

HERE BE SIRENS

Music Theatre in One Act
Book and Music by Kate Soper

Premiered by Morningside Opera and Dixon Place, 2014
Press Clippings

- *The New York Times*, 1/22/14 (“...brainy, baffling, consistently astounding...”)
- *The New York Times*, 9/7/14 (“...inspired and strangely powerful...”)
- *The Wall Street Journal*, 9/8/14 (“...audacious, genre-bending music theatre...”)
- *I Care if You Listen*, 1/21/14 (“...no one superlative seems to suffice...”)
- *The New Yorker*, 9/8/14 (“...dazzling, funny, and erudite...”)
- *Bomb Magazine*, Winter 2015 (“...mesmerized by the sounds and sights...”)
- *The New Yorker*, 2/3/14 (“...hilarious, furiously inventive...”)



Tempting and Dangerous. They Sing, Too.

‘Here Be Sirens’ Blends Opera and Play

By STEVE SMITH JAN. 22, 2014

“Do you know what it means to be the insensate apparatus of a homicidal mythological order?” The composer and soprano Kate Soper, portraying Polyxo, one of three mellifluous murderesses of ancient legend, poses that question not long into “Here Be Sirens,” her substantial new musical-theater piece. The Morningside Opera is presenting the work’s premiere engagement at Dixon Place on the Lower East Side.

More accurately, Ms. Soper fairly shouts the question, playing a character trapped by a fate not of her choosing. Polyxo is directly addressing her sisters: Peitho, a perky ingénue played by Brett Umlauf, and Phaino, a quirky stoic portrayed by Gelsey Bell. The three are onstage continually, individually and collectively accompanying themselves at a rag-draped, lidless piano onstage in full view. **But Ms. Soper is also addressing the audience directly, something she does throughout her brainy, baffling, consistently astounding 100-minute piece.**

It’s not difficult to imagine Ms. Soper feeling a bit like a vessel buffeted by external forces. In a video filmed at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., last summer, she explains that “Here Be Sirens” started life as an operatic commission, transformed into a play as she wrote the libretto, and finally found its form as neither and both.

Yes, there is a story to follow in “Here Be Sirens”: a strand that subtly emerges from sounds and scenes that recur as if entrapped by a swirling tidal pool. As Ms. Soper expounds professorially on varying myths, interpretations and tangents — a feverish mash-up of Homer and Freud, Jung and Sappho, Erasmus and Edna St. Vincent Millay — Peitho is transformed, gradually achieving a self-awareness that Polyxo and Phaino already possess.

Ms. Soper’s music reflects a similarly virtuosic cacophony of styles. Opening with a haunting hymn delivered in darkness from behind and then around the audience, Ms. Soper references stark chant, Baroque extravagance, modernist dissonance and pop-tune directness in collision and collusion. The singers’ voices, similar yet distinct, fuse repeatedly in hair-raising instants of both concord and discord. The piano, beyond its standard function, is a drum, a rattle, a gong and an echo chamber.

Lest that threaten to sound too brainy, know that “Here Be Sirens” is consistently funny — usually droll, occasionally uproarious. Ms. Soper ably plays the assertive foil to Ms. Umlauf’s ditsy Peitho and Ms. Bell’s aloof Phaino. Resourcefully directed by Rick Burkhardt, the performers express distinct

personalities not just in narrative and song, but also through composure, posture and gesture.

Andreea Mincic's spare set provides exactly enough for the trio to work with: a chalkboard for Ms. Soper's manic figurations and glyphs; a short platform on which Ms. Umlauf can preen; a box of props for spontaneous pageants. Annie Holt's costumes — white fright wigs; fishnet leotards strewn with seashells and kelp; bony, clawed boots — conjure a grotesque allure.

Austin Smith's lighting is intrinsic to the drama. And Brad Peterson's video projections present an oceanic horizon increasingly cluttered with victims of the sirens' irresistible allure — a quality shared by Ms. Soper's remarkable show.

"Here Be Sirens" will be presented from next Thursday through Feb. 2 at Dixon Place, 161A Chrystie Street, between Rivington and Delancey Streets, Lower East Side; 866-811-4111, dixonplace.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 23, 2014, on page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: Tempting and Dangerous. They Sing, Too..

MUSIC | OPERA REVIEW

Wingless, but They've Found Their Soul Mates

'Here Be Sirens,' a Little Philosophy Included

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI SEPT. 7, 2014

Have you ever wondered how the sirens lost their wings? Maybe you didn't know that the sirens once had wings. Perhaps you're a little unclear as to who the sirens were. (Or are?)

You're not alone. The mythological record is murky. But that did not stop the composer, writer and soprano Kate Soper from exploring the matter in "Here Be Sirens," her inspired, entertaining and strangely powerful fantasia. This 100-minute hybrid of opera, play and musical theater presents the sirens as a trio of avian-humanoid femme fatales, encamped on an island somewhere in the Mediterranean in the timeless past and future, whose songs enthrall the sailors on passing ships that inevitably sink offshore.

"Here Be Sirens," which had an acclaimed premiere in January in a production by Morningside Opera at Dixon Place in the Lower East Side, returned to that theater's intimate black-box performance space on Friday night in a limited return engagement. It is not a flawless work. **Still, no one interested in pushing and smudging the boundaries of contemporary opera and theater should miss it.**

In this inventive production, directed by Rick Burkhardt, with costumes by Annie Holt, a set by Andreea Mincic and videos by Brad Peterson, the three sirens appear in pasty-white facial makeup and powdered wigs, wearing seashell-encrusted fishnet tights strewn with tattered fabric fragments. Though "Here Be Sirens" is at heart a philosophical rumination, however whimsical, it tells a surprisingly poignant story, centering on the quest for self-awareness by the least evolved of the sirens, Polyxo, played by Ms. Soper.

Her two siren soul mates have long ago come to terms with their mythological identities, especially Phaino, who is contentedly self-absorbed, almost blasé, played by the winning soprano Gelsey Bell. Of the three, Phaino spends the most time playing the lidless piano that is the opera's only instrument, though the score calls for its strings to be scraped and bowed and during the shipwreck sequences the three sirens gather at the piano, pounding inside the piano with a mallet, singing and shrieking together.

Peitho, also a nonreflective type, is the most sensual siren and claims to be in love with every sailor whose body washes up on shore. The soprano Brett Umlauf inhabits the role, looking like a mermaid with a Marilyn Monroe hairdo.

Polyxo, though, as the introduction to Ms. Soper's libretto indicates, is what "would happen if a siren were to pursue a doctorate in critical theory via correspondence course." Bent on understanding what a siren is supposed to be, Polyxo constantly picks up one of the books strewn about the stage, then works out calculations on a blackboard and deconstructs texts from Homer, Erasmus, Milton and more,

chunks of which are quoted in the libretto.

Ms. Soper sings with cool intensity and is especially compelling during Polyxo's long spoken discourses, directed at the audience. At one point, she asks, "Do you know what it means to be the insensate apparatus of a homicidal mythological order?" Well, no, but with the question posed so intently you certainly want to find out.

You hear echoes of medieval and Renaissance vocal writing in Ms. Soper's audaciously eclectic score, along with hints of Baroque opera, stabs of piercing modernism, sassy show tunes and sardonic waltzes. Such stylistic variety can result in merely facile music. But Ms. Soper's inspiration is so strong that every stylistic swerve seems right. The sustained vocal trios are often very difficult. But these performers sing with the command befitting their mythological characters.

When the texts for songs are a fanciful mash-up of Plato, Theobaldus, Soper or whatever, making the words clear is not the point. Still, there are crucial passages in which the English words really matter, and, at times, Ms. Soper is more intent on creating a musical mood than setting the text so it can be understood. The singers also could have sometimes sacrificed volume and plushness for the sake of clarity.

Oh yes, this business of how the sirens lost their wings. As presented here, it was the result of a singing competition between the sirens and the muses, re-enacted with the sirens taking the roles of the flashy, super-hip, ultra-confident muses, who are, it turns out, also the judges for this mythological battle of the bands. Naturally, the muses win. In a frenzy of victory, they rip off the wings of their rivals, a daffy yet poignant scene, one of many that "Here Be Sirens" leaves you to ponder.

The final two performances of "Here Be Sirens" will be presented Friday and Saturday at Dixon Place, 161A Chrystie Street, between Rivington and Delancey Streets, Lower East Side; 866-811-4111, dixonplace.org.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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OPERA

The Femmes Fatales of Mythology



From left to right: Brett Umlauf, Kate Soper and Gelsey Bell in a scene from 'Here Be Sirens.' *NOAH ARJOMAND*

By **HEIDI WALESON**

Sept. 8, 2014 6:25 p.m. ET

Here Be Sirens

Morningside Opera

Through Sept. 13

New York

Few operas by women composers are ever produced, so it was a salutary surprise to get two very different chamber pieces by women staged back to back last week. Kate Soper's "Here Be Sirens," presented by Morningside Opera and the Lower East Side venue Dixon Place, was a return engagement for this audacious, genre-bending piece of music theater, which had its premiere in January. **Ms. Soper calls her 100-minute work an "epic vaudeville/one-act opera/mermaid fever dream for three voices and manhandled piano," which pretty much captures its spirit if you add in the highly original compositional voice.**

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"Sirens" imagines a trio of the mythological bird-women trapped forever on their island. In white wigs, fishnet leotards bedizened with shells and seaweed, and perched on clawed feet (the costumes are by Annie Holt), the stoic, sullen Phaino (Gelsey Bell) and the flirtatious ingénue Peitho (Brett Umlauf) wait patiently for their prey, while Polyxo (Ms. Soper) desperately scours all available knowledge about sirens so that she can figure out where they came from and thus escape their fate. Escape seems unlikely. Each time Polyxo comes close to a revelation, Phaino, who crouches behind a lidless piano that is festooned with white rags, sounds an air horn to announce the arrival of a ship, and the three go about their murderous business.

Ms. Soper is a whirlwind as Polyxo; she frantically reads aloud, scribbles on a chalkboard, and lectures, addressing the audience directly with such comments as "So you probably wonder: Do we eat them?" from which follows a discourse on carrion-eating creatures. Her hypotheses about the origins and the purpose of the sirens, and the texts of their songs, are yanked from a jumble of sources—from Plato to Jung, and encompassing Dante, Erasmus, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Milton, Sappho and others. The sirens re-enact the abduction of Persephone, and a singing contest with the muses. The smooth-singing muses win—the event is rigged—and the sirens get their wings pulled off.

The music takes the evening beyond comedy. Ms. Soper's writing for the vocal trio starts in familiar territory, with Renaissance harmonies and Baroque canons, but it soon flies off in other directions. There are music-hall tunes, a pretty waltz, a hymn and a bluesy number, but you feel the essence of the sirens and their deepest compulsions in their seduction and shipwreck songs. The ferocious, vibrating dissonances as the voices sound together conjure their eternal menace. This is a different idea of a siren song—not smoothly sexy, but wild, elemental and dangerous. The lidless piano is part of the sirens' arsenal—they strum the strings, pound on them with a timpani mallet, and sing into the cavity so that it becomes an echo chamber for their ululations. The sailors don't have a chance.

Director Rick Burkhardt and set designer Andreea Mincic created a simple but effective frame—a chalkboard, piles of books, a rock on which the ditsy Peitho preens or crouches, birdlike—while in the background, Brad Peterson's hazy video suggested the sea and the ships that approach and sink. With voice and body, the three singers adroitly created the three separate siren personalities and the inevitability of their collective destiny, which, it seems, no scholar or poet can fully explain.

Brooklyn, N.Y.

Despite its unusual subject, Laura Kaminsky's "As One," given its world premiere at BAM Fisher, is a slicker, more conventional piece. The 75-minute



'As One' emphasizes the sensitive, meditative side of the journey. *KEN HOWARD*

opera recounts the life journey of Hannah, its transgender protagonist, from male to female in 15 songs. Baritone Kelly Markgraf is "Hannah before" and mezzo Sasha Cooke is "Hannah after"; they are accompanied by the onstage Fry Street Quartet.

The libretto, a collaboration by Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed, a filmmaker, is based on Ms. Reed's own story. The songs track Hannah's growing consciousness and gradual gender transition: We see the young teenager and star high-school athlete, the college student excited to pass as female, the hormone treatments, and Hannah's distancing from her family and her past. The double casting ingeniously sets out the male/female bifurcation of personality, and the two singers, with their matched vocal timbres and expressivity, make it believable. So does Ken Cazan's choreographed direction, as when Mr. Markgraf reaches his arms around Ms. Cooke to thumb through an invisible card catalog, or when Ms. Cooke does push-ups as Mr. Markgraf sings "Perfect boy." Ms. Reed's film, projected on hanging sheets, supplies settings like a classroom, a bridge and a landscape in Norway, its jittery, home-movie quality reflecting the personal nature of the tale.

However, Ms. Kaminsky's smooth, pretty music emphasizes the sensitive, meditative side of the journey. There's not much angst here, and only one song, "Out of nowhere," in which Hannah is assaulted, has any conflict. When the two Hannahs sing together, they sound harmonically aligned, rather than in opposition; the string quartet functions as accompaniment, amplifying poignant moments, like the wistful solo cello that backs up a letter from home. Even the ending, when the character has completed her physical and emotional transition and the male singer leaves the stage, seems simplistic. One can't help but think that it must have all been more difficult than this, and that the creators deliberately chose to temper the bite of this challenging subject.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

Falling for Kate Soper's Sirens' Songs at Dixon Place Theater

KURT GOTTSCHALK

on January 21, 2014 at 1:00 pm

There are many things one might say – would, in fact, want to say – about Morningside Opera's production of *Here Be Sirens*, an enthralling new opera by composer and soprano Kate Soper showing at [Dixon Place Theater](#) in New York City. **The fact that no one superlative seems to suffice is testament to how human a work Soper has managed to create about characters who, essentially, are not human.**

Set on an unnamed Mediterranean island in, according to the libretto, “the past and the future,” *Here Be Sirens* (in eight scenes without intermission) tells the story of three sirens, perhaps the only three in existence, who hail passing ships with their song, coaxing them in and causing them to crash into the rocky shore and into their doom. Soper has created a fascinating setting for her sirens, visually rather like a monochromatic Dr. Seuss scene with inhabitants who are, in keeping with the myth, both alluring and horrific. Their world is primitive, mournful, haunting and enticing. The sirens have no way to leave the island, apparently due to the old world designs of moralistic gods. They are, as far as they know, sentenced to an eternity of seducing and killing sailors. They also have little capacity for memory, which becomes the intellectual bars that keep them on the island prison. Those who can't remember their own history, it seems, are doomed to dwell in it.

What they do have, besides a piano that they take turns playing sparsely and percussively, is books. Polyxo, played with lots of inquisitiveness and little temper by Soper, is a questioning being who wants to understand who or what they are and how they might

improve things for themselves. Peitho (brought entrancingly to life by soprano coloratura Brett Umlauf) seems to revel in her feminine powers and is uninterested in rocking the figurative boat, although she is very interested in the sailors aboard the literal boats they lure to their shores. Phaino (eerily embodied by soprano Gelsey Bell) is the least anthropomorphic of the three, stoic, at times almost a ghost.

Soper's story is slow to develop, and in fact the first 20 minutes of the nearly two hours (at the January 12 staging) seemed closer to a song cycle with dense annotation than any sort of traditionally narrative opera. But once the sirens' lot had been established, a sort of Beckettian fable began to unfold. Polyxo's thirst for knowledge propelled the action, developing with ease into an investigation of feminism, mythology, psychoanalytic theory and centuries of trying to explain what we don't understand. Her intellectual pursuits are not mere props. The sirens' songs include texts by Plato, Homer, Carl Jung, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Milton and Sappho, performed almost entirely a cappella and written with incisive wit, a flair for drama and moments of melodrama. **The score, which ranges from the baroque to the avant garde, was delivered compellingly by the three women. It is to Soper's credit that with the sheer amount of information being delivered the story never gets overly dense.**

Such headiness is nothing new for Soper. She has scored Plato before, and has taken on Kafka, Jenny Holzer, Frank O'Hara and others. *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say*, her fine setting of verse by Lydia Davis for voice and flute, is included on *Relay*, the second album by the Wet Ink Ensemble (Soper is a co-director of the group). A performance of the piece can also be found on Vimeo and is well worth looking up. She has a great sense for working with text and finding musicality in prose.

On the island, Soper's alter ego is no less a seeker of knowledge, although she may have bigger hurdles to clear. With the benefit of the books inexplicably littering the island, Polyxo comes to realize that being a siren is considered a disease. "That's how they all describe us – Boethius, Plutarch," she says. "The siren song is something that befalls you. Desire is a catastrophe. But maybe a useful catastrophe. Desire is what keeps you alive."

At that point in the story the implications for our heroines are not only clear, they matter. Such revelations are what make us come to care about the sirens. In the end we can't help but extend human compassion to what are (whether or not they want to be) murderous shrews. Either that or we have simply fallen for their song.

Here Be Sirens continues on January 30-31 and February 1-2 at Dixon Place Theater in Manhattan.

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DIXON PLACE / MORNINGSIDE OPERA: "HERE BE SIRENS"

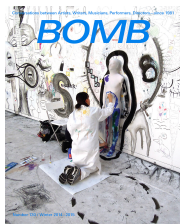
Kate Soper, a dynamic young composer and singer with keen theatrical instincts, draws elements of parlor music, modernist atonality, and Cagean experimentalism into a firmly focussed style. She takes part in a revival of her three-woman show, a dazzling, funny, and erudite post-feminist meditation on ancient myth; Rick Burkhardt directs. (161A Chrystie St. dixonplace.org. Sept. 5-6 and Sept. 12-13 at 7:30.)

September 5 - September 13

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Kate Soper's *Here Be Sirens* by Andrea Ray



Brett Umlauf (left), Kate Soper (center), and Gelsey Bell (right) in *Here Be Sirens*. Performance view at Morningside Opera's production at Dixon Place, 2014. Photo by Noah Arjomand.

Morningside Opera, 2014

Kate Soper's *Here Be Sirens* explores, through beautiful harmonies and curious discords, the constraint of fixed roles and the desire to release oneself from them through the activity of research—finding the origin of the fixed identity being key to redefining and freeing oneself. Calling on an ancient example of a frightening femme fatale, in Soper's work, the figure of the siren stands in for any fixed subject identity.

I found myself mesmerized by the sounds and sights of this opera; by the interrelated set and props, such as the classroom with toppled books, desks, and chalkboard; the sirens' lacey, colored-silk outfits with shell necklaces and curious mo the dazzling video projecti

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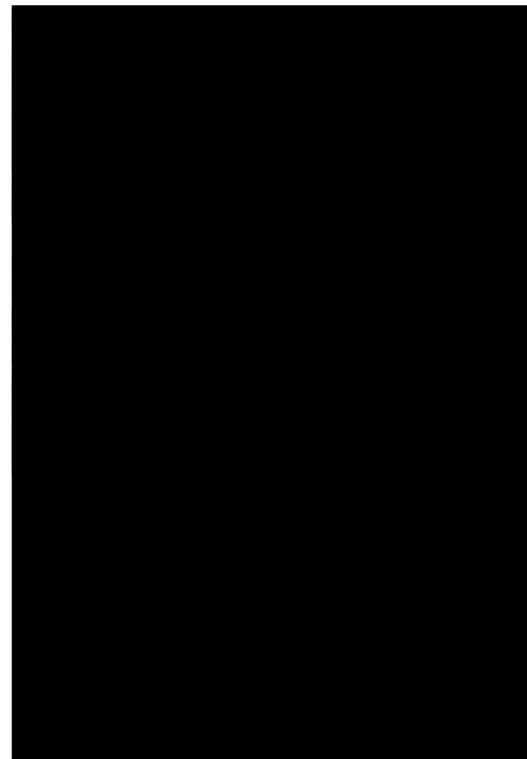
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rocky coast and the occasional ship.

The three sirens respond to the approaching ships with song and music, as if they are wired to do so. Interacting with one another, they float in and out of dreamlike and illusory realms, which are interspersed by arguments with each other, moments of audience address, and occasional breaks into cruise-ship cabaret-type shenanigans. At one point I found myself facing a siren's solemn seductive stare, as she sang (to me), "Oh, sailor, oh, sailor." I'll be your sailor, thank you.

One of the sirens combs through books (rather than hair), researching her lineage and the genesis of her role of constraint, which is to be stuck on that rock, having to sing and lure sailors to their deaths. As the embedded narrator of the play, she recites (from many books) statements on the historical context and psychoanalytic implications of her task in a comedic academic tone. "When did the siren lose her wings?" she asks. While as a siren, she may have to fulfill a certain role, if she could only discover when her wings were clipped, she may recast, redress, rewrite her kind, and fly from the rock of assumptions.

Leaving the Dixon Place theater, I reflected on the opera's use of research as it was literally conveyed through one character and I wondered if it is necessary to determine the point of original injustice in an attempt to solve an inequality. While it wouldn't be fair to expect this siren to resolve the 5,000-year-old form of domination called patriarchy, Soper's work did lure me onto a thinking rock to recast "woman as provocateur" and encouraged me to further explore the relationship of myth to history and opera to social commentary. And I'm



still sitting there, fully immersed in my memory of the sights, sounds, and the potential of *Here Be Sirens*.

— *Andrea Ray is a Brooklyn-based artist whose recent installations explore issues of subjectivity and community through, for example, proposed forms of alternative living and utopian communities.*

Tags: , feminism, femininity, gender, singing, off-off-broadway theater

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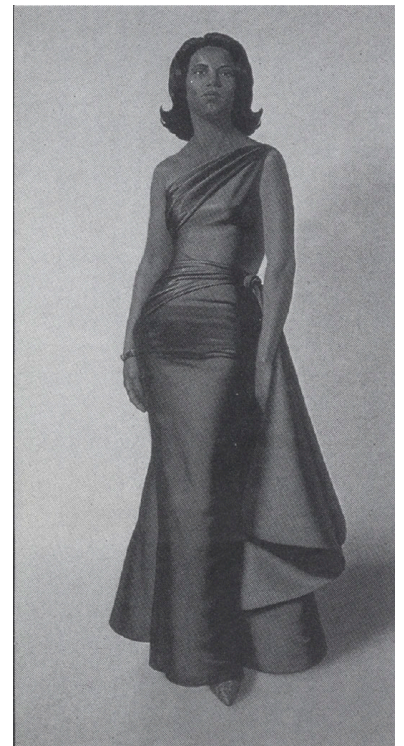
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THE OPERA LAB

The Prototype Festival rethinks a venerable genre.

BY ALEX ROSS

Jonathan Blalock in Gregory Spears's "Paul's Case," based on the Willa Cather story.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY NOAH STERN WEBER

Cashiers at a supermarket endure another day of monotony. A war reporter is visited by the spectre of the slain American soldier whose corpse he photographed. A Pakistani woman fights for justice after being ritualistically raped. An effete young man whose proclivities put him at odds with his family commits suicide. No one will accuse the composers participating in the Prototype Festival—which, in mid-January, presented half a dozen new operatic pieces around New York—of ignoring contemporary reality. Happily, Prototype offered musical vitality alongside social pertinence. The recent demise of New York City Opera has been widely, and fittingly, lamented, yet in an eleven-day period Prototype managed to uncover more new work of substance than City Opera was able to do in the past decade or more.



The festival came into being last year, when the alternative-opera impresario Beth Morrison joined forces with Kristin Marting and Kim Whitener, who run the downtown arts space HERE. Their aim is to give a platform to composers who might otherwise be forced to wait half their careers for an operatic commission, and who would run up against the inherent caution of so many American companies. Furthermore, Prototype encourages—though it hardly requires—composers to move beyond traditional classical techniques of singing and playing. The resulting body of work has been dubbed “black-box opera,” indicating a convergence of classical composition with the spirit of experimental theatre. Such a fusion is, of course, nothing new; Weill and Brecht pursued something similar in the nineteen-twenties. But, as the music publisher Norman Ryan argued in a recent issue of *Opera America*, there are economic reasons for the latest surge: in the wake of the recession, recent conservatory graduates have adopted a do-it-yourself strategy, instead of waiting for the Metropolitan Opera to come calling.

The black-box trend is international. At a competition in Sweden, Morrison encountered “Have a Good Day!,” a supermarket satire from the Lithuanian music-theatre collective Operomanija; Prototype brought the show to New York, where it played at HERE, in a white-walled space under bleak fluorescent light. When the audience enters, ten women in blue aprons are seated on platforms on one side of the space, scanning bar codes and staring blankly. The libretto, written by Vaiva Grainyte and sung in Lithuanian, allows each cashier in turn to reveal her personality: one is a self-involved flirt; another spouts clichés (“Every day is a gift”); a third thinks obsessively about her son, who is in England. In choral passages, they mouth the liturgy of consumerism (“Hello, how are you? Thank you! Have a good day!”). The music, by Lina Lapelyte, combines the unsentimental minimalism of early Philip Glass with hints of folkish melody. All told, it is a tightly constructed, multilayered creation, its humor pierced by melancholy. At its heart is a woeful two-note aria, sung by Milda Zapolskaite, in which an art-history major bewails her inability to find a job: “I wrote to *Art Echos*. They published some bits of my thesis. . . . I bought myself some good stockings and the rest I spent on wine and calming tea.” The downtown audience shuddered.

Prototype is a particularly bracing addition to New York musical life because it gives equal time to female artists. If misogyny is an implicit topic in “Have a Good Day!,” it dominates Kamala Sankaram’s “Thumbprint,” which dramatizes the experiences of Mukhtar Mai, a resident of a rural Pakistani village who, after being gang-raped at the order of a tribal council, in 2002, made history by bringing her case to trial. Sankaram, an Indian-American composer, singer, and sitar player, not only wrote the score but also performed the lead role. Here, too, Glassian minimalism came into play, intermingled with sinuous patterns from Hindustani classical music. This eclectic vocabulary, while adroitly handled, never quite conveyed the full horror of the subject; an excess of insistent ostinato patterns caused the mind to wander. Still, Sankaram brought clear conviction to her dual role as creator and performer. She is representative of a growing wave of composers who, in the vein of Meredith Monk, Joan La Barbara, and Laurie Anderson, use their own voices as instruments; another is Kate Soper, whose theatre piece “Here Be Sirens”—an erudite, hilarious, furiously inventive meditation on the siren myth—had its première at Dixon Place, under the auspices of the Morningside Opera, while Prototype was ongoing.

The male protagonists of Prototype were a desperate, wounded bunch. At Roulette, in Brooklyn, the festival presented two one-act operas by the Stanford-based composer Jonathan Berger: “Theotokia,” in which a schizophrenic mental patient hallucinates a congregation of Himalayan yetis; and “The War Reporter,” which adapts Dan O’Brien’s play about the photojournalist Paul Watson, who was both celebrated and condemned for his picture of a soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Vocal parts were sung by the four male singers of New York Polyphony, which alternates between early and modern fare, and by the multitalented soprano Mellissa Hughes. Woven around the voices is an intricate instrumental fabric that combines modernistic gestures with ancient-sounding chants. At times, Berger’s writing is too busy with refined detail, but the pivotal scenes make their mark—especially the wrenching sequence in which Watson, here portrayed by the expressive baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert, attempts to apologize to the soldier’s mother and is told never to call again. The bustling ensemble retreats, leaving the lead character starkly isolated.

■ was haunted most of all by Gregory Spears’s “Paul’s Case,” based on Willa Cather’s classic 1906 tale of a doomed young Pittsburgh aesthete. On paper, it was the least adventurous piece in the Prototype lineup; American opera houses have a notorious weakness for dramatizations of public-domain literary properties. But Spears, setting a libretto that he wrote in collaboration with Kathryn Walat, avoids the trap of slavishly reenacting a familiar text. Instead, his plaintive, eerie score delves into the inner world of Paul, who defies his teachers, steals from his employer, lives grandly in New York for a few days, and ultimately chooses death over shame. Spears, too, has minimalist roots, and draws also on the bittersweet textures of Renaissance consort music and the vocal ornaments of Baroque opera. While his musical language is predominantly tonal, he creates tension by adding acidic dissonances and by layering voices in claustrophobic ensembles, which represent the carping spirits encroaching upon Paul’s daydreams.

The young tenor Jonathan Blalock, a North Carolina native, proved integral to the success of the Prototype staging, which originated with the Washington, D.C.,-area group UrbanArias. A lyric tenor of the Mozart and Rossini type, Blalock had no trouble with the high-lying music of the title role, his sweet, pale voice shining through the silvery mist of Spears’s instrumentation. Beyond that, Blalock’s ironic smile and haughty poses signalled the character’s conflict with his humdrum surroundings. Generations of readers have concluded that Paul is gay; in the opera, a seeming flirtation with a Yale freshman, played by the tenor Michael Slattery, makes that subtext legible, although the two singers kept their body language properly ambiguous. (“They had started out in the confiding warmth of a champagne friendship, but their parting in the elevator was singularly cool,” Cather writes, leaving the rest to the reader’s imagination.)

The ending is as quietly harrowing as anything in recent American opera. Paul, having thrown himself in front of an onrushing train, has a split-second glimpse of the life he will not live—he sees “the yellow of Algerian sands, the blue of the Adriatic.” Kevin Newbury, the director of the Prototype

production, had Blalock lie on his back as overhead lights descended upon him, stopping within inches of his face. The vocal line repeatedly comes to rest on a quick, courtly two-note descent; in its final iteration, the figure is pushed up another step, to a high, hopeful, heartbreaking A. The opera ends, as it began, with a procession of bell-like E-major piano chords, dissonant tones sounding in their midst. At once impassive, bright, and dark, they echo Cather's cosmic closing phrase: "Paul dropped back into the immense design of things." ♦



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