



## Playwrights at the Opera: On Writing the Libretto

By Michael Korie, with Deborah Brevoort, Thulani Davis, Donna DiNovelli, David Henry Hwang, William Hoffman, Stephen Karam, Craig Lucas, Terrence McNally, John Patrick Shanley, and Royce Vavrek

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Since the beginnings of opera, playwrights have been drawn to writing librettos – the plays which are entirely set to music, sung by opera singers, and accompanied by symphony orchestras.

It makes sense that playwrights would want to test their wings in the rarified venue of the opera house. In fact, writing an opera libretto may be closer to writing a play than writing a musical. Musicals stop talking in order to sing, but operas are continuous. In language, librettos are closer to plays than the lyrics to musicals are since librettos are not written in rhymed song form. And unlike in a musical, a playwright doesn't have to relinquish the juiciest moments of the script to be regurgitated in lyrics in song form.

Of course, librettos have also been written by composers themselves, noted poets, lyricists, novelists, and every now and then a journalist –, here at *The Dramatist* we wanted to hear *exclusively* from playwright-librettists, and learn exactly what all the excitement is about.

These days there seems to be a good deal of excitement. Audiences are more interested in new operas than ever before now that they can actually understand what's being sung amidst all those open-vowels sounds. All they have to do is glance at the now ubiquitous super-titles writ large above the proscenium. And understanding the action changes the whole ballgame. No longer do audiences have to study librettos beforehand and try to remember what the foreign words mean, or read along in the top balcony with tiny flashlights, or try to make sense of the condensed plot descriptions in the playbills. Now ticket-holders can demand the same dramatic verisimilitude that they do in plays or films. Composers naturally want their works to reach the widest possible audience and get future performances – a watertight libretto helps. Interested in bringing opera to new audiences, opera companies led by The Metropolitan Opera have initiated bold new works programs specifically aimed at creating new operas in collaboration with today's leading playwrights. And so, here in the Broadway issue, we have asked ten playwrights to

share their thoughts on what it takes to write a libretto, and relate some of their experiences across town and up the avenue from the Great White Way.

The playwrights we spoke to are, in alphabetical order: **Deborah Brevoort**, **Thulani Davis**, **Donna Di Novelli**, **David Henry Hwang**, **William Hoffman**, **Stephen Karam**, **Craig Lucas**, **Terrence McNally**, **John Patrick Shanley**, and **Royce Vavrek**.

**Michael Korie:** How many opera librettos have you written, and which was your favorite or favorites?

**Royce Vavrek:** I've written three full-length operas, *Dog Days* with composer David T. Little, *Song from the Uproar* with Missy Mazzoli and *Maren of Vardø* with Jeff Myers. One-act operas include *Prairie Dogs* with Rachel Peters, *Angel's Bone* with Du Yun, and *Strip Mall* with Matt Marks.

**Stephen Karam:** Only one, *Dark Sisters*.

**John Patrick Shanley:** *Doubt* is my first. I enjoyed it very much.

**Deborah Brevoort:** I have written three opera librettos: *Altezza* with composer Alexandra Vrebalov about Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell; *Embedded* inspired by Edgar Allan Poe with composer Patrick Soluri; and *Steal A Pencil For Me* about the Holocaust with composer Gerald Cohen. *Embedded* is my favorite.

**William Hoffman:** *The Ghosts of Versailles* – 1981 – Metropolitan Opera (twice), Lyric Opera of Chicago, and other productions. Music by John Corigliano. *The Cows of Apollo* – Brooklyn Academy of Music – Music by Christopher Theofanides. Based on the only extant comedy of Sophocles. It purports how music came into existence (Hermes stole one of Apollo's sacred cows and turned it into a lyre!) *Morning Star* – commissioned originally by the Lyric Opera of Chicago, then re-commissioned by the Cincinnati Opera. Music by Ricky Ian Gordon. Based on Sylvia Regan's play. Set against the backdrop of the Triangle Shirt Waist factory fire, I tend to like the opera I'm in the throes of creating more than all the others. Right now *Morning Star* is my favorite work. But earlier *Ghosts* was my favorite.

**Thulani Davis:** Three: *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, Anthony Davis, composer, 1985; *The E. & O. Line*, Anne

LeBaron, composer, 1989; *Amistad, An Opera*, Anthony Davis, composer, 1997. And a couple of oratorios. I love the melding of words and music most in “X”-words and music perfectly matched– and probably like my own work best in “Amistad.”

**Craig Lucas:** With Gerald Busy, one of our operas, *Breedlove*, tells a straightforward story, historical in nature, and the other, *Orpheus in Love*, explodes its narrative, backwards and forwards. The Nico Muhly opera, *Two Boys*, is based loosely on a news item about an internet crime from early 2001 in England, and we’ve been working on it for about five years. The Metropolitan Opera has lavished time and attention and support, as has the English National Opera where it debuted last year.

**Donna Di Novelli:** I cut my teeth on *Florida*, a work I wrote with Randall Eng. With Christopher Theofanidis, I wrote *Heart of a Soldier* for San Francisco Opera based on a nonfiction account of the life of Rick Rescorla. Chris’s beautiful verisimo score is studded with electric guitar wailing over battle scenes in Vietnam and ends when a bag pipe enters the balcony of the opera house.

**David Henry Hwang:** I have written eight works with contemporary classical composers. Of these, five could be considered operas, while the remaining three are musical theatre hybrids. My favorites include *Ainadamar* with Osvaldo Golijov and my first such piece, *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* with Philip Glass. According to “Opera News,” I am the most-produced living American opera librettist, which feels like something of a 19th-century distinction.

**MK:** How does writing an opera libretto differ from writing dialogue for a play, or the book and lyrics for a musical?

**WH:** Operas follow the same dramatic rules as plays and film scripts. Each scene needs conflict, each scene has to connect to a central theme, the stakes of the opera need to be life and death, and if the work is comic, it has to make me laugh out loud.

**JPS:** After we were about halfway through creating the opera *Doubt* I went to see *The Marriage of Figaro* and afterwards I called the composer and I said, you know, we really haven’t done enough repetition. Because repetition is where the

music gets to develop. By saying the same phrase over and over again you can explore it musically in a way you can't when the language is always changing.

**RV:** Each project comes with its own set of specific challenges, whether it is an opera or a musical. I do seem to rhyme more when I write musicals than I do in an opera libretto.

**CL:** Music tends to slow down the momentum of the language, so you can't cram too many words or syllables in or it starts to create a comic mash. There is always paring away. Sung phrasing alters our hearing, and certain phrases that would play perfectly intelligibly in a play become vaguely double-entre-ish when the sounds are elongated by singing. Also, the composer's needs become paramount: things have to "sing" to the composer. They have to have a secret music above and beyond the simple way that the language scans (or doesn't!). Meaning and inference becomes paramount, and so a lot of communication between composer and librettist, back and forth, has to happen. My dialogue relies heavily on the white space; I'm slightly averse to people saying what they mean and meaning what they say, I lose interest without subtext and inference and the tension between what a character knows about themselves and what they deny or are completely unaware of. People reveal themselves in what they do.

**DB:** In general, it takes more time to sing an opera aria than a song in a musical, so you can't have a lot of words or otherwise the opera will take all night. This forced economy makes your libretto highly poetic and theatrical.

**SK:** For me, it's about letting the music do all of the heavy lifting. In other words, I ask myself constantly: could the music express this? If so, let the music do the story-telling. A line like: "That big, bold, hazy, overwhelmingly gray sky!" can – and usually should – be: "That sky..." if it will be set to music by a talented composer. The music capture the bigness and the boldness of it.

**DHH:** One of my libretti, *Sound and Beauty*, with music by Philip Glass, is adapted from two of my one-act plays, which gave me a very clear opportunity to note the differences between these forms. On a technical level, the libretti need to be more concise, since it takes longer to sing "I love you" than to say it. In a larger sense, there is an important difference where it comes to issues of artistic control. When I write a

play, I hold the primary artistic vision, and all my collaborators ideally support that. With an opera, part of my job as I see it is to create a libretto which is going to help the composer to do his or her best work.

**TD:** One has to have a sense of how one's rhythms, tonalities and emotional tone sets the ground for music the composer has not thought of yet. You want to feed the composer's imagination and in an array of voices, tones and rhythms. Ideas must be said more simply and one has to look for lyrical moments that can be enlarged, repeated and become themes in works with a chorus.

**MK:** Did you experience a learning curve when you wrote your first opera libretto? What was your preparation?

**TD:** Are you kidding? There is no preparation for making something where every singer can hit every syllable on every note and get your point across at the same time— you have to do it. I grew up listening to opera, but I did look at libretti, which depressed me enormously and seemed bound by a lot of unnecessary stage business, so I put them down. I started trying to write a play in free and standard verse, ditched that. I set out to write a long poem and that is what I still do.

**DB:** I participated in the American Lyric Theater's Composer/Librettist Development Program, an intensive program in opera writing. I studied librettos and scores; did writing assignments with composers; wrote *Altezza* and then *Embedded* under the guidance of opera composers, librettists and dramaturges provided by ALT. This process took about two years.

**DHH:** My first work with composer Philip Glass, *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, was more of a musical theatre piece. Though not an opera, it got me used to working with music that plays a central, if not primary, role in an evening of theatre. By the time we wrote our full opera *The Voyage* for the Metropolitan Opera in 1992, I had spent time trying to familiarize myself with the opera repertoire. Of course, working on my play *M Butterfly*, which quoted extensively from Puccini's opera, also acquainted me with the form.

**DDN:** You can't write plays if you don't go to the theater. You can't write opera if you don't spend time absorbing and studying the form. Deconstructing opera is the necessary step to constructing one's own—and something I enjoy

doing, engaging my analytical mind sparks my creative side. My path to opera is littered with musical theater. I wrote my last play in 1995 when I was recruited by the Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program at Tisch and all my thinking and investigating from then on has concerned the combination of words and music. My earliest influences—those jump-out-of-your-skin moments of excitement—were produced by *Trouble in Tahiti* and *Peter Grimes* and English language operas in general— Michael Korie’s *Harvey Milk*; Wayne Koestenbaum’s *Jackie O*; Alice Goodman’s *The Death of Klinghoffer*. I later came to appreciate the librettos of Mark Campbell, J.D. McClatchy, and Mark Adamo, and the use of text by David Lang and Michael Gordon.

**SK:** I listened to and saw as many operas as I could. Librettos are funny things when you look at all of the classics; many of them endure because of the music alone. There are gorgeous scores saddled with terrible, implausible, absurd librettos – but opera really is first and foremost about the music. That said, nothing is better when rich music meets a rich story.

**CL:** My first love, the late actor Peter Evans, introduced me to Benjamin Britten’s operas, and I sank into them. Britten was scrupulously careful about not only the stories he chose but then every single syllable of the language spoken, the shape of scenes, the design. Operas and musicals (and screenplays) are much more overtly structural than plays, which can be slightly baggier, though nowhere near as baggy as novels which can seem like great shuffling fatsos compared to even the most expansive play, say *The Iceman Cometh*.

**JPS:** When I saw *La Boheme* for the first time, I thought, "Oh, I know exactly what this is." It was in my bones. But I was not part of the tradition of opera going – where I came from, no one went to a play. It’s only recently that I actually started to go to see operas. I’m starting to love opera, but I was definitely a neophyte. I’ve been both praised and criticized for my plays when they said, "It’s like an opera!" The workshop of *Doubt* taught me a lot. I wanted to open it up in a different way than I had for the screenplay – for instance, in an opera, I realized you could hear the feelings and thoughts of the parishioners in the sermon scenes, and in order to do that we really had to do some experimentation on our feet.

- RV:** I was able to experiment with libretto-writing through my participation in American Lyric Theater's Composer Librettist Development Program. It began with me writing small projects – an aria, then a duet – and culminated in my writing the libretti for two one-act operas. (*Note from editor: see box on ALT.*)
- MK:** How helpful was the composer about expressing what was needed for the music, and how to write words for opera singers to sing?
- DDN:** Collaboration with a composer, and ultimately with the music itself, is what transformed me from playwright into librettist. The key to collaboration is beginning at the beginning. An opera isn't a play set to music. It's a joint venture where the interplay of music and drama is the basis of the art form. And collaboration is one tough mother. Finding a match of sensibilities, and a match of desire, is paramount. I can't imagine working with a composer whose music didn't thrill me or with whom I couldn't discuss how dramatic function and musical choice connect.
- WH:** I need the composer to set limits: they have to let me know what they find settable or un-settable. What is it that they need to accomplish musically, and how my libretto can help them or hinder them. John Corigliano was determined *not* to write any opera that could be pigeon-holed as neo-classical, in the vein of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, whose libretto by W. H. Auden locked him into a wrong-note harmony province of the 18th century. I was required by John to write a libretto that was not locked into the neo-classical genre. It was an interesting problem for me to solve. Ricky Ian Gordon, similarly, did not want to be locked into a turn-of-the-century America.
- JPS:** The composer, Douglas Cuomo, wanted to go with the natural flow of the language as it had been in the play and in the film. I ended up stylizing sections of it to make it a sort of hybrid between lyrics and dialogue so that it would lend itself to increased musicalization. .
- CL:** Both Gerald Busby and Nico Muhly love the social aspect of the opera world, they are both avid foodies so their approach to the music is somewhat kitchen-inflected: "We'll take some of this and some of that, whatever we've got, and we'll whip up *something*." I'm sure both of them have had moments when they'd absolutely love to murder

me, but they have both been kind and forgiving and we have worked and worked and worked until the narratives and the words are artful and simple and clear.

- TD:** Anthony Davis was very helpful and taught me a lot about singers. The singers taught me as well. He didn't tell me what he needed. We discussed moods, pace, etc; he told me what he heard and I did the same. I told him the opening of *X* had to be tense, suggested things I'd heard him do on piano that fit what I was trying to describe, and then said the soprano should come in and cut across the tension underneath. It seemed the way we would meet Malcolm's mother. That's what he composed. He told me where he wanted instrumental scenes and was excellent at thinking through the sequence of scenes, lots of visual elements, and how to include improvisation. He saw the right ending for *X* and I got my way for the ending of *Amistad*.
- RV:** I usually have a pretty good idea of the composer's musical language before writing text for them, and most of the composers have seen and heard how my words work with music. Normally we'll talk a lot about the piece and how the words and music will function for the specific project before either of us begin work.
- SK:** Nico Muhly was incredibly helpful. We did a lot of back and forth discussion regarding music-time and space. Sometimes Nico would take a lengthy passage and ask for it to be cut in half. Sometimes I handed him a line like: "Look what I did." And it became an aria! We had ongoing discussions about music-time and how long we thought certain parts of the story should take.
- DHH:** Whenever I start work on an opera, I spend a good deal of time with the composers trying to understand what will help them to do their best work. So it's not just a question of how to write words; rather, I try to find out what's going to push their buttons, so to speak. For instance, I learned that Osvaldo Golijov likes passionate words and scenes with lots of guts and blood; Unsuk Chin, on the other hand, wants the words to be almost like wallpaper, so her music stands out and carries the piece forward. It's very important to me that the composer expresses his or her wants and needs for the libretto.
- DB:** I have written a number of musicals and have a good sense of what is sing-able and what isn't so I didn't need to have



that conversation. As for other musical issues, occasionally the composer would ask me to rewrite a line by adding a syllable or two, or ending a line with a “A-sound” or an “O” but that was about it. I was never consulted on musical issues.

**MK:** What do playwrights writing a libretto need to be conscious of knowing that it is going to be sung?

**JPS:** To think about that idea of how can a script develop musically, how can a series of lines of dialogue transposed into this form allow the composer to develop them? In pop music, there are very definite repetitive structures that are used to create a worm in the brain and create something memorable. But in opera, there is more open rein given to exploring something in a much longer melodic and orchestral line. So you don’t want to write a pop lyric masquerading as an opera. You want to write passionate material that revisits its base as it escalates so that you can get somewhere. In terms of language, whether you’re going up a flight of stairs or going down a flight of stairs, you want to really feel the progression of the language.

**MK:** What about the drama or story you chose convinced you it should be an opera?

**CL:** Frankly, in all three instances, it was the composer’s music that excited me. I love the parts of the psyche and spirit that can be accessed by music. So, once I knew I wanted to work with a particular composer, the story always came from them.

**DHH:** Basically, a good opera story embraces heightened reality. The audience will suspend its disbelief for most narrative genres, but is particularly willing to do so in opera, since the aesthetic premise itself is already so non-naturalistic, i.e. people in real life do not go around singing all the time. That’s why many opera plots could be considered "over the top," but with the addition of music, beautifully render intense emotions such as love, hate, grief, and revenge.

**DDN:** The inexpressible in each story required–demanded– music: when words alone fail and the void can only be filled by an operatic voice going beyond letter and thought. Think on how the word “misterioso” is set in *La Traviata*. Vowels of pleasure. What the heart understands beyond the mind’s logic. That’s opera’s gift.

- DB:** All of the stories dealt with big, primal emotions, high-stakes dramatic situations; and epic events –war, terrorism, the Holocaust. These subjects require a heightened treatment that is suited to opera where everything is enlarged.
- RV:** I love singular characters with interesting perspectives, and I appreciate a certain velocity in the way the story moves forward. I tend to fall in love with stories very easily, and often will find myself half way through a novel consumed with ideas for adapting it for the opera.
- SK:** There is a memoir of one of Brigham Young’s wives called *WIFE NO. 19*: Reading it and others, it was clear that these women, having lived such house-ridden, emotionally shut-down lives – the moment they voiced their feelings for the first time publicly, it was an explosion of ideas and emotions. They were practically singing already.
- TD:** If I like a story, I try to figure out what form best opens up its potential.
- MK:** Did you write the libretto first and then give it to the composer, or did you work simultaneously, back and forth? How many changes did you make?
- DHH:** In all my opera collaborations to date, I have written the words first, then the composer has set them to music. Some composers wish to get more involved in the details of the libretto, others are interested in the overall structure but less so the words themselves. As a rule, opera composers don’t rewrite the way we are used to doing with plays or musicals. In part, this is because operas don’t get previews. In my opinion, this is a problem with opera development; there’s not enough time for rewriting based on what one learns from an audience. An exception to the generalization that opera composers don’t rewrite, was Osvaldo Golijov. On the opening night of *Ainadamar* at Santa Fe Opera, I had given Osvaldo three possible last lines for Dawn Upshaw to sing; as the lights went up on the performance, I still didn’t know which one had had chosen!
- RV:** I always try to have a complete libretto finished before the composer starts writing. There are almost always changes/additions/cuts that need to be made once the composer digs in, but I find it wise to have the whole libretto completed before the composition begins.

- WH:** All of my opera work went back and forth to the composer. I can't imagine writing an opera that didn't involve a lot of input from the composer. Operas are the most collaborative of art forms.
- DB:** The back and forth part of the process happened after I had working drafts. In one opera, *Steal A Pencil For Me* I developed the outline for the opera in close collaboration with the composer. I gave him the first act of the libretto and made changes to it before going on to the second act. After the complete libretto was finished I continued to make numerous changes as he wrote the music.
- CL:** The words came first, though often, once music had been composed, words would change and I would try to find something to fit the scansion. But both composers have their own unique solutions to that, and I try to never interfere.
- SK:** Libretto first and agreed upon before even one note of music was written.
- TD:** I write first. We go back and forth. It was very thrilling to have Anthony phone and excitedly say he'd had an idea and play something on the piano. Lots of changes. I purposely overwrote and let Anthony cut to what he liked best. He often just trimmed or pulled certain passages for a chorus in addition to what I may have indicated.
- JPS:** I gave the composer a portion of the libretto, and he scored it and then came over to my apartment and would plink out note by note every beat of the composition. Then we'd stop and talk about it and I'd raise whatever issues I had with that particular piece of plinking. It took a couple of months to arrive at a common language.
- MK:** Did you ever arrive at a point where you and your composer had a vastly different approach to a certain scene or moment? How did you work through that difference?
- TD:** We heard different things sometimes and we did some yelling.
- DB:** Truthfully? The composers usually get their way. Musical needs trump dramatic concerns. I think in their heart of hearts opera composers are not really collaborative beings. They tend to go off and work by themselves. The libretto is

viewed as a vehicle for their musical composition—not as an artistic creation in its own right that has equal standing with the music. It is very different than musical theatre, where decisions are mutually agreed-upon and each element in the work is equally important.

- CL:** I find it necessary to enter into the composer’s vision, so I would never dig my heels in or stay so attached to my own version of something if the composer wasn’t happy. Opera is a composer’s medium. Musicals, too. They don’t call them Books-icals or Lyrics-icals, they’re both based on music, and that’s why I think ideas that come from composers are best, and as much as I will try to fight for narrative coherence, my solutions are not that important to me: music often unlocks things.
- RV:** We always discuss the idea before the composition begins, even if just in broad strokes, so we’re on the same page.
- SK:** Our disagreements were always in the spirit of making the opera better. We never reached an impasse. We had a good marriage.
- DHH:** As I’ve said before, it is my belief that part of my job as a librettist is to serve the composer. Therefore, if I have a disagreement with the composer, I will make my case as strongly as possible, but in the end, will defer to his/her decision. This is not unlike writing for movies, where, in the end, I will generally defer to the director.
- MK:** What was your favorite moment in the completed opera where you felt you accomplished something you couldn’t have without music?
- SK:** Two favorites: Nico did an astonishing thing at the end of Act 1; he wrote a beautiful sextet that captured the individual pain and prayers of each woman, climaxing into a huge wave of aching music. You understood the desires of six different women all at once. In Act II, on national television, one of the characters suffers a panic attack. The way he achieved her racing pulse, anxiety, her distorted vision – all with just the orchestra – it was thrilling.
- DB:** The most powerful moment for me was hearing the orchestrations in *Embedded*. I had an epiphany: I suddenly understood how the orchestra works dramatically in an

opera. It is more than just an accompaniment, it has a dramatic function and it carries theme.

- CL:** My favorite moment is always when the orchestra arrives. When I hear that sound I simply cannot believe that I have had anything to do with what's on the stage, it is so magical and completely transformative to me.
- RV:** The aria "Mirror, Mirror" in *Dog Days* comes to mind. In the scene, the protagonist Lisa, starving and emaciated, looks into a mirror and sings what's almost a love song to herself and her model-like body. David T. Little's music creates a whole internal world of excitement, delusion, loneliness and extreme sadness that my words could really only begin to suggest.
- DDN:** I always feel I've accomplished something I couldn't have without music. When I think of specific moments, I think of Christopher Theofanidis' setting of the word 'Stay' sung by Melody Moore as Susan Rescorla. A word we hear a young boy sing to the G.I.'s in World War II is transformed by the end of the opera to a woman's plea to her husband who is about to perish in the World Trade Center. Four letters on my part, but with Chris's music– the heart of *Heart of a Soldier*.
- TD:** Hearing the words sung is an unbelievable experience. I sit in dress rehearsal, where only those of us who have worked on it hear it, and cry a lot. Opera allows me to give communities voice in my stories like the role of a Greek Chorus. I don't really write solely about individuals.
- DHH:** I agree with Shaffer in *Amadeus* that one of the amazing things about opera is the ability to have many voices speaking at the same time. I think, for instance, of the final trio, "Doy mi Sangre," in *Ainadamar*, where an intensely driving percussive section of music suddenly gives way to this blend of heavenly female voices, which transports us immediately to a place of transcendence and grace, in a way only music can.
- MK:** Compared to your creative involvement in the production of your plays, how involved were you in all aspects of the production of your opera – for example, casting, staging, making changes.

- DB:** Playwrights often wait until they get in the room with actors before making their final revisions. But you can't do that in opera. The production with the orchestra, singers, scores is so huge, complicated and expensive that by the time you get to rehearsals it is financially prohibitive to make any changes. Occasionally during rehearsals I could get a word changed in the libretto here and there, but that was it.
- CL:** You gotta pick your battles in life. In another life maybe I'll be reborn as a composer and I'll get more artistic control over an opera.
- TD:** Mainstream opera houses are not really geared to create from scratch. As someone told me, "We usually get the opera in a kit, so to speak." I told her, "This time you are making the kit." A chorus master in Chicago once asked me why I came for all four weeks of rehearsal and said the last librettist only came to correct diction two days prior. I said, "That's too late." I first flew to Chicago, solely to let the chorus ask about diction (American vowels or European, e.g.) six months before rehearsal.
- RV:** I don't think I have an interesting answer for this question.
- DDN:** Because my background is musical theater I'm always ready to rewrite in rehearsal—I thrive on it. Composers? Not so much. With orchestration attached, I find in all cases there is an early end to rewrites. One exception occurred when we were about to premiere *Heart of a Soldier* and our beloved maestro, Patrick Summers suggested we write a brand new aria for our lead, Thomas Hampson—I think it was four days before opening. It became one of the most successful moments of the opera.
- DHH:** One difficult aspect of being a librettist is that most opera companies are not used to dealing with living composers or librettists. If they choose to commission a new opera or do a contemporary work, they can usually wrap their heads around the idea that their composer is alive, but usually forget that there is a living librettist as well! So the librettist needs to push to make certain he or she is not forgotten, or even has a ticket for opening night!
- JPS:** Well, in casting, zero. I don't know much about the pool of talent in opera, and I would defer to others on that. I had a great deal to do with the conception of the piece in terms of staging. I went a long way in conceiving the whole thing. But

then, you bring in a director. There were a tremendous number of transitions, a lot of scenes, and Kevin Newberry did a wonderful job. In opera, to my amazement, the director doesn't cast it. The artistic director casts it. I'd never run into that before.

**SK:** The producers kept me unusually involved. I was at all the casting sessions, design meetings, etc. It was actually very similar to building a new play.

**MK:** Contracts for librettists fall outside the province of the Dramatist Guild and the kinds of agreements playwrights are used to. Do you have any advice to offer playwrights writing librettos?

**SK:** My advice is get a good lawyer. It's murky waters, and a lawyer will protect your interests.

**WH:** Librettists need to ask for an equal share in the profits of the opera and equal billing. Asking for equal treatment is an unusual requirement these days but if we don't go for that as our goal we will never achieve it.

**DB:** It's the Wild West out there for opera librettists in terms of contracts. Many of the things you would normally get as a lyricist and book writer on a musical, you won't get in opera – like your name listed in the program or poster! – unless you demand it. Issues to watch out for: copyright vs. work for hire; royalties; percentage splits for future revenues; and billing.

**CL:** Well, I'm not sure I do, because try as I might, the opera companies were not interested in yielding on certain fronts and were going to do things their way. I didn't love that, but I love the opera, and in fact, there is not one word or phrase or moment in *Two Boys* that I didn't write or didn't ultimately solve myself. Getting there was sometimes painful, there were a lot of cooks in the kitchen at times, but no one made me do anything I didn't want to do, finally, and for that, I will always be grateful.

**RV:** I think it's a good idea to have a collaboration agreement in place any time you are marrying your voice with someone else's.

**DDN:** I found it changes from composer to composer. There are some collaborations where composers set a fifty-fifty split

on commission and royalties; and others where a thirty-seventy is expected – and everything in between.

- DHH:** In most cases, the opera company will commission the composer, who will then sub-commission the librettist. So basically, we work for the composer and I see this as similar to any other work-for-hire arrangement, such as writing a movie.
- TD:** Share copyright. Do not do it as a “for hire” job. Work out a fair way to share percentages of all fees involved but only as a copyright holder do you maintain a continued connection to the life of the work.
- MK:** Finally, would you do it again?
- WH:** Only if the piece on which the opera was based were spectacularly interesting, the deal were fifty-fifty, and only if I loved the composer’s work prior work. This rules out most of the proposals that cross my desk.
- SK:** Absolutely. Nico wrote the incidental music for *Sons Of The Prophet* so we’ve already collaborated again...but we both hope another opera is in our near future.
- TD:** One more time, I think. Theater is an easier medium. Opera is like navigating an iceberg– just very huge.
- CL:** I would prefer to work away from New York, but that has more to do with the critical atmosphere here – so much position-taking, so much “All Good, All Terrible.” It’s dull dull dull. Look at the operas we are getting to see at The Met, look at all the new directors, the European productions, the younger audiences, the international screenings, the enthusiasm, the *music*. Peter Gelb has been a hero in those regards, and as for all of those vicious websites, which I do not visit, and all of those angry, angry opera “fans,” I’d rather drink my own urine than have anything to do with that. I thought theater was antagonistic but theater is a Zen monastery compared to opera in New York. Yikes!
- DHH:** I am. I just agreed to write *Alice Through the Looking Glass* with Unsuk Chin as a sequel to our *Alice in Wonderland* – commissioned by the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, to premiere in 2019(!).



- JPS:** I would certainly do an opera of *Moonstruck*. And I would do something original.
- DB:** Yes! My next project is already in the works, an Alaskan version of *Die Fledermaus* for the Anchorage Opera's 2014 season. Opera gives you the opportunity to work on a large scale—something that is virtually impossible in the theatre where plays with more than five characters can't get produced.
- RV:** I absolutely love the world of contemporary opera, and can't wait to create it again and again and again...
- DDN:** For me, being a librettist is about playing with the possibilities the conventions offer, and whether I am fulfilling or subverting them, hoping the composer will take my humble words and turn them into mysterious, heart-piercing beauty.

### Terrence McNally: The Role Of A Librettist

Playwright Terrence McNally's passionate association with opera is well known through his heralded trilogy of plays *Master Class*, *The Lisbon Traviata*, and *Golden Age*, as well as from his broadcasts for The Metropolitan Opera, and from his own libretto to the hugely successful *Dead Man Walking*, one of the most frequently produced new American operas. Here he shares his observations on writing librettos and the process of collaborating with a composer.

I've loved opera since I was in the 6th grade and our wacko nun brought in a phonograph and some Puccini love duets. I was hooked in about fifteen seconds. I'm sure it is opera that led me to writing plays, which accounts for my fondness for long speeches, duets, trios and quarters – all spoken, of course. I never found it odd or unbelievable that someone could drink poison or be stabbed and sing for fifteen minutes. It was just another way to try to express "Big Themes" and "Huge Emotions." For me, good theatre is poetic, a created reality. Opera understands this from the get-go. Naturalism and opera (and my kind of theatre) do not mix.

Writing an original libretto is a formidable project. So is writing an original musical. Unless you're a Frank Loesser or a Richard Wagner who can write both words and music, it can be very difficult to find a composer who "understands" what you're trying to say with your libretto and can translate that into music. I have

written one opera with Jake Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*. It is based on the memoir of Sister Helen Prejean. The audience was familiar with the general parameters of her story because of the hugely successful film. Also, Jake and I knew the general guidelines of “our” story: “Nun counsels man on death row up to the moment of his execution.” That’s a pretty strong outline to follow. We couldn’t stray too far from it.

Our next opera will be *Great Scott* based on my original libretto. Here I have to “inspire” Jake and make sure he understands my characters before he can put pen to paper. It has been an infinitely more challenging project to complete than our first collaboration. I can’t “just write it like a play” (as Jake keeps urging me) because plays are much looser, talkier, more leisurely than a good opera libretto. A musical libretto is somewhere in between the two. But having a pre-agreed upon story to tell does make the process “easier,” which is ridiculous because plays, musicals and librettos are never “easy.”

The playwright must choose a composer as carefully as we choose a spouse. There are as many bad collaborations as there are marriages but marriages are easier to get out of. Choose with caution and still hope for the best. You are going to be intimate for a couple of years, minimum. You have to love and respect each other and be able to stand the way the other one jiggles change in their pocket or eats with their fingers. This might sound petty but in the long run, it isn’t. A good collaboration can be glorious and exhilarating. But it needs a lot of commitment and patience. There is nothing more intimate that you will do as a writer than collaborate with a composer you admire.

Good collaboration means good give and take. It means standing your ground when you’re pretty sure you’re right and giving way when the composer’s needs and instincts are paramount. Some times you throw away a week’s work because the music alone says it better than you ever did.

In Master Class Maria Callas says “The composer is God.” That is true for the interpreter of an opera after it’s joined the repertory. But while it’s being written it’s the librettist who holds the keys to the kingdom. If the story and words don’t fly, the music won’t either.

People love to trash bad librettos. Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* is a prime example. I think it’s a pretty damn good libretto. It gives four great voices the chance to sing words that inspired Verdi’s great score. True, some of the “back story” is a little sketchy but when the characters are center stage we know exactly what they and Verdi are about.

The great librettists are Da Ponte for Mozart, Boito for Verdi and Hofmannsthal for Richard Strauss. I don’t know what you learn from “reading” them as literature but listening to them as music will teach anyone a lot about how situation and music and finally, words, go together. The great opera composers are great playwrights but I believe the great librettists helped them get that way.

Our job as librettists is more important than ever. More contemporary operas are being commissioned than ever before but too many of them fail because of ineffective librettos. If our story doesn't ring true or hold interest, the composer is writing notes, nothing but notes, and a second production of his opera is an unlikely prospect.