

# *Grounded*, a contemporary opera with an anti-war theme, premieres at the Metropolitan Opera

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*Grounded*, the new opera depicting the impact of drone warfare on a female fighter pilot, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City in late September. The opera, with its theme of long-distance killing based on the experience of the US war in Afghanistan, is especially timely given the ongoing bloodbath in Ukraine and genocide in Gaza.

The creators of *Grounded* are composer Jeanine Tesori, known until now primarily for her Broadway musicals, including Tony Awards for both *Fun Home* and *Kimberly Akimbo*, and playwright George Brant, who wrote the 2013 one-woman play upon which the opera is based. The opera is a co-production of the Washington National Opera, where it received its world premiere last year.

*Grounded* follows Jess (mezzo-soprano Emily D'Angelo), a decorated Air Force fighter pilot in Iraq during the US invasion, committed to aerial warfare as her life's calling. Jess comes to a crossroads when she finds herself pregnant. Though her condition is unplanned, she is in love and ready to start her family. Eric (tenor Ben Bliss), the father of her child, is a compassionate partner over the course of the story, which spans some five years.

Jess turns to her superior with the news. "The Commander," (bass Greer Grimsley) callously berates her for a "waste of training and taxpayer money," and urges her to abort the pregnancy.

Disregarding The Commander's advice, Jess returns home. Sometime later, she is asked to join a new division, based in Las Vegas. There she will wage war in Afghanistan with unmanned Reaper drones, remote-controlled killing machines that operate against their targets many thousands of miles away. At first conflicted over the offer, concerned about her pride and her reputation as a pilot, she comes to terms with it as the best possible outcome for her family. "Each night you will go home. ... think about that," she consoles herself. The chorus resounds that "the threat of death has been eliminated [from war]."

Jess begins to accept her new surroundings in Las Vegas, which include a "killing" partner, a 19-year-old "Sensor" (baritone Kyle Miller). The Sensor has been recruited by the military because of his video-gaming skills. The plot develops

through Jess's intensifying psychological and emotional pain as she engages in long-distance killing. Soprano Kirsten MacKinnon plays "Also Jess," a voice in Jess's mind as she psychologically dissociates, in the opera's second act.

"Also Jess," the device meant to depict the deep alienation and turmoil Jess is undergoing, her anxiety and even paranoia, is of limited effectiveness. The more intimate scenes of Jess and Eric with their daughter Sam, now five years old, provide a warmth and tenderness contrasting strongly with the business of war, and these are affecting. The sometime humorous antics of the Sensor also stand out against the carnage being inflicted on their targets. These emotional exchanges are ultimately more convincing than those between Jess and her psyche.

The opera climaxes with a mission for Jess to "eliminate" a longstanding target, known as "The Serpent." She is at first honored by this assignment, but the internal conflict is not resolved. This leads to a powerful conclusion, when Jess sees her target accompanied by a little girl around the same age as her daughter. Jess sees her role as judge, jury and executioner of an innocent young victim. She snaps, and instead of pulling the trigger, propels the drone into the side of a mountain. The opera concludes with Jess, having been court-martialed, in solitary confinement in a military prison. Her conscience is unburdened, however, and her personality is whole again.

The score of *Grounded*, conducted by Met music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, employs a prominent brass section as well as an atypical batterie percussion section, with unusually-sized bass and snare drums to bend and manipulate military themes into slightly disfigured versions of themselves. This adds a sinister tint to musical motifs that are usually treated in a straightforward and even reverent fashion. The orchestra's bombastic moments, particularly during the scenes of wartime chaos, have a time-shifted and underplayed character, emphasizing the eerie disconnect between the faraway destruction and its image depicted on a computer screen.

The imposing LED backlit set spans the entire width of the stage, and powerfully conveys the sense that all is being monitored inside a digital dystopia. The costumes are also effective, carefully crafted to place the viewer firmly in the

21st century, with the use of detailed military garb and ornamentation. The choreography and staging, particularly in the moments that utilize the full ensemble, also help to bring out the drama's most dynamic moments.

The subject matter and the theme of *Grounded* are what set the opera apart from much of what is usually presented, and are worthy of somewhat extended discussion. Brant has cited a longstanding interest in the subject of drone warfare, dating back to the time when the technology was kept strictly secret from the US public.

"We knew [drones] were being used overseas, but we didn't know quite what we were doing with them," he told an interviewer. "It felt like the attitude toward the public was: 'Don't worry about this. These are great. They don't put our pilots in harm's way, and they get the job done.'" Tesori wrote, "[A]t the heart of this piece is considering what we are asking of [military service] people when the goal is unclear but the expectation when you receive an order is still: Don't think, just do. What is the psychic effect of being the person who has to push the button?"

It should be obvious that this theme is of genuine contemporary relevance. One of the lessons drawn by the US ruling class from its debacle in Vietnam 50 years ago was the need to shield the population from knowledge about the crimes committed in its name, and also to use technology to inflict maximum suffering on the "enemy" while minimizing US casualties.

In part, drone warfare is one of the products of this situation. Technology has been used to carry out the mass murder of innocent civilians. The Zionist regime in Israel has, with the crucial help of its American military suppliers, carried out crimes of genocide in Gaza, while extending these to its asymmetrical smart phone bomb attacks in Lebanon.

However, modern technology has also been used to expose war crimes. Among the most famous of these exposures was the WikiLeaks' publication of the "Collateral Murder" video in 2010. An innocent family can be seen on a digital screen being gunned down near Baghdad by a US Apache helicopter team. The killers can be heard justifying their action with the words, "Well, it's their fault [for] bringing their kids to a battle." The subsequent publication by WikiLeaks of the *Iraq War Logs* and *Afghan War Diary* exposed the daily war crimes committed by the American military.

The US authorities waged a nearly 15-year campaign to silence and punish WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for his "crime" of exposing their actions. In a notorious tape leaked in 2010, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calls for Assange's assassination, asking, "Can't we just drone this guy?" Assange was finally freed from London's Belmarsh prison several months ago, after five years described by experts as "torture."

*Grounded* has weaknesses. One of the most obvious is the gratuitous use of profanity. The repeated use of such language

is not offensive in and of itself, but it seems a misguided, unnecessary effort to reach a younger or "hipper" audience.

More seriously, *Grounded*'s creators have focused to some extent on the gender of the protagonist as central to the opera's weight and importance. Similarly, considerable emphasis has been placed on the fact that Tesori is only the second female composer to have her work premiered in the history of the Met Opera.

While these facts are not devoid of significance, the work's focus on them is related to the identity-obsessed outlook of a certain milieu. One is entitled to ask, if the composer had not been a woman and the leading character had been a male, would an opera on this theme still have been mounted? (See Andrew Niccol's 2015 film *Good Kill*, for example, about a male drone operator, also in Nevada.)

To the extent that Tesori's work treats the unequal treatment of women in the US military as a compelling problem in the face of the monstrous, world-historical crimes carried out by America's armed forces, it is seriously off the mark. Moreover, the implication that women are less "warlike" than men is particularly backward and false. Almost 50 years after the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and after such US Secretaries of State as Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton, all of them dripping in the blood of their victims, any suggestion that imperialist war would be less likely or less brutal under female leaders is simply ludicrous.

Notwithstanding these and other limitations, *Grounded* stands out above all because of its theme, which receives serious treatment. It has been well received by audiences, and this testifies to growing opposition to war. With the US military's advanced preparations for world war and an American oligarchy increasingly unrestrained in its global conspiracies, *Grounded* is to be welcomed.



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