

A conversation with Arin Arbus

HGO's Managing Director Perryn Leech discusses the art of making opera with the talented, up-and-coming American theater director.



One of the great joys of my career has been collaborating with some of the world's most accomplished and acclaimed opera directors. But there is something incredibly fulfilling about helping someone who is new to the operatic art form immerse themselves in the process of planning an opera from concept to reality, from page to stage, as it were. Last season, it was Michael Grandage, whose new production of *Madame Butterfly* was only his second opera ever; this season it's my great pleasure to have a similar opportunity to support Arin Arbus as she makes her debut as an opera director with *The Rape of Lucretia*.

I met Arin for the first time about eighteen months ago over a leisurely brunch in New York City. She was already an exciting and highly regarded theater director; my job at that time

was to talk her through the many basic differences between producing opera as opposed to theater. What did it mean that we did two shows "in repertoire"? How could we manage with virtually no technical time with the singers? Could an opera singer really only work for six hours a day? How does having two directors in the process (the director and the conductor) work? And why on earth were we talking about an opera that we would not do for a year and a half when the lead-time in some of her shows is often weeks rather than months?

At the start we might as well have been talking in completely different languages, but by the end we were both much better in sync. It is important to find out what newcomers to opera know about the process, but much more important to find out what they don't know so that you can support them.

A lot has changed at HGO in the eighteen months since that first meeting, and a lot has happened in the process of bringing *Lucretia* to life. Arin and I met again in New York in October, before going to see an opera at the Met. This time we had a much less pragmatic and more esoteric conversation about her theatrical values, influences, and style, as well as how much she is looking forward to diving into rehearsals for *Lucretia*.

Perryn Leech: What made you decide to try your hand at directing an opera?

Arin Arbus: After seeing some of my work, Anthony Freud approached me and convinced me that the idea of directing an opera was not as terrifying as it seemed. I guess in some way I'm attracted to things which are

frightening — challenging projects, new situations, new people, and new forms of expression.

PL: What three words (and only three!) would you use to describe your overall directing style?

AA: Open. Collaborative. Compassionate.

PL: Whose theater work has had the biggest influence on your artistic outlook?

AA: My parents were both in the theater, and my mom took me to plays all the time when I was a kid. When I was four or five, she took me to see Trevor Nunn's eight-hour production of *Nicholas Nickleby*. Those characters made a huge impression; I couldn't let go of them. My mom and I would be grocery shopping or driving somewhere and we would pretend to be Smike or Mrs. Squeers. I realize now that characters in literature and their stories always occupied my imagination. When I was in grade school, my father was in productions of Beckett's *Endgame* and Pinter's *The Homecoming*. I remember going to those productions and being shocked. I didn't really understand what was going on, but for the first time I understood that playwrights were trying to communicate something large about human experience. That was very exciting and mysterious to me then, and remains so.

There have been so many other influential experiences and people: the late, great director Gerald Gutierrez, who was my mentor and a close friend; Theater for a New Audience's Founding Artistic Director Jeffrey Horowitz introduced me to Shakespeare and in doing so, opened up a whole imaginative world for me; Cicely Berry, Robert Woodruff, Peter Brook, Harold Clurman, Shakespeare, Adrienne Kennedy, August Wilson, Ibsen...

PL: You've done a big project with inmates at Woodbourne Prison. Why did you choose to work with prisoners?

AA: I was going through a period of doubt; I often do. I doubted myself and my work and the context in which theater is made and seen in America. I started wondering if the work I was doing was important to my collaborators and to the audiences who were attending. Did it have an impact on anyone? I wondered: in what context could theater be meaningful? Prison, in some ways, is an ideal context for theater because it is a highly charged political sphere that exists outside of capitalism. That's exciting to me. One does not have to worry about box office income or reviews. Language has power in prison. Certain words are thought of as dangerous. It reminds me of a great quote from a Thomas Kyd play, "where words prevail not, violence prevails." Most of the men I work with are in prison because of violence. They found themselves in situations where words could not prevail. So for them, the opportunity to express themselves through words is significant and meaningful to them personally.

PL: Was there anything about directing this specific Britten chamber opera that attracted you?

AA: The music is amazing. I'm attracted to the very complex characters. I'm attracted to the political ideas that are rooted in the opera — ideas about occupation and revolution. I'm attracted to Lucretia — a woman who has the courage to refuse to accept things as they are. I'm also attracted to the dramaturgical structure of the piece, which in some ways frustrates and provokes more than it satisfies.

PL: What specifically about this particular work, *The Rape of Lucretia*, will you find most challenging?

AA: I think one of the great challenges of *Lucretia* is to find a way to tell the story that preserves the inherent ambiguities of the piece.

PL: What do you anticipate will be the main differences in directing an opera rather than a theater piece?

AA: Well, the music. In theater, you generally have the words but have to uncover the rhythm. In Shakespeare, for instance, there is a great musicality to his words, but every actor will create a different kind of music when he or she speaks the text; different rhythms, different crescendos, different caesuras, diminuendos, etc. — all of which are valid. In opera, the rhythm is already there. The emotion and the patterns of thought are already precisely laid out. That's a tremendous help, in a certain sense. One still has to uncover what's going on inside a person when he or she is singing, but you have more information than in a straight play. That's both limiting and liberating.

PL: What characteristic do you admire most in performers when you are directing them?

AA: I love performers who are both great listeners and great inventors.

PL: If you were told you could only direct one more show ever (in any medium), what would you choose?

AA: ONLY ONE MORE SHOW? Yikes! I would like to direct *King Lear*. That play cuts to the heart of the matter for me. I also love the medium of television. I know very little about how it's made, but I think it's a medium with great potential as the audience gets to know characters in a very different way from those in theater or opera. There isn't necessarily one great arc or journey for a character, and in that sense it's more like life. That interests me.

In discussing the performance we had just seen at the Met, I realized that although the opera process is inherently different, Arin's skill and theatrical beliefs will bring to life a production of *Lucretia* that is collaborative for the performing forces, compassionate in its storytelling, and totally open to the new challenges of directing opera. She couldn't have used three better words to describe herself!