

Woman at the Window: Oratorio remembers the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

Adam Mclean
16 February 2016

On February 4 and 5, students at the Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts in Los Angeles performed *Woman at the Window: The Triangle Factory Fire*. The work is an oratorio about the tragic fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City in 1911 in which 146 people died. The incident was the deadliest industrial disaster in US history. The new work was written by students who performed it under the guidance of musicians from the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

The owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in lower Manhattan had accused workers, mostly recent Jewish and Italian female immigrants, of stealing the clothing they produced. They began locking the doors during shifts, posting guards and taking other measures to reduce theft. Theft was a code word to refer to both direct “theft,” workers taking the articles they produced without paying, and indirect “theft,” including workers taking breaks during their shifts.

Thus, when the fire broke out, the doors were locked, and the workers were either incinerated, or forced to jump to their deaths, from eight to ten stories up. On the ground, emergency response was inadequate. Firefighters’ ladders could only reach the sixth floor and life nets tore on impact.

The two owners of the factory, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, were eventually charged with wrongful death and made to pay \$75 to each victim’s family. Their insurance covered these costs and paid them \$60,000 more than they needed. For locking the doors, Blanck was fined an additional \$20. Both were acquitted of the more serious manslaughter charges.

In a brief filmed introduction shown to the audience before the performances of *Woman at the Window*, students spoke about the process of creating the work. One pointed out that the reason to study history is to learn from it, so that we might not repeat the mistakes of the past. This perspective is prominent in the piece. The

oratorio takes as its starting point the social background to the fire and shows how events unfolded from that perspective.

There is no shortage of artistic pitfalls *Woman at the Window* could have fallen into, but happily these are largely avoided.

In dealing with the mindset of workers in the factory, the piece makes clear the workers are predominantly female and immigrant. Some time is devoted to the notion of a “20th century woman,” a more autonomous person than her 19th century counterpart, who was able to work for herself, go out alone and so forth.

But this aspect is not overdone, and is more of an attempt to show the social mentality of women at the time than an adaptation to the identity politics so common today. Later, *Woman at the Window* establishes that the idea of a new and independent “20th century woman” is useless against women’s oppression by capital. When the hostility of the factory owners to the workers is shown, it has the character of capitalist exploiting worker, not man exploiting woman.

The workers generally feel a mild satisfaction about their place. While taking pride producing clothes for the rest of society, they are happy enough to be able to provide for their families. They are humble, and are even tolerant to a fault regarding their working conditions.

There is something universal about the overall state of things in the factory. One of the lyrics begins “Rows and rows of workers, speaking different tongues,” and continues on about how friendships are made despite language barriers. Conversely, other lyrics include lines about the “foreman, breathing down our necks,” or about how, whenever the foreman left, “laughter would resume.” The work is eminently humane. The factory owners themselves, though detestable, confess to having once been workers themselves.

One issue that comes up is the need for the working

class to engage in active struggle. Some of the garment workers have the illusion that conditions may improve on their own. This is bound up with the notion of America being a “land of opportunity,” a recurring theme in the oratorio.

For other workers, struggle is the means through which the working class can improve its lot or even overturn the profit system. A scene is devoted to a union organizer appealing for a strike against the factory owners. This is presumably a reference to Clara Lemlich, a Ukrainian-born, Jewish socialist and a leader of the 1909 shirtwaist strike. In her lyrics, she brings up the issues of low pay, long hours, constant harassment by management.

At a famed rally in November 1909, Lemlich (who later joined the Communist Party), then 23, speaking in Yiddish, called for a general strike of ladies’ garment workers. Over the next couple of days, some 20,000 workers went on strike, the “Uprising of the 20,000,” a struggle that would last until February 1910.

That the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was chosen as the subject of an oratorio, an event about which many of those the students’ age know nothing about, indicates considerable seriousness and is a welcome sign of an interest in grappling with critical historical questions. The social misery and endless war generated by capitalism today must increasingly call the system into question.

Woman at the Window elevates the viewer’s understanding of history and consciousness in general. However, it would be an error to suggest that the oratorio has no weaknesses, as nearly inevitable as they may be.

The last lines of the oratorio raise some of the difficulties. After dirges in Latin and Hebrew, the piece closes with the lyrics, “From their ashes, we will rise. We will rise. We will rise!” In the aftermath of the blaze, outrage and a certain defiance emerge (which is historically accurate).

As this lyric is slowly sung, the chorus’s perspective and tone undergo a transformation. What was at first mournful becomes rebellious. The final “We will rise!” is sung in such way as to indicate those who died in the fire will not have died in vain. It marks a renewed resolve for struggle.

This raises questions that oratorio could not possibly answer. Among those surely is “If this were the mood in 1911, why does the world look the way it does now?” The conditions of masses of humanity are abysmal, and horrifying industrial disasters, especially in low-wage countries like Bangladesh and China, are a regular occurrence.

To answer the question adequately would involve studying concretely the course of the class struggle over the past century. The socialist aspirations of workers in the early part of the 20th century found expression, above all, in the Russian Revolution of 1917, which established the first workers’ state. That revolution and the founding of the Communist International attracted millions in every part of the globe, including Clara Lemlich and many other New York City garment workers. The emergence of Stalinism in the USSR and the various Communist parties led to the betrayal of the socialist cause and brought about the most catastrophic defeats. But capitalism has not solved any of its contradictions, and the global population today confronts the need to finish the work begun by the October Revolution.

There is an interesting parallel lodged in the last lyric of *Woman at the Window* that was probably not consciously intended by the oratorio’s creators. The transformation in the tone of the lyrics from forlorn to defiant was a savvy device to show the change in the attitude of the workers in 1911, but it applies equally to the trajectory of workers’ consciousness today, including in the US.

The oratorio does not address the immediate or longer-term outcome of the historical issues posed by the events it dramatizes. That would be asking a great deal. However, it is admirable that the work goes as far as it does. Moreover, that it was written mostly by high school students is extremely noteworthy and speaks to the radicalization of a new generation and its hunger for history. Although it may be a local Los Angeles production, *Woman at the Window* deserves a wide audience.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact