

OPERA IS IMPOSSIBLE

by Anne Bogart, BLO Artistic Associate

In his gorgeous recent book *The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera*, composer Matthew Aucoin details the many impossibilities inherent in the opera experience. From its inception, he writes, opera undertook the daunting task of recreating Greek drama, a form that no one alive at the time had ever heard or experienced. He goes on to elaborate opera's balancing act throughout history, for performers and spectators alike. Perhaps due to its unique position at the intersection of musical composition, theatrical performance, poetic expression, and visual artistry — not to mention its ability to interweave political, personal, and spiritual themes — opera tends to convey multiple messages simultaneously. This can be both demanding as well as rewarding for audiences. Other challenges include cultural and language barriers, a reputation for elitism, and the cost of attendance. But what shines through in Aucoin's book is his profound passion for the art form and his optimism about its present and future.

And this is what is required: optimism and the willingness to embrace the great obstacles that the opera enterprise sets before us. And with great gusto. Obstacles are what define a person and even an organization. It is the impossibilities that catch fire and expand the definitions of what it means to be human.

I recently joined Boston Lyric Opera as their Artistic Associate. I agreed to become part of the company because I have been consistently astonished and inspired by their courage, tenacity, and audacity under nearly insurmountable conditions. Their ambitions and the ways they achieve their objectives are remarkably daring and often highly successful. As Artistic Associate, I am actively involved in the process of shepherding each season's operas to BLO's stages.

Before becoming the Artistic Associate, I stage-directed two BLO productions: an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* by composer Poul Ruders, and Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* intertwined with Alma Mahler's *Four Songs*. I am currently in pre-production to direct this



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season's *Carousel* by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein. The complications involved in bringing *The Handmaid's Tale* into being were monumental. We transported a gigantic cast, design, and audience to Harvard's enormous Lavietes Pavilion, a space originally envisioned by Margaret Atwood as the Red Center, where, in her fiction, a fascist theocracy trained battalions of handmaids. For *Bluebeard's Castle* | *Four Songs*, we constructed an immersive experience for audiences within the massive Flynn Cruiseport in South Boston's Seaport District. For *Carousel*, we are bringing a colossal emblem of American musical theatre to the very space of its first performance in 1945: the Colonial Theatre.

Mitridate, also a remarkable and perhaps nearly impossible choice for BLO, was originally commissioned by Milan's Teatro Regio Ducale in 1770. It is a serious opera written by a then-callow 14-year-old composer named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Based upon a little-known Racine tragedy, the work is astonishingly advanced for such a young boy who had inherited the convention-heavy 18th-century style and practices of composition. The score advances the action in vast swathes of recitative interspersed

with arias of vertiginous difficulty that equate emotional crisis with vocal athletics. The intense feelings of love, jealousy, and betrayal experienced by the opera's characters are expressed in frenetic energy and dazzling high notes. This is a young composer's extraordinary but uneven achievement that hints at the genius to come. An older, wiser Mozart later wrote arias that were more subtly difficult, and fewer of them per opera. Despite its initial run of 21 performances, for years afterward, *Mitridate* was considered unsingable. For all these reasons, it is an opera that hardly ever sees the light of day.

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At the opera's outset, family patriarch Mitridate — a combustible combination of weakness, vanity and cruelty — is presumed dead. The plot revolves around the intense rivalry between Mitridate's two doppelgänger-ish sons, Sifare and Farnace. The brothers are involved in a bitter feud over Aspasia, their father's intended bride, who has captured both of their hearts. Aspasia is in love with the noble Sifare and rejects the amorous advances of the devious, indolent Farnace. Suddenly, Mitridate reappears — not dead — suspicious of the motives of his sons and bent on vengeance for their duplicity. Much anguish ensues and the generational struggle plays out in emotional, political, and personal dimensions. The opera resonates like life, a constant battle between old and new.

What I love most about creating and experiencing opera is its inherent impossibility and extravagance, its extreme nature and disregard for realism. Opera plunges audiences directly into the emotions of people on the brink, emotions that are intricately woven together with magnificent, complex layers of exquisite music. Opera provides a shared, cross-cultural experience that is often exhilarating, blending artistry and athleticism, virtuosity and strength, as well as the grand and the personal.



LIZA VOLL PHOTOGRAPHY

Ryan McKinny and Naomi Louisa O'Connell in BLO's *Bluebeard's Castle* / *Four Songs*, March 2023

And surprisingly, during the most tragic and bloody moments, the singers as well as the audience seem to enjoy themselves immensely. For these reasons and more, I feel that opera may be the world's greatest art form.

At the beginning of any process, the obstacles around realizing a production generally feel insurmountable. A tremendous amount of effort, planning, fundraising, imagination, and preparation must be invested in an art form that, in the end, depends upon the delicate vibrations of a singer's vocal cords. A great deal of care, expense, and time goes into respecting the rules and procedures of the unions that protect our orchestras, singers, designers, and other creative personnel during hiring and production periods. The nature of opera-going itself provides plenty of obstacles as well, including its sometimes off-putting rituals and its inherent extremities of passion and feeling. Then there is the massive presence of the orchestra over which the human voice must soar. All of this feels epic and improbable. And yet, an ease and lightness must rise above all this effort. And this lightness is nothing less than ecstatic beauty.