

OPERA NEWS AWARDS

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Aliana de la Guardia as the Shopper/Mother in *Gallo*, 2014



Brian Church (foreground) as *Wet in Loose, Wet, Perforated*, 2011

Guerilla Opera redefines the opera experience.

► **GUERRILLA OPERA RELISHES** confrontation and upending conventions. Founded in Boston in 2007, the company has no conductor, chorus or orchestra. The pieces it commissions, which never exceed ninety minutes and are often closer to ten, feature no more than four instruments and four singers. In some instances, they have no vocal music at all. Whether their productions should even be called operas was once discussed within the group.

“When you say ‘opera,’ a very specific image and definition comes to people’s minds,” says Cuban-American soprano Aliana de la Guardia, who formed the company with fellow Boston Conservatory graduates and frequent new-music collaborators Mike Williams and Rudolf Rojahn. “For me, ‘operatic’ encompasses an experience as opposed to a set of rules to follow. [Opera’s] about immersion in music and spectacle. By taking that very bare definition, the possibilities of what Guerilla Opera can do as a company and the kinds of artists we can engage become very open.”

Over thirteen seasons, the twenty-five productions she and her colleagues have created reflect that boundary-pushing spirit. Sonically, they challenge the mainstream aversion to

Collective Energy.

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academic music, which de la Guardia defines as “anything not Neo-Romantic or Neo-Classical which plays with, bends or eschews traditional Western tonal structure.”

“When we started, our music was a little bit raucous and aggressive, in a rock-band sort of way,” de la Guardia says. Their eclectic narrative source material ranges from major works of literature—Andy Vores’s *No*

voices within institutional bureaucracies.

The group’s goals for transforming opera extend to broader industry issues as well. For example, they have grown increasingly concerned with what happens to new music such as their commissions after the premiere run. “These works are being forgotten, because they’ve lost their ‘shine,’” says producer and designer Julia Noulin-Mérat,

“Opera is about immersion in music and spectacle.”

Exit (2008), based on Jean-Paul Sartre’s play; Hannah Lash’s *Beowulf* (2016)—to unexpected texts such as the 2008 Vice Presidential debate transcript in Curtis K. Hughes’s *Say it Ain’t So, Joe* (2009). Settings and costumes, too, are not what audiences would likely see at Boston Lyric or the Met: Ken Ueno’s *Gallo* (2014) featured a stage covered in Cheerios and a countertenor donning a chicken suit; Nicholas Vines’s *Loose, Wet, Perforated* (2011) is a twenty-first-century morality tale that takes place on a futuristic game show.

The primary factor that unites these disparate works is the ensemble itself. Guerilla’s organization is more akin to that of experimental theater groups such as SITI Company (with whom de la Guardia trained) or the Wooster Group, in that composers write specifically for the company’s core members, who work as a collective. “We don’t have departments, like other opera companies,” she says. “The artists design, produce and perform. Because we’re part of a whole, it’s a rewarding experience for those that come in. And when the artist experience is great, the audience’s will be great.” This dynamic also avoids the hierarchical structure that can diminish artists’

Guerilla’s co-artistic director. “There’s so much to learn from having produced a work, letting it sit, and then doing a second production with new creatives. It will make the work grow. To me, that feels like success, because the piece isn’t frozen in time.” Both women applaud Opera America’s Next Stage Grants for funding second productions of new works, which can help propel into wide circulation pieces that initially may have been controversial, as well as reform the canon.

Accessibility, from issues of cost to enriching the experiences of underrepresented groups in opera audiences, is also a focal point. Their ticket prices are kept low, tactile tours are arranged for visually impaired individuals, and patrons with service animals are given reserved seating,

Julia Noulin-Mérat and Aliana de la Guardia, Guerilla Opera’s co-artistic directors



among other initiatives. Guerilla Opera also produces work in Haverhill, MA, a small city thirty-five miles north of Boston where de la Guardia lives. “For people who live in non-hub cities, traveling to arts experiences can be prohibitive,” she says. “We’re a company that can produce performances in multiple cities, which opens up the possibility of doing cool things in unexpected places for people who are not generally exposed to this kind of progressive art, like site-specific or immersive work.”

Guerilla’s 2020–21 smaller-scale, live-streamed season reflects many of these goals. In October, the company conceived Caroline Louise Miller’s *Ophelia’s Life Dream* (2009)—a poet’s psychedelic journey within herself that follows her transformation into a mushroom, moth and palm tree—as an experimental film. “They’re giving it an entirely new interpretation, which is exciting,” Miller says. “Having some distance from the piece enabled me to have a more laid-back conversation about it with my collaborators, and to let them do amazing things with it.”

Miller appreciates the ease with which those conversations took place with the entire company, as that access doesn’t always exist for composers. She also admires Guerilla’s willingness to tackle even the most difficult or unexpected ideas and music. “They get really into weird stuff and take it seriously, and I’m impressed by that,” she says. “After working on *Ophelia* with them, I feel they’re willing to think big before tearing down [ideas] based on real-world constraints. They do a lot with a little and figure out a way to make it happen, no matter what.” ■

Charles Shafaieh is an arts journalist whose work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Irish Times and other international publications.