

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

O-Lan Jones: One Room, Two Windows

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, March 15th, 2012

*Composer-actor-designer-writer-singer and American theatre treasure O-Lan Jones was deep in rehearsal for her newest opera, *The Woman in the Wall*, when we stole a few minutes of her time.*

What's *The Woman in the Wall* about?

The story is inspired by a real practice during the medieval times in Europe. Nuns would volunteer to be immured – walled into a room for their whole lives in order to connect to God. I was not raised with any religion so I am entering this mythological kingdom from the point of view of its essential and archetypal qualities. And also the sense that there is mysterious sacred help abounding and the heart can connect to a vast consciousness.

What drew you back to the middle ages? They seem so distant from our everyday 21st century lives.

The central image – a woman bricked into a room with one window to the church and one window open to the world is just fraught with metaphor for our own lives – here we are; walled into our own selves for the duration with access to whatever we believe is holy and whatever we believe is ordinary.

I was driving down Beverly Blvd. listening to the radio when I heard about the idea of The anchoress, these women who would live forever in one room. It gave me the chills. If all the doors are locked shut where do you go on the inside. A lot of the inside we have in common. So we wrote what we know of the way inside from our own experience.

Kathleen Cramer (the librettist) and I put the opera together in the form of the 7 days of the week which cover 17 years. We've got the Seven Virtues in there, too. There's a formality to this piece, and there's a way that harsh external form can create the container for mighty forces.

You wrote *The Woman in the Wall* in medieval modes. What are medieval modes, and how does listening to music written in them have a special effect on the audience?

Those modes sound sort of like a minor key and sometimes it sounds like one note is stretching itself out past where it should be and that makes you sit up and wonder. The music of that time has a stark quality. This is before the Renaissance when all the soft flutes and pretty lutes came in – the music I wrote is inspired by that rough medieval sound with the notes that rub against each other and the sawing away of the strings. But, there are some pretty parts, too! And when you get these amazing singers and a 30-voice choir from the Angel City Chorale it's just thrilling.

You often make theatre in large, unconventional spaces. What's up with that?

Yeah, I used to be a proscenium gal, but when I did *Songs and Dances of Imaginary Lands* a couple of years ago we needed a huge space in order to bring the vision to life; there were 21 installations of *Imaginary Lands* and their “indigenous” dances & music. The lands embodied

turning points in the life of Tom and Sue – our main couple who had lost their identities – they went together and individually to these places to reclaim their story. We needed to have the whole audience travel together so we made trains to carry half the audience. The orchestra was on wheels – the place we performed in was a 25,000 empty car dealership and it really felt like we’d all been on a major journey together at the end of the evening.

After that experience it’s been hard to put me back in the box. Even though *The Woman in the Wall* is slightly more traditional, when we did a concert reading of it in a theater it felt very constricting to me. I like having the workings of the piece visible; nothing up our sleeves, but it’s magic anyway!

We’re performing *The Woman in the Wall* at the Masonic Lodge in Culver City. It’s a huge rectangular room, seating on all sides. You’ll be able to see people coming and going to their entrances some of the time. All the externals are clearly and intentionally for pretend but the heart of it is true and mysterious. The Masonic Lodge is full of a sense of ceremony. And I see this event as a ceremony designed to help the whole audience come to the same ecstatic connection with life force that Marianna (*The Woman in the Wall*) comes to at the end.

What music are you listening to on your iPod these days?

Oh, it’s all ME all the time; playing the audio files of the score and moving little plasticine figures around that represent all the performers; figuring out who goes where when.

The Woman in the Wall opens March 23 in Los Angeles and runs through March 31.

Photo credit: Halldor Enard

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