

Slaying the Dragon

a new opera by

Michael Ching & Ellen Frankel

Who? Center City Opera Theater, Michael Ching (composer), Ellen Frankel (librettist)

What? CCOT's 2011-2012 Creative Development Project world premiere opera

When? June 7 & 9, 2012 (Prince Music Theater); June 14, 16 & 17, 2012 (AVA's Helen Corning Warden Theater)

Where? Philadelphia, PA

Why? Celebrate new opera during the 2012 Opera America Conference in Philadelphia

About:

Background and Themes. *Slaying the Dragon* is inspired by real events that took place in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the early 1990's, when Larry Trapp, Grand Dragon of the Nebraska Ku Klux Klan, conducted a hate campaign against minority groups in this predominantly white Midwestern city. But when Cantor Michael and Julie Weisser reached out to Larry, despite his anti-Semitic threats, Larry turned his back on bigotry, and campaigned for tolerance until he died in the Weissers' home from advanced diabetes. Larry's story has inspired several imagined and documentary works, most notably Kathryn Watterson's 1995 journalistic account, *Not By the Sword*.

Drawing upon these historical events as well as their various retellings, *Slaying the Dragon* presents the fictional story of Jerry Krieg, a white supremacist whose life is suddenly transformed thanks to the kindness extended to him by Rabbi Nathan Goodman and his wife, Vera. Won over by their compassion, Jerry renounces his association with the Klan and other hate groups, and begins to speak out publicly for tolerance. However, Jerry's advanced diabetes cuts short his plans for a new life. Unable to care for himself, Jerry moves in with the Goodmans and converts to Judaism before dying.

During the course of the opera, we learn that Jerry was abused as a child. We also learn that Nathan spent part of his childhood in an orphanage and was later imprisoned for robbery before deciding to become a rabbi. In reaching out to Jerry, Nathan succeeds in healing many of the wounds inflicted during his own childhood. Before Jerry dies, he reaches out to his own abuser, his father, and reconciles with him.

In the end, this story is about two men, each scarred by abuse and the absence of love, who both find redemption from the prisons of their past. The story also presents a powerful portrait of

repentance and forgiveness, and the possibility of authentic change.

Plot Synopsis (subject to change):

Scene 1. Jerry's apartment. Confined to a wheelchair as a double amputee due to diabetes, Jerry makes harassing phone calls to Dr. Eunice Lincoln, an African-American leader and feminist; Giet Long, a Vietnamese immigrant who heads an Asian resettlement center; and Rabbi Nathan Goodman, a local Reform rabbi.

Scene 2. In front of a government building in the center of town. At a protest rally organized by Reverend Gray, Dr. Eunice Lincoln and Rabbi Goodman, the three speak out against racism. Jerry Krieg and his skinhead henchmen show up to heckle.

Scene 3. Jerry's apartment. Viper and Beast, two young skinheads who assist Jerry, deliver weapons and supplies to Jerry's apartment for Operation Gooks, Jerry's plot to destroy the Asian immigrant center.

Scene 4. Dark interior. Jerry Krieg is sworn in as Grand Dragon of the state KKK. Adolph Hasse, Grand Dragon of a Klan in another state, presides over the ceremony.

Scene 5. Goodmans' living room/TV Studio/Jerry's apartment. Vera and Nathan, together with Jordan Gray, Eunice Lincoln, and Giet Long, watch a broadcast of "The Truth about Race," a white supremacist video sponsored by Jerry. The scene shifts between the cablevision studio and the Goodmans' living room. The Goodmans and their guests express their outrage about the video. After their guests leave, Vera persuades Nathan to call Jerry.

Scene 6. Jerry's apartment. Jerry talks with Beast and Viper about upcoming plans to firebomb several homes, including Eunice Lincoln's, as well as Nathan Goodman's synagogue. Nathan calls Jerry, offering to do errands for him, but Jerry rebuffs him.

Scene 7. Goodmans' living room. Nathan calls Jerry, offering to help him get out of his present life. Jerry agrees to Vera's plan that she and Nathan bring dinner to his apartment. Vera asks Jordan to alert the police if they don't return by midnight.

(Intermission)

Scene 8. Jerry's apartment. Nathan and Vera arrive at Jerry's apartment with dinner. When Jerry realizes they truly want to help him, he breaks down. He vows to repudiate bigotry and violence and to ask his victims for forgiveness. Nathan invites Jerry to speak at the upcoming Martin Luther King Day program at Temple Emeth. Jerry reveals that he was abused as a child; Nathan discloses that he was abandoned as a child, turned to crime, and went to prison.

Scene 9. Nathan's Study at Temple Emeth. Jerry meets separately with Eunice Lincoln, Giet Long, and Esther Zikorn, a Holocaust survivor, to ask for their forgiveness. Although he reconciles with Eunice and Long, Esther refuses to forgive him.

Scene 10. Temple Emeth sanctuary. Eunice, Jordan, Giet Long, and Nathan speak at the MLK program. Jerry then speaks, apologizing for his past actions, pledging to promote the cause of tolerance, and denouncing his former associations with hate groups and violence. He is interrupted by Beast and Viper, but he shouts them down.

Scene 11. Goodmans' living room. Jerry's diabetes has become so severe that he has moved in with the Goodmans and Vera has quit her nursing job to care for him. Jerry fights with Vera, expressing regret for his recent turnabout; they reconcile. Jerry announces that he's ready to convert to Judaism.

Scene 12. Goodmans' living room. Jerry converts to Judaism, then dies.

Main Characters:

Jerry Krieg, Grand Dragon (tenor)

Nathan Goodman, Rabbi (baritone)

Vera Goodman, Nathan's wife (soprano)

Dr. Eunice Lincoln, African-American leader and author (alto)

Giet Long, Vietnamese immigrant, director of Asian Resettlement Center (baritone)

Minor Characters:

Reverend Jordan Gray, director of the Interfaith Council

Adolph Hasse, Grand Dragon of neighboring state

The Kladd, Klan ceremonial officer

The Night Hawk, Klan officer in charge of new inductees

Esther Zikorn, Holocaust survivor

Beast and **Viper**, Jerry's young skinhead sidekicks. Beast is a man in his twenties; Viper, a young woman in her late teens.

Several singers for small parts (**Klansmen, congregants and guests at Martin Luther King Day event**)

Final casting TBA