



**ADELAIDE
FESTIVAL**

28 FEB - 15 MAR 2020



OPERA/UK

Breaking the Waves

Music by Missy Mazzoli
Libretto by Royce Vavrek

**AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE /
AUSTRALIAN EXCLUSIVE**

**13 & 15 March 2020
FESTIVAL THEATRE,
ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE**

Duration 2hr 50mins, including interval

Co-produced by Opera Ventures,
Scottish Opera, Houston Grand
Opera and Théâtre National de
l'Opéra Comique, in association
with Adelaide Festival.

Performed in English with English
surtitles.

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Government's International Touring
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An interview with...

MISSY MAZZOLI

COMPOSER

ROYCE VAVREK

LIBRETTIST

Following the success of your first collaboration, *Song from the Uproar* (2012), did the creative process change or evolve when writing *Breaking the Waves*?

MM: *Breaking the Waves* is a very different kind of piece from *Song from the Uproar* in that it has a more concrete narrative and a clearly defined dramatic arc, so our collaboration was focused much more on clear storytelling and ways to distinctly outline each character and theme. I think at this point we've also come to know each other incredibly well, which leads to a very rich and exciting creative partnership. We can play to each other's strengths, but also feel free to tell each other when a line of the libretto or a musical passage is just not working. We've grown tremendously as artists in recent years, both through our work on *Uproar* and other projects, and we go to see new work together nearly every other day. As a result we've exponentially expanded our creative vocabulary and our shared frame of reference, and are both more willing to take risks in all aspects of our work.

The work of director Lars von Trier is so aesthetically specific and rooted in the capabilities of the film genre, so why adapt this particular story?

RV: I have loved von Trier's film since I first saw it at the age of fourteen. I can remember seeing it on a very small television at a friend's house, not the ideal situation to take in the very cinematic qualities of the movie. It was the story and the performances that really captured my imagination. As a storyteller now, I find that I am often swept up by the magic of the way other people communicate their narratives. When I become infatuated with a story, my life begins a lifelong dialogue with them that sometimes results in my wanting to translate them to my particular art form. *Breaking the Waves* had possibilities for new means of expression that I felt we could conjure. Through this adaptation we have created something that uses the brilliance of von Trier's creation as a catalyst and created something of our own.

How does the operatic genre transform the original source material, either intentionally or inadvertently?

MM: One of the most powerful characteristics of opera is its ability to communicate many different layers of emotion simultaneously. I felt that I could explore the characters' psychology in a very deep and complex way because I was using music as my primary tool of expression. In this way our opera is very different from the original film, which had very little underscoring. In the opera, music intensifies the storyline but just as often subverts or contradicts the expected emotional narrative, all with the intention of illuminating the inner life of each character. I also bring back themes and motifs throughout the work, to tie characters and events together in unexpected ways. Royce, James [Darrah] and I also had to create innovative ways to communicate the intimacy of the many close-up shots

in the film, since opera always happens at a slight physical remove from the audience and it's impossible to be right in a character's face. We chose to see the aria itself as the operatic close-up, and often use solo instrumental moments, a cappella passages or repeated motives to create a sense of closeness or tenderness that can be communicated from the stage to the last row of the house.

In light of your Opera Philadelphia-sponsored trip to Scotland to conduct research for this project, how do you attempt to capture a sense of place in the score and libretto?

MM: While the film was shot in various locations in Scotland and also in Denmark, we chose to root our opera firmly in the Isle of Skye in northern Scotland. When visiting the Isle of Skye I was immediately struck by how loud and violent the landscape felt; there were huge rock formations jutting out of lush green meadows, and seemingly infinite green expanses that ended in extraordinary plunges off cliffs into the ocean. I wanted to capture the drama of this landscape in the music itself, in the same way that a work like *Peter Grimes* captures the sound of the sea, even in the purely instrumental passages. When traveling in Skye I could very clearly hear how the opera would begin, with a massive, low chord that contained the sound of the waves, the rocks, church bells, and all the sensual violence of that unique landscape.

RV: Going to Skye really unlocked a lot of the film's clues, and allowed for the opera to reside in the environment. Although a lot has changed on the Isle in the last four decades, the residents that we spoke to suggested that the sense of place – its spirit – remained. It was important to us to retrace the footsteps of our characters: to walk out to Neist Point, to crawl into one of the little red public phone booths that pop up around the landscape, to commune with the sheep that outnumber the people. It made the world we were creating much, much richer.

As artists who are involved in the contemporary opera scene, what consideration do you give to the interplay of modern audiences and topical themes?

RV: I am hungry for so many different experiences when I go to the opera, and to the theatre in general. It's important that we continue to create work that explores the many facets of existence. The past tells us everything about who we are as a society today, and it's important to remind ourselves where we've come from. It's impossible to truly know what themes will be in the zeitgeist when we set out to write an opera, in this case over three years ago... but we knew that we had a powerful story with the opportunity to get under the skin of a modern audience, and hopefully future audiences. The emotional themes – loyalty, faith, goodness – of the piece are unmoored from any specific place and time and are truly an expression of the human experience.

A message from...

TOM MORRIS

DIRECTOR

When John Berry, the Artistic Director of Opera Ventures, suggested I read the operatic adaptation of *Breaking the Waves*, I experienced afresh the shock that I had felt watching the film. Nearly 15 years after it was shot, Lars von Trier's classic and controversial movie remains so rigorous in its journey of pain that it is almost unbearable to watch. What is more, the film's narrative and tone are so definitive, and so extreme, that you might think it would defy adaptation. But Missy Mazzoli's internationally celebrated score does something radical and strange to her source. Once I had heard it, I was converted to its brilliance. And once I had talked to the composer about how she had approached it, I was hooked.

At the compelling heart of the film is Emily Watson's astonishing performance as the romantic tragic heroine, Bess, inviting the audience to imagine what might possibly connect the innocent sincerity of her character with the harrowing course taken by her life. Is she in control or not? Does she understand or ignore the price she is paying for love? Is she a prophet or an innocent, a radical or a victim? Where a novel might answer these questions, the film, which strikingly has no underscore, presents a bleak, provocative mystery.

This opera is Missy Mazzoli's personal and passionate response to that provocation. Where the film is silent, her music is eloquent. Captivated by Watson's performance, she seems to have created a new version of Bess in order to wrestle with the unsettling questions at the heart of the film. In doing so, she has written the music of Bess's mind. The opera is rigidly held by von Trier's merciless narrative, but Mazzoli's musical characterisation fights back with a compassionate response to the story's brutality. While remaining faithful to it, she has literally turned the film inside out.

Nor is Bess's relationship with her community in the opera straightforward. The librettist Royce Vavrek describes a conflict between Bess and a community battling to instruct her with their own very different visions of goodness: the emblematic church elders, her mother, her best friend, the doctor, even Bess's husband Jan, are all doing their damndest to help her. But her goodness is somehow beyond them: their help is clouded by their judgment and it fails. The opera is a kind of *Passion*: a tragedy of cross-purposes in which the community can see Bess's profound compassion but cannot prevent itself from contributing to her destruction.

It is this theme of compassion that in the end distinguishes the opera from its source. Critics of the film dislike the topos of male salvation through female sacrifice. Mazzoli challenges it by giving her heroine a voice. She sings not just in the music but in the vision of the entire score. 'I have tried to give her the agency to sing the map of her story into being,' Mazzoli says. And even after the opera's tragic denouement, the compassion of Mazzoli's Bess remains alive in the music until the last note sounds.

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THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE



COMPOSER
Missy Mazzoli



LIBRETTIST
Royce Vavrek



DIRECTOR
Tom Morris



CONDUCTOR
Stuart Stratford

CAST



Bess McNeill
Sydney Mancasola



Jan Nyman
Duncan Rock



Dodo McNeill
Wallis Giunta



Mother
Orla Boylan



Dr Richardson
Elgan Llŷr Thomas



Terry
Byron Jackson



Councilman
Freddie Tong



Sadistic Sailor
Francis Church



Young Sailor
David Lynn

Synopsis

Isle of Skye, Scotland, early 1970s

ACT I

Bess McNeill, a young Scottish woman with a history of psychological problems, marries Jan Nyman, an oil-rig worker, in the strict Calvinist church of her home town, despite misgivings from her community, which views Jan as an outsider.

When Jan returns to the oil rig to work, Bess is devastated. Her mother considers taking her back to a psychiatric hospital, and her sister-in-law Dodo warns Jan about his wife's fragile emotional state.

Bess prays to God for Jan's return from the oil rig. The following day, Jan is almost killed in an accident on the rig and is hurriedly flown to hospital. Bess believes her prayer was the reason that Jan has returned, and thus the reason for his injury.

Interval

ACT II

Bess discovers that the accident on the rig has left her husband almost entirely paralysed. Jan encourages his wife to find other lovers, and Bess is at first shocked by his suggestion. After trying to kill himself, Jan manages to persuade her that this device might nourish their relationship.

Failed liaisons with strangers coincide with a decline in Jan's health, but more successful encounters seem to lead to a stabilisation in his condition. Bess becomes increasingly convinced that her own sexual activities will save her husband and restore their relationship.

ACT III

Bess' home town is scandalised by her behaviour and she is thrown out of her church. Struggling to understand why, she renews her resolve to save her husband. Seeking more extreme encounters on board a large commercial ship, she is savagely attacked.

As Bess' wounded body is delivered to the hospital, Jan wakes from surgery, his condition dramatically improved.



CREATIVE TEAM

Conductor
Stuart Stratford

Director
Tom Morris

Revival Director
Sara Brodie

Designer
Soutra Gilmour

Original Lighting Designer
Richard Howell

Leader
Anthony Moffat

First Violins
Anthony Moffat
Frances Pryce †
Katie Hull §†
Terez Korondi

Second Violins
Angus Ramsay ††
Liz Reeves
Helena Zambrano Quispe
John Robinson

Violas
Lev Atlas ††
Rachel Davis
Shelagh McKail

Associate Lighting Designer
Robert B Dickson

Projection Designer
Will Duke

Sound Designer
Jon Nicholls

Video Programmer & System Designer
David Butler

Fight Director
Raymond Short

Cellos
Niamh Malloy **
Marie Connell
Aline Harris

Double Basses
Peter Fry *
Christopher Freeman

Flute
Siobhan Grealay

Oboe
Amy Turner ††

Clarinet
Lawrence Gill †

Bassoon & Contrabassoon
Andrew Watson

Tenors
Raymond Armstrong
David Lynn
Declan McCusker
Christian Schneeberger
Fraser Simpson
Cailean Swainson

Running Props Supervisor
Jenni Murison

Stage Supervisor
Ben Howell

Running Wardrobe Supervisor
Emma Butchart

Assistant Directors
Rosie Purdie
Clara Solly-Slade

Assistant Conductor
Susannah Wapshott

Répétiteurs
Fiona MacSherry
Susannah Wapshott

The Orchestra of Scottish Opera

The Chorus of *Breaking the Waves*

French Horn
Sue Baxendale

Trombone
Cillian Ó Ceallacháin †

Percussion
Jay Allen †

Piano/Synthesizer
Fiona MacSherry

Harp
Ruth Potter

Electric Guitar
Lewis Dunsmore

§ Assistant Leader

* Section Principal

** Guest Section Principal

† Visiting Tutor to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

CHORUS

Chorus Master
Susannah Wapshott

Basses
Francis Church
Steven Faughey
Phil Gault
Simon Hannigan
Douglas Nairne
Jonathan Sedgwick

PRODUCTION

Production Manager
Andrew Storer

Emerging Artist Associate Producer
Lucy Walters

Stage Manager
Donald Ross

Deputy Stage Manager
Kieron Johnson

Running Props Supervisor
Jenni Murison

Stage Supervisor
Ben Howell

Running Wardrobe Supervisor
Emma Butchart

Make-up and Wigs Supervisor
Alison Chalmers

Lighting Supervisor
Barry McDonald

Revolve Operator
Alex Barau

Costumes, props and sets created by Scottish Opera Technical Department.

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