Cultural Daily

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El Canguro: Opera Cloud's Silver-Lining May Be Made of Lead

Cynthia Ferrell · Thursday, September 8th, 2011

One in an occasional series of artists reflecting on their work.

Under stress, my German composer's English falls apart. Right now, he's incomprehensible.

Our opera debuts in downtown LA this Saturday – one Herculean night after four years of effort. A week out, and *El Canguro* (slangily, *The Nursery*) is still in production hell: sets unfinished and costumes unfitted, unhelped by a theatre sporting 1980s equipment and, oh yeah, that carrot-turned-kudzu called the Cloud.

This year, the Cloud beckoned gleefully to our international collaboration. We could bypass stultifying limits on emails. Libretto, score, contracts, waivers, rehearsal tracks with and without melody – we smugly swapped out-sized files with speed and ease. But opera is born in pain and the Cloud's no spinal block. In 2011 we know the truth: The faster the technology, the faster the screw up.

I ran across Mike von der Nahmer in the fall of '07 at North Hollywood's Academy for New Musical Theatre. I had my back pinned to the rear wall. So did the pony-tailed guy to my right. Neither of us looked like joiners. When the rest of crowd started passing around a rip-a-musical-from-the-headlines assignment, Pony Tail looked at me and said in heavy accent, "I want to write an opera."

"I'm in," I said.

"Not an operetta," he went on. "An opera."

"Okay," I said.

"You don't understand," he insisted. "I am a genius."

I looked him in the eye. He probably was. "Lucky for you," I said, "so am I."

We launched *El Canguro*, a rainforest story that had been haunting me since my Spanish immersion studies that summer in Guatemala. During my Antigua stay, authorities raided a holding house for infants. The 14 babies in cheap jumper swings were intended for the lucrative and shady foreign adoption market, where American demand so exceeded supply that natives bred to sell, and older children not for sale were stolen.

So: A Guatemalan topic being written by an American, composed by a German, titled in Spanish and sung in English. And all worked really well. Right up until finances sent Mike home to Munich twelve months later.

Why yes, once I had the Cloud. Late in 2010 we got a venue offer from KUSC Radio for a one-night debut: September 10, 2011, and the Cloud resurrected our opera. Thanks to DropBox, I could listen, praise and cajole, and Mike could write and rewrite and have every file automatically update. The Cloud's speed shrank continents. Its size fueled inspiration. It totally screwed us up.

As it turns out, speed and prosody don't mix.

Prosody is the art of placing text to notes, ensuring that the emphasized syllable is on the emphasized note. It's easiest to see in structured form: For those who've ever written a song (or tried to mimic a Frost poem), you know the first stanza's easy. Making every thought after that fit the same pattern sucks.

Opera is less structured, but prosody is still paramount. Let's face it: opera singers are hard enough to understand without bum placement of syllables. With few repetitive patterns to guide him and a declining hold on English, Mike counted on me to proof the scores. A rapid-fire, deadline-driven uploading of masses of scores – a whole opera's length of scores. Scores that automatically update and who the hell knows if the one I printed last night is the one in DropBox this morning? Now add that bit about second tongues and I'm hip deep in sheet music and wonky notes, all of it growing too much too fast and, well, damn that Cloud.

Yes, he's a genius. Last year he landed the Berlin Opera Prize, while getting his master's in music therapy. Right now he's talking, in English that matches my grasp of German, about El Canguro's next incarnation. I think he's saying something about more choir and new instruments. I can't be sure.

Opera is old. It's not afraid to experiment. It can be tonal or banging on pipes, impolitic and sexually shocking. Opera can be bolder than opera audiences, who are notoriously cranky and have a tendency to boo. I can't wait to hear El Canguro, I can't stand to hear the mis-paired words I missed in the flood where new light-speed technology grappled with this centuries-old craft. If it works, Mike and I will bow happily. If it stumbles, we'll look to the sky, at the Cloud hanging over our heads.

El Canguro debuts Saturday, September 10, 2011, 7PM at downtown Los Angeles's AT&T Center Theater.

Images: Renee Rulon Cortez as the Daughter; Andrew Pearson as Cesar.

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