

The Death of Klinghoffer dramatizes 1985 hijacking of Achille Lauro

Fred Mazelis

14 November 2014

There are two distinct questions raised by the current production of *The Death of Klinghoffer* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, where the run of eight performances ends this Saturday afternoon.

One issue is this work's very right to public performance. The opera, which premiered in Brussels in 1991, is based on the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship and the brutal murder of one of its passengers, Leon Klinghoffer. It is only now receiving its premiere at the Met. For months a noisy, ultra-reactionary faction of the Zionist lobby has called composer John Adams anti-Semitic and demanded that *Klinghoffer* be banned. These elements mustered a few hundred protesters outside the Met at New York's Lincoln Center when the long-awaited Met premiere took place on October 20.

While the production has proceeded as scheduled, the censorship attempt was only partly repulsed. Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Met, agreed last spring to an unprincipled deal with Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). This meant the cancellation of plans for the worldwide live simulcast of the opera, which would have reached an audience of many tens of thousands.

Gelb also agreed to provide a full page in the opera's program, handed to every member of the audience, in which Lisa and Ilsa Klinghoffer are given the opportunity to denounce the opera and repeat the spurious claim that it "rationalizes" terrorism. The Klinghoffer daughters have worked closely with the ADL in its efforts to use the murder of their father to attack the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and defend and cover up the continuing crimes of the Israeli regime. It must be said that the pattern of intimidation by the Zionist establishment, of which Foxman is a major spokesman, continues.

The second question, the one that obviously demands attention once the attack on artistic freedom has been answered, is how successfully *The Death of Klinghoffer* deals with its subject matter, both in musical and dramatic terms.

In regard to the second issue, one must say that Adams's

work, alongside his *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic*, is among the few contemporary operas that deserve a place in the repertoire. While it is uneven, the music is often effective and gripping. The opera attempts to deal—even if in a limited fashion—with a subject that is not often treated seriously and truthfully in the media or in the cultural sphere. The charge of anti-Semitism is an absurd and contemptible lie.

A co-production between the Met and the English National Opera, where it was performed in 2012, this version of the opera is primarily realistic. It is framed as the recollection of the events of the three days in 1985 by the Captain of the cruise ship, sung effectively by baritone Paulo Szot. At the same time, there are abstract elements, primarily the six choruses, beginning with the two that open the opera, the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians and the Chorus of Exiled Jews.

The Metropolitan Opera Chorus has an almost unparalleled role in this work. The opera opens with a group of dozens of Palestinian women mourning the loss of their homeland. The work's very first words challenge the myth that Palestine was a land without a people when the state of Israel was founded. "My father's house was razed in '48...of that house not a wall on which a bird could nest was left to stand. Israel laid all to waste," the women sing. The bitter conflict is articulated at the conclusion, as they sing, "Our faith will take the stones he broke and break his teeth."

The prologue to the opera then continues, as the same singers remove their outer garments and become the Chorus of Exiled Jews, singing of their own hopes and sorrows. Thus, in the first 20 minutes, the stage of the two competing "narratives" has been set. To the Zionists who denounce the opera, this is "excusing" or "justifying" the Achille Lauro hijackers. What they intentionally falsify is the difference between justification and explanation.

The first act begins just after the hijacking. Most of the act is dominated by the hijackers and their interaction with the Captain. He is guarded by Mamoud (Aubrey Allcock), one of the Palestinians, who sings with some sensitivity of his

memories as well as the immediate surroundings.

Much of this act is characterized by arioso passages. An elegiac and foreboding tone is set; as the passengers fear for their safety, the captain seeks to maintain calm and the hijackers prepare their next moves. The second act, as the action approaches its climax, is far more effective both musically and dramatically. The music is characterized by what might be called a modified minimalism. With its rhythmic repetition and propulsiveness, but also a variety of moods, this is characteristic of Adams's development in recent decades. There is vitality and genuine emotion in the score.

Both Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer make their musical appearances in Act II. Leon, with British baritone Alan Opie in a powerful performance, challenges the hijackers in a brief aria. Later, after he is shot and killed, we hear the Aria of the Falling Body, in which he sings a final abstract monologue. Marilyn Klinghoffer, sung by mezzo-soprano Michaela Martens, is given the final word, in her bitter reaction to the Captain after he informs her of her husband's death. "You embraced them," she repeats several times, and goes on to recall her husband and say, "They should have killed me. I wanted to die."

Also noteworthy in this second act is a sprightly aria by the British Dancing Girl, soprano Kate Miller-Heidke, which is out of character with the rest of the action and perhaps effective for that reason. Another high point is the aria given to the youngest Palestinian, Omar. In previous productions, this has been a "trouser role," sung by a mezzo-soprano. Here Omar is portrayed by Jesse Kovarsky, a dancer, who received strong audience reaction for his performance during curtain calls. His story, meanwhile, is sung by a Palestinian woman (Maya Lahyani), who explains how he decided to sacrifice his life.

The performances were uniformly powerful. Among them must also be mentioned the other two hijackers, Molqi, sung by tenor Sean Pannikar, and "Rambo," sung by bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green. The Met Orchestra was ably conducted by David Robertson, the music director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

There are a total of six choruses in the opera. An Ocean Chorus in Act I is coupled with a Desert Chorus in Act II. Act I closes with a foreboding Night Chorus, and the Day Chorus, in uncharacteristically optimistic mode, shows the relieved passengers leaving the ship after it has docked in Cairo, just before the final scene of the opera. Needless to say, this calls for a variety of music, not to mention costumes and moods. The curtain calls began with an ovation for this group of professional singers under the direction of Donald Palumbo.

Perhaps the biggest weakness of this work is indicated by

the opening choruses. They are undoubtedly effective, but there is something abstract about them. The "competing narratives" that set the stage for the tragedy are both a strength of the opera and a weakness. Adams and librettist Alice Goodman are correct to try to explain the roots of terrorism, but their explanation does not go far enough.

There is little or nothing beyond the opening mention of the 1948 dispossession of the Palestinian people. While it is of course more easily said than done in a work of this kind, the effects of decades-long occupation, including of the territories seized in the 1967 war, do not come through. Above all, what might be termed the geopolitical aspects, and the isolation and betrayal of the Palestinians, are not dealt with, and yet the individual terror directed against innocents in the 1985 hijacking cannot otherwise be fully understood.

Director Tom Morris, with the assistance of set designer Tom Pye and video designer Finn Ross, has attempted to provide some background for the action through the use of projected text, a technique that has also been used in other recent Met productions. This makes for occasional distraction as the focus wanders from the dramatic action on stage to the explanations in the text.

At one point the text notes that President Ronald Reagan called on Lt. Col. Oliver North, the notorious architect of the Iran-contra scandal, to convene a Terrorist Incident Working Group during the Achille Lauro crisis. This is of some significance, but once this technique is used, it is perhaps also significant it is not also used to explore other aspects of this history.

The listener is left with the feeling that what is being witnessed is a timeless tragedy, a calamity with a beginning but no end. This is probably the view of both Adams and Goodman. Their generally humane attempt to understand the situation is to be welcomed, but the feeling of hopelessness is mistaken.

Watch the official Metropolitan Opera trailer.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)