he found the poet's structural device, the acrostic, highly suggestive when he began to approach the text musically.

"I like to work that way, too, to find some systematic way to spin the piece out," Weisman says, echoing Rabinowitz. "Once you have a framework, you create some boundaries and it's easier to work."

Lee Hoiby had already been asked to write a setting of the Hardy poem that in some way would be included in the production, and that happenstance gave Weisman his armature.

"I got hold of his song early on and looked at it," Weisman recalls. "I decided not to directly imitate the way Anna had worked, but I had experience working on pieces that are inspired by other composers

whose palettes are far from my own — a piece I wrote at Princeton based on some of Scott Joplin's rags and a commission I wrote as a birthday tribute to George Crumb, a reaction to some of his music."

This time, Weisman says, he "looked at the song and split it up into segments."

"I mapped the segments onto the poetry and would pull something from [Hoiby's] song and try to incorporate it into the music. It's not exactly an acrostic," he says, "but it approaches it."

More than most operas, though, "Darkling" is a total theater experience, with not only music and singing but also video, projected images and text — an attempt to find a way to gather and save those shards and fragments.

Rabinowitz is optimistic about the future of the piece after its limited run this month.

"The best thing would be if it becomes a piece that is done again and again," she says. "We think it could go to festivals around the world. I'm hoping it will have a life for a while, maybe forever." n

"Darkling" runs Feb. 28 to March 18 at the East 13th Street Theater (136 E. 13th St.). Performances are Tuesdays and Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m. Panel discussions with the creators will follow the Feb. 26, March 7 and March 9 performances. For ticket information, call (212) 279-4200.

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