

The Death of Klinghoffer premieres in New York

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The premiere performance of John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* took place at the Metropolitan Opera on Monday night, the first of eight scheduled appearances of this important work.

The show went on, despite calls for its cancellation and threats from some quarters that the opera's sets would be "burned to the ground." Several hundred demonstrators, roughly equal to the number who turned out a month earlier when the Met season opened, protested outside the opera house in Lincoln Center. They were led by former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, known for his love of opera as well as his right-wing views.

There were some scattered boos inside, as well as one arrest for disorderly conduct after a member of the audience interrupted the performance before the intermission. The overwhelming majority present responded with cheers, however, when conductor David Robertson arrived to begin the opera and with a huge ovation at the end, including for the composer himself.

The 1991 opera, based on the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship by members of the Palestine Liberation Front and the killing of disabled passenger Leon Klinghoffer, was denounced from its world premiere by Klinghoffer's two daughters. An ongoing campaign against the opera has been led by the most right-wing elements of the Zionist lobby. Composer Adams, known for *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic*, among many other works, has, along with librettist Alice Goodman, been accused of anti-Semitism and denounced for supposedly "humanizing" terrorists.

There have been various claims that art cannot and must not concern itself with horrible crimes. This is utterly false, as most of Shakespeare attests. Theodore Dreiser's monumental *An American Tragedy* "humanizes" a murderer, and this novel has in fact become the subject of a contemporary opera. As critic Fred Plotkin recently pointed out, this season's productions at the Met include Verdi's *Macbeth*, in which "an innocent man is murdered onstage and his killer sings an exultant aria," and *Die Meistersinger*, the work of "a viciously anti-Semitic" librettist (and composer), Richard Wagner. Few if any would deny the greatness of *Macbeth* or *Die Meistersinger*.

John Adams is no anti-Semite, and his opera assuredly

deserves to be seen. An evaluation of this production will appear on the *World Socialist Web Site* next month, but recordings reveal that the opera is a serious and thoughtful work, and that there is nothing remotely anti-Semitic about it. It has its weaknesses, both dramatically and in its treatment of the subject, but Adams and his collaborators are to be congratulated for courageously recognizing that the murderous terrorist attack that took the life of a disabled Jewish cruise ship passenger did not take place in a historical or social vacuum.

To understand crimes is not to support or excuse them. The same argument, in opposition to a historical explanation, was utilized in the chauvinist campaign of lies after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to launch the "war on terror" that has seen countless war crimes carried out in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and elsewhere.

Playing a prominent role at that time was none other than Giuliani. He denounced the very idea of seeking to explain terrorism to cover up the responsibility of US imperialism and its heinous record of state terrorism. The former mayor also has a record of inciting censorship of art and whipping up reactionary sentiment for demagogic political purposes. In 1999, he tried to halt public funding of the Brooklyn Museum because he objected to an exhibition of contemporary art on religious grounds.

At the rally against the opera on Monday night, Giuliani claimed that he was not calling for its cancellation but only for peaceful protest. In recent weeks, however, baritone Alan Opie, who sings the role of Klinghoffer in this production, has received threatening e-mails saying he would "forever be known as a fascist."

Several programs in connection with the opera were canceled amid threats, and Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, the master of ceremonies at the protest at which Giuliani spoke, last month declared, "[Metropolitan Opera general manager] Peter Gelb, before we are finished, we are going to be back here, everyone here and many, many more...until the set is burned to the ground." This same Wiesenfeld, then a trustee of the City University of New York, tried to stop the awarding of an honorary degree to playwright Tony Kushner several years ago. The argument at the time was similar, with Wiesenfeld charging that Kushner was "anti-Israel."

The current controversy is only the latest in a long series of attacks on *Klinghoffer* since its first performance more than 20 years ago. From the outset it attracted harsh attacks from pro-Zionist critics. Planned runs of the opera at the Glyndebourne Festival in England and in Los Angeles were canceled. Composer and critic Edward Rothstein, as well as noted musicologist Richard Taruskin, both writing in the *New York Times*, were among those who denounced the opera on political grounds. Rothstein is currently the cultural critic-at-large for the *Times*. Taruskin is known, among other things, for his low opinion of the work of Dmitri Shostakovich, whom he claims was a loyal defender of the Stalinist regime.

More recently, some productions of *Klinghoffer*, including one in St. Louis and the one in London that has now come to New York, have proceeded without major incident. The uproar in New York has provoked expressions of surprise in some musical circles.

The long-postponed premiere of this opera at the Met was bound to anger Zionist circles, considering New York's political and cultural importance. There are, however, a number of other historical and current political considerations involved as well.

There is a note of desperation among the most rabid Zionists. While the settlements continue to expand in the occupied West Bank and the Israeli military wreaks havoc and mass murder in the Gaza Strip, these elements, especially in the United States, sense political shifts and dangers.

Democrats and Republicans are unanimously in support of the Zionist lobby. This bipartisan support was displayed at the Monday protest. Although Mayor Bill de Blasio criticized his Republican predecessor and defended the Met's right to perform the opera, other Democrats, including former governor David Paterson and congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, joined Giuliani at the demonstration. Jerrold Nadler, the congressman from the Upper West Side of Manhattan known as a "liberal" stalwart, held his own program at a nearby Jewish center, no doubt to immunize himself against Zionist criticism.

Even as the big-business politicians continue to march in lockstep, however, growing sections of the Jewish population, especially younger people of Jewish background, are more and more hostile to the propaganda of the Zionist regime. The growing crisis of Zionism was reflected in the relatively small number at Monday's protest. *The Death of Klinghoffer* could not have been staged in New York as recently as 10 years ago.

At the same time, the growing crisis of Zionism and of American capitalism finds expression in demands for censorship and blacklisting, alongside other attacks on democratic rights. As far as the Zionists are concerned, the founding myth of the state of Israel must be defended at all costs. The historical fact that this state was founded on ethnic cleansing, on the dispossession of the Palestinian people, must be buried. Adams opens the eyes of his audience to the suffering of the Palestinians, and even to the idea that Jews and

Palestinians might share a common suffering. To the Zionists this is an unforgivable crime. This history cannot be shown on the opera stage, or on any stage, for that matter.

The enduring tragedy of both Palestinians and Jews in the Middle East—addressed in part by Adams's opera—lies not only in the suffering of the Palestinian people, but also in the way in which survivors of the Nazi Holocaust have been pitted against their Arab neighbors, and have been led into what Leon Trotsky so correctly predicted would become "a trap for the Jewish people."

The attacks on *The Death of Klinghoffer* raise fundamental issues of artistic freedom and the struggle for a cultural life that reflects the reality of life itself. This struggle has only begun. The fact that the performances of *Klinghoffer* are now taking place is far from an unalloyed victory for cultural freedom.

It should not be forgotten that Met general manager Gelb, who now defends the production of this opera, agreed four months ago to a deal to cancel the simulcast of the opera to movie theaters around the world, where *The Death of Klinghoffer* would have reached an audience of many tens of thousands. Gelb's action was a cowardly compromise brokered by the Anti-Defamation League. It undoubtedly reflected pressure in the background from some of the Met's multimillionaire donors, the same donors who told Gelb that he had to secure contract concessions from the opera's musicians, choristers and stagehands.

As long as the plutocrats control museums, the opera and other cultural venues, operas like those of John Adams—whatever their limitations—will have to fight for their existence, and will remain the exception. The fight against censorship is a political struggle that is bound up with the building of a mass movement of the working class based on a socialist program and committed to the broadest and freest development of cultural life.



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