



Harnessing Girl Power

🕒 OCTOBER 8, 2020 👤 MEGAN GLOSS

Stage director Jennifer Williams discusses how to create empowered portrayals of women on the operatic stage.

Female protagonists in opera have long carried an unfair, if not inaccurate narrative. It often follows something like this: girl in long flowing gown meets boy immersed in a battle of heroic proportions. Girl and boy fall in love, despite the stakes being high and ultimately plotting against them. Girl is inevitably wronged and has no other choice but to face death by murder, suicide, or tuberculosis—or, get married.

While it might be a familiar tale, it hardly represents the potential that stage director Jennifer Williams sees for ditching the damsel in distress act and tapping into these female characters' inner bad asses with a fresh approach, all the while staying true to the context of the story.



Jennifer Williams
photo by Lucas Godlewski

Williams has become regarded for bringing a contemporary feminist flair to both new and traditional operatic repertoire. Though it's a theatrical genre she admitted to initially avoiding.

"It's funny, but I actually avoided opera very early in my career," Williams says. "Opera has a lot of baggage. It carefully branded itself to be exclusive, and that's still a seed that it carries. I think now in the 21st century, we're starting to fight back against that and to change that narrative to try to make it more inclusive. That includes women and the multiplicity of what it means to be a woman."

Discovering Opera's Potential for Change

After working for several theatre companies in Chicago, Williams—now based in New York—stumbled into a company that focused on revisiting and reimagining the classics.

"Apropos for opera," she says.

Later, after embarking upon an internship with Chicago Opera Theater and working her way through the ranks to an opportunity as an assistant director, Williams eventually was wooed by the art form. In fact, she can point to the exact place in Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* score where her infatuation finally took hold.

"Because of the interdisciplinary nature of it, the way music and text overlay each other, and how music can add meaning and counterpoint to text and vice versa, that was very interesting to me," Williams says. "And I thought it was very interesting the way that, in a

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single moment, a syllable, a note, a word could be unpacked in a myriad of ways. To my mind as a theatre maker, that opens the door to inclusivity because you're allowing this single moment to have a multiplicity of perspectives. So, why not make that happen onstage?"

Continuing to work with progressive opera companies, Williams says she began to identify the potential for change in the approach to opera, specifically in the portrayal often found within women's roles.

It's something she believes isn't necessarily a byproduct of the time periods from which certain works came.

"I saw a lot of work to be done," Williams says. "There are a lot of very problematic narratives in a lot of these stories that are written by men and for men that are laden with all of the cultural issues surrounding women—misogyny and sexism—that aren't products of their time. They're very much products of our own time that are exacerbated or overlaid where they weren't originally. To merely say it's a product of the composers' time, I think, is letting ourselves off the hook as storytellers."



photo by Licas Godlewski

Where Empowerment Lies: Being the Subject, Not the Object

When it comes to creating these roles, much can be interpreted in defining empowerment and knowing how to establish it for the portrayal of a character.

Williams believes that part of the job of an artist is to be a trailblazer, to establish a path, and to find out what that uniquely means to the artist.

"It starts with asking the big questions and asking better questions about what is going on with these narratives," she says. "What makes these power dynamics tick? It comes down to creating a 360-degree character and getting away from very two-dimensional portrayals."

This can be achieved not only through intentions of the composer's score, but through the process of collaboration with the stage director and conductor.

"This creative team offers a blueprint for singers to step into and find that space where they can carve out their role," Williams says. "It comes down to two things: the art of preparation and the art of collaboration. Preparation is never wasted, and the idea is that we do all of this preparation so we can leave it at the door to be present and in-the-moment when we come to the rehearsal hall. The great news is that a lot of it has to do with the attention to one's craft, which I think is the strong suit of any classically trained musician."

Attention to the text as well as a thorough understanding of the conflict and having a presence in the role that's generated from intense focus also aid in bringing a sense of empowerment and honesty to the portrayal of a character.

Within the story's conflict, Williams emphasizes developing a nuanced understanding of its

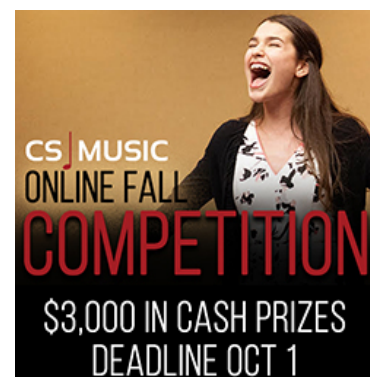


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context by asking the two-part question “Why this story, why now?” as well as considering the implications of choices a character makes, elevating the stakes beyond the casual to find the poetry in each action, and thinking critically about the sequence of those actions.

For artists, it’s an important thought process. For Williams, it’s her starting point, encouraging artists to develop answers to those questions as well as honing one’s historical imagination and curiosity.

“Whenever I’m traveling, I try to go to historical sites—palaces,” she says. “Having a visceral understanding of what it was like to be in an 18th century palace or space, with the surroundings and the architecture, and how power was inscribed in a space, I think it really informs our artistic processes. That way, when we step onto a stage or a set, we can fill in a reality. Technology is also continuing to develop as we speak, so even if we aren’t traveling, there are other ways to do this kind of research.”

This depth of work, however, doesn’t mean upending or rewriting the score but, rather, functioning within the blueprint offered to create the character by asking specific questions to yield mindful choices.

“Stanislavski said that ‘generality is the enemy of all art,’” Williams says, quoting the great Russian theatrical practitioner. “That is a terrific springboard into any character and in creating a highly focused and empowered role. And by empowered, I mean changing the narrative so that that character is the subject, not the object of what’s happening. No matter how things are written or the production one finds oneself in, there’s always a path forward to being the subject and not the object of narratives.”

Other Tools for Success

Character mapping—a graphic depiction that analyzes the traits and attributes of a role—as well as relationship mapping for power dynamics, creating a character storyboard for physicality from beginning to end, and constructing an action diagram are effective methods for establishing a visual aid in the development of a character.

“For character storyboards for physicality, so much can be communicated in how we carry ourselves in our character,” Williams says. “We often think that our costumes develop that for us, but how a costume is worn is different for each artist. So, a character’s physicality is another important part of the imagination for artists to develop.”

For action diagrams, Williams says she likes to begin backward, thinking about what the climactic action is that brings the story to a conclusion.

“What are the actions that lead to that action?” she asks. “This helps you have a very strong idea about what the imperative actions are that are the backbone of the drama trajectory. What other choices could that character have made? What are the implications of those?”

Libretto and score analysis are also important stepping stones toward character development, examining what kinds of choices these characters could be making.

“Even in moments,” she says, “when it feels like there’s an inevitable moment in a script—for example, Mimì dying of tuberculosis in *La bohème*. She doesn’t choose to die of tuberculosis, of course. But what did she choose? It’s about how she dies. Does she choose to die alone? Or, does she choose to die surrounded by the people she loves?”

“She makes sacrifices in order to do that. To my mind, that’s a very powerful choice. It’s what makes the story deeply moving. It also empowers that character, so she’s not a victim. There’s a difference between being vulnerable and being a victim.

“Sometimes in opera, there is a tendency to conflate the two. Vulnerability is a deeply compelling aspect of the human condition. It’s that kernel of humanity we try to establish as artists to enable us to connect with an audience.”

Overcoming Obstacles

When it comes to facing roadblocks in certain roles, Williams says the challenges often are as unique as the artists themselves. A common hurdle, however, is what she dubs “the burden of production history,” whether it’s an artist’s previous experience with a role or knowledge of the canon and another singer’s imprint on that role.

“One thing that separates us from our colleagues in theatre is that we perform roles over and over again, whereas in theatre, even the most accomplished actor might perform *Hamlet* once—perhaps twice if that person is a huge celebrity,” Williams says. “I once worked with an artist who had performed *Carmen* over 40 times. On the one hand, in opera, you have this burden of the ‘ghosting of past productions’ that haunt our performances. But it’s also a unique challenge and opportunity to ask what bigger and better questions haven’t been answered.”

Time periods, she adds, are also arbitrary. Contemporary questions beg to be asked of characters, even when portraying figures meshed between historical movements and dynamic moments in history.

“How is this character revolutionary?” Williams asks. “What is she resisting, challenging, or complicating? How do they fit into the big picture of the enlightenment or whatever that larger context is? Even though we have this long trajectory of ghosting in opera, I think all of those questions raise themselves anew every time there is a different production, because it’s a new moment and lens of each artist’s personal experience and viewpoint.”

A Vessel for Change

Not only a means for entertainment, Williams believes that being able to tap into these methods for character development also can be a vehicle for change and offer a timeless commentary and reflection of the happenings in the world, using the character in the opera as a kind of prototype with the artist as its author.

“To my mind, that’s quite thrilling for an audience to watch,” she says.



photo by Mike Vitelli

This approach can also be seen in Williams’ work as a director of opera, frequently coupling it with neighboring artforms that make use of interdisciplinary approaches—such as staging a soprano aerialist in *The Turn of the Screw*—in multimedia design, physical theatre, immersive theatre, and site-specific performance. Her goal is to take historically marginalized characters and put them at the forefront in unexpected ways, reimagining the story from their perspective—especially when the story is intended to be told from their perspective.

“A lot of my favorite female characters come from contemporary opera,” Williams says. “There are various points of entry for every artist in traditional repertoire. But I think forwarding and developing the repertoire is critical because there will inherently be issues if we tell the same stories written by the same people all the time.”

In the future, she says she would love to see more works written by more diverse voices that

reflect diverse experiences and the multiplicity of the human condition.

"I would love to see more roles about and for women of color, transsexual women, women across socioeconomic positions, and different stories about women," Williams says.

"Frequently, there's a tendency to portray women as an emotional vessel in opera and, obviously, women are far more than that. Why not have an opera about women scientists, women in political leadership positions, women doing all of the innovative things that women indeed do?"

She adds that it's the job of artists to start these types of conversations, through the portrayal of characters, the composition of new works, and beyond.

"Great artists aren't reactionary," Williams says. "We're deciding what to bring. For us as artists, we need to be thoughtful when we're telling these stories, because that has a rippling effect across culture."

"The opera is a place for community. It's a place where we have conversations and where the possible can encounter the impossible, challenging our notions of what our reality could be like. That active imagination is really important for audiences. I think that is the first step in making any kind of social change."

"That's a deeply empowering thing," Williams says.



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Megan Gloss is a classical singer and journalist based in the Midwest.

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