

Operaphoria™

METROPOLITAN OPERA LIVE IN HD

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Emily D'Angelo
as Jess

Grounded, by Jeanine Tesori

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The devastation of war on civilian populations has been receiving increased coverage because of advanced technology, the sophistication of modern communications, and the willingness of a few sources of information to publish what is known about the horrors of war. Just recently the *New Yorker* has joined with the “In The Dark” podcasts to publish their extensive research into civilian deaths and injuries in Iraq.⁽¹⁾ And every

day we see tragic reports of children killed and mutilated by war. In 2013 the playwright George Brant wrote the one-act play, “Grounded,” to address this tragedy. It has received several stagings, to critical acclaim, which prompted the Met to co-commission the creation of a new opera, along with Washington National Opera, where it premiered last year. The original drama was a chilling one-woman play about a hot-shot F-16 pilot in Iraq. The opera takes off on the play, but also adds a few characters and scenes.

Jess is the pilot who loves her job. She loves soaring in her “blue,” where she has found a sense of freedom. She has also learned how to depersonalize the damage she is doing. “I drop my bomb, and I’m long gone before the boom.” Her psychological defenses have been working for her. However, her life changes when she is back in the States, on leave. She meets Eric, a man she wants to be with. When she becomes pregnant, she loses her cockpit job. Jess stays home for about five years to raise her daughter, Sam, before the lure

of high-speed combat results in her re-enlisting. However, she is not back in the cockpit. Rather, the Commander assigns her to operate a Reaper drone from a computer in an air-conditioned trailer near Las Vegas. She is trained by a 19-year-old gamer who instructs her in the intricacies of working with the Kill Chain, their off-site supervisors. They will direct Jess’s actions through her headset. This new job approximates the cockpit job in the sense that it provides some of the excitement, and the satisfaction of a successful mission. However, this is also an emotionally different experience for her. Now, even though she is half the world

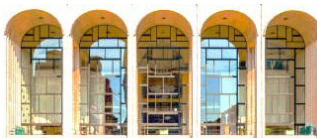


Photo: Metropolitan Opera

away, the cameras bring everything up close and personal. She sees the Hellfire missiles hit their targets and sees who is getting killed. She is no longer gone before the boom.

Jess works long hours, closely watching the monitors. She tracks targets, with long periods of waiting for targets to appear, interspersed with periods of immediate intensity, requiring split second decisions with strategic and moral

(continued...)

Operaphoria™: *A state of ecstasy induced by opera*

(continued from front)

implications. She experiences the stress of the job and develops new emotional defenses, including the creation of Also Jess, an alter ego, a part of her that can handle the stress.

She has been excited by chasing a high-value target called The Serpent. He is difficult to track, clever in his disguises, remaining free to kill Americans. Jess obsesses with catching him, following camera tracking and intelligence reports. At times she becomes manic, which spills over into her relationship with Eric. Then, she is thrilled when she gets a break. She has been able to track The Serpent to his home. She gets confirmation that this is the Serpent when he steps from his car, finally revealing himself. At the same time, the Serpent waves to his daughter, who is about the same age as Jess's Sam. Jess is ordered to take the

shot that would eliminate an enemy responsible for the loss of American lives. In the same split second, she realizes she cannot kill the child. She takes the drone off course and crashes it. The Kill Chain supervisors are howling curses at her for her failure to follow the order. Jess then observes another Reaper drone that has been tracking the Serpent, and that drone takes the shot. She sees the killing of The Serpent and his child.

The opera ends with Jess in a cell. She has been court-martialed. However, the imprisonment has taken her out of the Kill Chain. Even though she is in prison, she now experiences a degree of clarity, and a sense of freedom unlike the freedom she had when soaring in her “blue.” — GP

⁽¹⁾See *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2024, page 7.

Women Composers at the Met

The first woman to have her work staged at the Met was the English composer and pioneering feminist Ethel Smyth (pronounced Smith). Her one-act opera, *Der Wald* (The Forest), enjoyed two performances at the Met in 1903. Written and sung in German—Smyth was an avid Wagner fan—it starred Met favorite Johanna Gadschi. Empresario Maurice Grau wisely paired it with an all-star cast performance of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, thereby guaranteeing a full house for the *Der Wald* premiere. Two operas in one evening, especially if one was new (and only one act long), was not unusual at that time. *Der Wald's* was well received by critics and its second and final performance actually helped increase the audience size for the less popular *La Fille du Régiment*, even though it starred Marcella Sembrich.

The Met's second offering of an opera composed by a woman was the late Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin*. This came 113 years

later, and many of our readers will remember seeing the opera back in 2016 as part of that season's Met Live in HD. It featured the all-star cast of Sussanna Phillips, Eric Owens, and Tamara Mumford, plus an exotic staging and score that stretched the bounds of opera music. Saariaho's untimely death has deprived opera fans of so much rich music we will never hear and operas we will never see.

Jeanine Tesori's *Grounded* will be the Met's third offering of an opera composed by a woman, but there have been other woman opera composers. Pauline Viardot was not only one of the most important singers of the 19th century, but she wrote five “salon operas” of which *Cendrillon* is the most popular. Scottish composer Thea Musgrave has written ten operas, including her best-known work, *Mary Queen of Scots*, in 1977. More recently, Unsuk Chin wrote *Alice in Wonderland* which has been staged to critical acclaim. — GD

Who is Jeanine Tesori?

For those of us not up to date with Broadway shows and composers, here is a brief summary of the amazing career and successes of Jeanine Tesori. She was born in New York in 1961 and educated at Columbia University, where she planned to follow her doctor father in becoming a physician, but ended up with a music degree from Barnard. In the end, her studies yielded to her musical background, one that included playing the piano at 3 and, most importantly, having a composer-conductor grandfather. Indeed, she treasures his baton and music stand, and has said, “As I age, I feel an incredible connection to him. I feel the energy and connection, because sometimes I don’t know where the music comes from.”

Her Broadway career began in the mid-1990s, first as a song writer, then as composer, arranger, and conductor. For the past thirty years her work has garnered numerous nominations and awards, making her the most honored woman composed in Broadway history, as well as the most productive. Her best known hits include *Caroline, or Change*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (for which she wrote a dozen new songs) and *Fun Home*, which won

her a 2014 Pulitzer Prize finalist spot, which she repeated in 2020 for her *Soft Power*.

She has partnered with Tony Kushner four times, and in 2011 she launched her opera career with their *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck* which premiered at Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown. This was followed in 2013, with *The Lion, The Unicorn, and Me*, which premiered at the Kennedy Center, a Washington National Opera production based on Jeanette Winterson’s children’s book. Then in 2019 she partnered with playwright Tazewell Thompson for *Blue*, which also premiered at Glimmerglass. This opera exposed the disgrace of police brutally targeting African American young men. And now we are about to experience her latest opera, *Grounded*, which was commissioned by the Met and Washington National Opera, where it premiered last October at Kennedy Center to enthusiastic reviews.

As Peter Gelb, the Met’s General Manager, has made abundantly clear, it is time for The Metropolitan Opera—indeed all opera companies—to embrace and showcase the many talented women composers waiting in the wings and introduce opera audiences to their work. This is a project that is just beginning and will continue as a regular feature of seasons to come. Stay tuned and keep coming to the Met’s Saturday matinees at Celebration Cinema. – GD

Election Year Opera Bits

We do not yet have an opera about Kamala Harris, but there is historical precedent. In 1872 Victoria Woodhull was the first woman to make a bid for the White House—rather spunky of her, considering that as a woman it would be another 48 years before she would even have the right to vote. She was also the first woman stockbroker, and the author of several books (which reveal she did *not* have the political or social skills of the

(continued on page 4)

Production

Grounded,

by Jeanine Tesori

After the play

by George Brant

Sat, Oct 19, 2024,
1:00 p.m.

Conductor: **Yannick Nézet-Séguin**

Jess: **Emily D’Angelo**

Also Jess: **Ellie Dehn**

Eric: **Ben Bliss**

Sensor: **Kyle Miller**

Commander: **Greer Grimsley**



Composer: **Tesori**

(Election Year Opera Bits ... continued from page 3)

current woman candidate). However, an opera has been written about Woodhull, by Victoria Bond. Scenes from *Mrs. President* were first performed by The New York City Opera in 2011. In 2016 the opera was produced at the National Opera Center in NYC.

Also in 2016, composer Gene Pritsker's *Trump* was performed at The Poisson Rouge in NYC. The Poisson Rouge is the former Village Gate, now a "multimedia art cabaret, serving art and alcohol." It is a bit of a stretch to refer to *Trump* as an opera, but it has been described as "A Theatrical Concerto" with some singing. A solo

violin plays the part of the Devil. Melania, Ivanka, and Benjamin Franklin all have singing roles. This 45-minute concerto claims to delve into Trump's mind set.

During his 2016 campaign, Trump video ads featured opera music, favoring Pavarotti's rendition of "Nessun dorma" from *Turandot*. Avoiding the potential confusion of subtlety, the ads ended with the soaring "Vincerò! vincerò! vincerò!" (I will win! I will win! I will win!). The family of Pavarotti asked the Trump campaign to stop using Luciano's inspiring music. – GP

The Met: Live in HD 2024-25 Schedule

NOTE: All operas begin at 1:00 p.m., except for *Aida*, which begins at 12:30 p.m.

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November 23, 2024

Tosca, by Puccini

The phenomenal Lise Davidsen stars as the passionate diva in the revival of David McVicar's production. Freddie De Tommaso makes his eagerly anticipated company debut as *Tosca*'s revolutionary lover, Cavaradossi. Quinn Kelsy is the sadistic chief of police, Scarpia. Maestro Xian Zhang conducts.

January 25, 2025

Aida, by Verdi

This is a new production by Michael Mayer, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. American soprano Angel Blue sings the Ethiopian princess torn between love and country, with mezzo Judit Kutasi as her rival, Amneris. Dramatic tenor Piotr Beczala is the conflicted lover Radames, who opens the heavens with his "*Celeste Aida*."

March 15, 2025

Fidelio, by Beethoven

Lise Davidsen returns to the Met, this time as Leonore, the faithful wife who risks everything

to save her husband from the clutches of tyranny. David Butt Philip is the political prisoner Florestan, and Tomasz Konieczny is the villainous Don Pizarro. The classic veteran German bass, René Pape sings the jailer, Rocco. Susanna Mälkki conducts this simulcast.

April 26, 2025

Le Nozze di Figaro, by Mozart

This is a revival of the Richard Eyre Production, Conductor Joana Mallwitz makes her Met debut of this timeless comedy with a sparkling cast. Michael Samuel is the clever Figaro who will marry his beloved Susanna (Olga Kulchynska).

May 17, 2025

Salome, by Richard Strauss

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts a new production that promises to shed new light on the biblical story that was dramatized by Oscar Wilde.

May 31, 2025

Il Barbiere di Siviglia, by Rossini

A revival of the Bartlett Sher production.