The Virginia Opera's *Loving v. Virginia* revisits critical civil rights battle of the 1960s

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The Virginia Opera, in partnership with the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, recently premiered its new production *Loving v. Virginia*, about the fight to do away with Virginia's reactionary, "anti-miscegenation" laws that forbid interracial marriage. The work is composed by Damien Geter, with a libretto by Jessica Murphy Moo.

The Loving case raises profound democratic issues that cannot fail to resonate today. The opera focuses on the lives and case of Richard and Mildred Loving, the interracial couple from rural Caroline County, Virginia, whose relationship was at the center of the legal fight.

The opera opens in 1958, when Richard and Mildred first fall in love. It follows the general development of the couple's relationship and their struggle to overcome Virginia's racist laws against interracial marriage, finally struck down in 1967 by the US Supreme Court in a landmark 9-0 ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*, from which the opera takes its name.

Richard Loving (played by baritone Jonathan Michie), a day laborer and drag racing fan, is drawn to Mildred (sung by soprano Flora Hawk) against the advice of friends, peers and both families. A well-staged early scene between Mildred's father (Christopher Humbert Jr.) and Richard, in which the latter tries to convince the older man of his emotional sincerity toward Mildred, includes the cautionary retort from Mildred's father, "Trouble can sound like you." A parallel scene between Mildred and her mother plays out opposite Richard and her father, as the depth of the couple's feelings overcomes her parent's reservations.

The couple marry soon afterward in an out-of-state ceremony, a felony under Virginia law at the time, and begin to "cohabit." The marriage, an ostensibly happy moment in their lives, is intruded upon by the symphony's foreboding strings and trumpets, a warning of what lies ahead.

The authorities soon discover the couple, and their lives are upended, as the local sheriff aggressively enforces Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, the 1924 law outlawing interracial marriage.

The drama in these moments is intensified by the use of a chorus consisting of masked (faceless?) bureaucrats in suits. Their appearances punctuate the drama, as they utter phrases such as "Know the code, follow the code!," as well as the assertions: "We decide who you are. We decide who you love!"

These scenes are powerful as depictions of the injustices the authorities perpetrated against African Americans and other minorities under the infamous Jim Crow system of racial apartheid, as well as the destructive emotional toll such measures take. Hawk's Mildred Jeter/Loving and Melody Wilson's Musiel Byrd Jeter (Mildred's mother), in a particularly powerful performance, provide much of the production's emotional core.

In the traumatic scene in which Mildred is imprisoned, the faceless bureaucrats form a circle around her, both acting as the jail cell walls and gloating at her as she nearly breaks down in distress, while her mother calls out to her that "The flood has come!" Flora Hawk's emotion, when she cries out "Daddy was right!," is strongly registered in her voice. One feels deeply that a traumatic injustice is occurring.

With the suspension of a one-year jail sentence for the "crime" of "intentional cohabitation" with a member of another race, the Lovings are forced to live in exile in Washington, D.C., far from their roots in rural Virginia.

Eventually, by the early 1960s, Mildred and Richard grow tired of putting up with the restrictions. There are brief but effective scenes depicting the struggle for civil

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rights and racial equality. Mildred's cousin asks her if she has heard about "Dr. King," and that "people are dreaming dreams outside our door," a reference to the August 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

Mildred eventually writes the office of attorney general Robert F. Kennedy, asking him to overturn the judge's verdict in Virginia. Kennedy replies to Mildred, only to tell her he cannot help. He advises her to appeal to the American Civil Liberties Union, which agrees to take up her case**.** This begins the concluding sequence of the opera, culminating in the above-mentioned Supreme Court decision.

In addition to the strength of the singers' performances, the Richmond Symphony Orchestra's accompanying music is vibrant and at times threatens to steal the show. The symphony draws on bluegrass, pop and jazz music to construct a backdrop that is lively and thrilling.

The earlier scenes feature easygoing bluegrass-style accompaniment while later scenes in Washington, with its crowded environs, are accompanied by busier jazz percussion. Following the performance in Northern Virginia, the packed house at George Mason University gave the production a well-deserved standing ovation**.**

There are numerous elements in *Loving v. Virginia* that speak truthfully and forcefully to current social and political conditions. Law enforcement's persecution of families for the "crime" of living with someone of another ethnicity finds its echo in the circumstances immigrant families or those with mixed-citizenship status face today at the hands of the fascistic Trump administration, with its virulent and toxic nationalism and chauvinism.

The present administration, seeking to build a presidential dictatorship on the ashes of the social gains of the last century and more, views these rights with undisguised hatred. One could easily recite Michie-Richard Loving's memorable line regarding his state's laws, "What is the logic? North is south," to the anti-immigrant fanatics hounding innocent families and calling for mass deportations. Not two hours from where the Lovings lived, the Maryland family of Salvadoran legal resident Kilmar Abrego García is fighting for his safe return after the Trump administration abducted him and sent him to the notorious CECOT concentration camp in El Salvador.

There are moments in the opera deliberately highlighting these connections. During the scenes of protest in the 1960s, demonstrators carry signs such as "Keep families together." In response to an audience member during a question-and-answer session following the performance, members of the cast spoke of the appropriateness of *Loving v. Virginia* in the current climate.

On May 2, as if to underline the threat such works of art pose to the establishment, the Trump administration announced its plan to eliminate the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), the principal federal agency in charge of funding and supporting cultural and artistic institutions across the US. In response, the NEA slashed hundreds of grants to participating institutions, including the Virginia Opera.

All in all, *Loving v. Virginia* is timely and serious, and deserves to be seen. Unfortunately, the last scheduled performances took place at the Carpenter Theatre in Richmond, Virginia on May 9-11. The success of the work, one hopes, will encourage further productions and performances.

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