

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

BOSTON LYRIC OPERA TO RELEASE A GRIPPING NEW CINEMATIC VISION OF THE PHILIP GLASS OPERA BASED ON EDGAR ALLAN POE'S GOTHIC HORROR STORY

*With hand-drawn and stop-motion animation, and a new recording,
a timely new framework is built around the familiar story and music.*

Film will be available widely Jan. 29, 2021, exclusively on BLO's operabox.tv.

NEW ENGLAND, U.S. – Updated Jan 13, 2020 – Boston Lyric Opera's (BLO) newly commissioned film version of **Philip Glass'** opera THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER is a gripping, ground-breaking new creation that launches Edgar Allan Poe's Victorian gothic horror tale into modern times. Using hand-drawn and stop-motion animation techniques alongside curated archival footage, this version of USHER tells the mysterious story with Glass' complete score and **Arthur Yorinks'** full libretto, while building a new, cinematic framework around it.

Helmed by film and opera director **James Darrah**, and boasting a fresh treatment by Spanish screenwriter **Raúl Santos** that places the opera within the story of a young immigrant girl named Luna who is detained on the U.S. border, **THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER** debuts exclusively on BLO's operabox.tv, starting Jan. 29, 2021.

The cast of USHER includes: **Chelsea Basler** as Madeline Usher; **Jesse Darden** as Roderick Usher; **Daniel Belcher** as William; **Christon Carney** as the Physician; and **Jorgeandrés Camargo** as the Servant. BLO Music Director **David Angus** conducts the score. Production Designer is **Yuki Izumihara**. Director of Photography is **Pablo Santiago**. Costume and Doll Designer is **Camille Assaf**. Art Director/Lead Designer (Luna) is **Yee Eun Nam**. Lead Animator is **Will Kim**; Associate Animator is **Jian Lee**. Lead Illustrator is **Rodrigo Muñoz**.

The Glass and Yorinks opera premiered in 1988 at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. It follows the Boston-born Poe's inscrutable short story about twin siblings Roderick Usher and his ill sister, Madeline, who live reclusively in a mysterious mansion. A third main character (unnamed in Poe's story, but called William in Yorinks' libretto) is summoned by his friend Roderick to come to the Usher house and help him. Like the source material, the opera maintains an opaque approach to the narrative, embracing the main story of a mentally and physically troubled man caring for his sister and feeling trapped in, and by, his familial home. There are suggestions, but not details, about the relationships between the characters. The Ushers' illnesses are not defined – clues hint at mental health, addiction, or supernatural causes. The oppressive house itself may, or may not, be to blame for the inhabitants' problems.

Glass' music is alternately propulsive, ethereal, and tension-filled. Roderick, William and peripheral characters build the narrative through song, while Madeline's voice is wordless, floating in, out and through the small orchestral arrangement. While Poe's story is centered in the work, much of the music contains no singing.

Screenwriter Santos leaned into the ambiguities of Poe's original story and Yorinks' libretto, dropping the opera's main story into an unexpected contemporary context. Here, the mysterious Usher twins, William, and the cursed house itself, are fantastical figments in the imagination of Luna, a mute immigrant child held in a detention facility at the border between the United States and Mexico.

Like Poe's original story, Darrah says, the opera's post-modernist music and obscure libretto elements evoke emotion rather than create a clear narrative -- making it ripe for interpretation. "We've created a context for the story that feels worthy of being out in the world right now," Darrah says. "USHER touches on issues we still grapple with today -- family heritage and lineage, hidden desires, mental health and illness. I think this unique format further enhances the intention of the opera, and brings a 100-year-old story into the present day."

Santos took advantage of the opera's unusual structure, with its passages of wordless music, to inject visual stories about Luna's past, the harrowing journey with her mother to escape a threat in their home country, and her idealized view of the U.S. as seen through American television reruns.

The film switches frequently between its narrative strands. Luna's story is told in alternately sweet and surreal hand-drawn animations that bring to life the drawings she makes while detained. The Ushers' story is told through stop-motion filmmaking, and from inside an abandoned dollhouse Luna finds. The stories share plot points: Madeline's death reflects that of a small pet Luna secretly carries with her; a treacherous river crossing mirrors a violent storm at the Usher house. Archival footage, ranging from vintage television ads to recent news reports from the border, offers commentary and historical context.

"Raúl created a trio of intersecting art films," Darrah says. "Each one amplifies, contextualizes and enriches the others."

The film's dreamlike immediacy was realized by a diverse team of animators and artists -- many of whom have their own remarkable immigration stories. Santos says the team felt connected to the new story of Luna and offered him ideas from their personal experiences to incorporate.

Coronavirus restrictions made for a music recording session unlike any other in BLO's history. Following municipal and state protocols enhanced by expert advice from local world-class medical doctors who serve on BLO's Health Task Force for Opera Artists, members of the BLO Orchestra recorded the score under the guidance of Music Director David Angus, who monitored the session remotely from his main home in England. Angus said Glass' precise compositions allowed orchestra members to follow a click track for timing instead of relying solely on a live conductor. Singers recorded their parts in separate sessions, listening to the recorded score.

“This is an unusual creative time for Boston Lyric Opera,” says **Esther Nelson**, BLO’s Stanford Calderwood General and Artistic Director. “This pandemic has demonstrated how inventive artists respond with ingenuity to a crisis. Music Director David Angus brilliantly shaped the music, remotely. Our creative team embraced the idea and design for a film version in the early days of the pandemic. Thankfully we were able to keep many of that team, and the original cast, in the transition from stage to film. I’m equally pleased about the fresh creative alliances this film has brought to us: illustrators, cinematographers, animators, and film editors are our new colleagues. BLO has always prioritized creation of new work and new productions through a robust commissioning program. This groundbreaking production opens an exciting new door for that work.”

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER debuts on BLO’s operabox.tv streaming service, starting Jan. 29, 2021. It is made available on-demand (\$10 for a seven-day rental). **MEDIA NOTE:** On-demand price was revised on Jan. 12.

Operabox.tv subscribers can access the film two days earlier, on Jan. 27. (Subscriptions and information about student discounts are available at blo.org/operaboxtv.) Operabox.tv is available at the [operabox.tv website](http://operabox.tv) and through branded apps available on Apple, Google, Amazon and Roku platforms.

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ABOUT BLO

Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) celebrates the art of the voice through innovative programming and community engagement that redefines the opera-going experience. In its 44th Season, BLO is the largest and oldest opera company in New England. Since its founding in 1976, the company has staged world premieres, U.S. premieres, co-productions and co-commissions of note with organizations such as The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, Scottish Opera and San Francisco Opera. BLO continues to be a destination for leading artists, conductors, directors and designers from around the world. Under the leadership of General & Artistic Director Esther Nelson, BLO’s productions have been described by national media as “part of the national dialogue” for their role in creating entry points for new audiences. *The New York Times* said BLO “clearly intends [its productions] to catch the interest of operagoers around the country.” BLO’s programming remains faithful to tradition while blazing new ground, building audiences, and creating new ways to enhance the opera-going experience. In a typical year, BLO employs nearly 350 artists and creative professionals—vocalists, artisans, stagehands, costumers and scenic designers. The Company is proud to play a significant and meaningful role in Boston’s vibrant arts community.

ABOUT OPERABOX.TV

Operabox.tv is the opera and classical-music streaming service created by Boston Lyric Opera – a new home for traditional content aimed at longtime opera lovers, as well as new commissioned works, opera-inspired original content, and projects designed to bring opera to broader audiences. There is a variety of free and paid content on operabox.tv. Season subscriptions with early access to paid content are \$99. Paid content is available on-demand 48 hours after subscriber access. Operabox.tv is available at www.operabox.tv and via streaming apps through Apple, Android, Amazon and Roku. To begin accessing free and paid content, visit www.blo.org/operaboxtv.

MEDIA INFORMATION

- Interviews with creative principals for this project are available. Photo and film assets will be available in January 2021.
- Preview screeners of the film will be available mid-January 2021.

- For photos from the film and its creation process, embeddable trailers, screener access and other assets contact John Michael Kennedy, JMKPR, jmk@jmkpr.com or 781-620-1761.