

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Phèdre

BY JEAN RACINE

TRANSLATED AND ADAPTED BY

TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER

DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

JANUARY 15–FEBRUARY 7, 2010

WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY

ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

PUBLICATIONS EDITOR

MICHAEL PALLER

RESIDENT DRAMATURG

DAN RUBIN

PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY ASSOCIATE

KATIE MAY

PUBLICATIONS INTERN

ELLEN CASSIDY

DRAMATURGY INTERN

SHELLEY CARTER

ARTISTIC INTERN

Words on Plays is made possible in part by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

A.C.T. is supported in part by the Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the donors of *The Next Generation Campaign*.



TIME FOR EXTRA DEEP BREATHS

An Interview with *Phèdre* Composer David Lang

BY ELLEN CASSIDY

David Lang has never quite fit into any musical box. Academics and critics have attempted to encapsulate his experimental musical style with such terms as “post-minimalist,” “totalist,” and “modernist rock,” but Lang is not interested in such labels. In 1987, he and two other composers fresh out of the Yale School of Music (Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe) founded Bang on a Can, a groundbreaking organization devoted to providing a home for creators, like themselves, of uncategorizable music through commissions and performance opportunities. Over the ensuing years, Lang’s reputation and repertoire have grown, and in 2008 his *little match girl passion*—a setting of Hans Christian Andersen’s familiar tale in the format of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*—won the Pulitzer Prize for Music, settling Lang squarely front and center in the contemporary music world.

Lang first met A.C.T. Artistic Director Carey Perloff when they were both undergraduates at Stanford University, and their artistic partnership blossomed years later in New York when he composed music for her production of Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at Classic Stage Company. Bringing Lang’s cutting-edge, genre-bending sensibility to the great classics of dramatic literature, their continuing collaboration has produced evocative scores, performed by some of the Bay Area’s most distinguished performance ensembles, for several A.C.T. productions, including Timberlake Wertenbaker’s adaptations of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (Rova Saxophone Quartet, 1993) and Euripides’ *Hecuba* (Kitka, 1995), Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Kronos Quartet, 1996), and Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* (Chanticleer, 1998), as well as the A.C.T.-commissioned opera *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, with a libretto by playwright Mac Wellman (Kronos Quartet, 2002).

Lang spoke to us in December about making music to complement the intense tragedy of Racine’s *Phèdre*.

II

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES HAS SAID ABOUT YOUR COMPOSITIONS: “THERE’S NO NAME FOR THIS KIND OF MUSIC.” HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT STATEMENT? I think there are some composers who wake up in the morning and say, “I really want it to be easy to know exactly what I do—to understand it without thinking about it, to know what radio station will play it, and what store will sell it, and what website will promote it.” If you tailor your music into the right box, all of those questions are settled for you. I think having a label on your work makes it easy for people to talk about you, to think about you,

to market you, to accept you or reject you. I'm not interested in that at all. I just want my music to be heard on its own terms. I don't want it to be heard in conjunction with anyone else's scene or anybody else's ideas. If I thought I belonged in a box, in a particular category of music, the very next day I would wake up and try to get out of it. So I like the idea that my music keeps people guessing, that I have pieces that are very loud and obnoxious, and that I have pieces that are quiet and beautiful. People came up to me after *the little match girl passion*, my Pulitzer Prize piece, and said, "God, this is so strange for you. Your music is so obnoxious." I like the idea that someone will be surprised. What's interesting to me is that all the pieces are very thoughtful. They're all made with the sense of getting some emotional life percolating down low. But knowing that much means knowing I'm not obligated to make them all sound alike, I'm not obligated to make them all with the same materials or the same instruments or aiming for the same venues. I don't really want to make it that easy to define me.

WHAT INITIALLY INSPIRED YOU ABOUT PHÈDRE?

The characters. What I really like about these characters is that they're emotional volcanoes. They're sitting on this incredibly intense emotion; it doesn't always come out, but it's always there. The tension once the play starts is amazing. I thought that's something that music can highlight very well. I enjoy showing that something that seems one way on the surface is actually something very different percolating down below.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE COMPOSING FOR A PLAY WRITTEN IN 17TH-CENTURY FRANCE, SET IN ANCIENT GREECE, AND PERFORMED IN NORTH AMERICA TODAY?

My life and love is to write opera. My real love is to think about characters and their motivations and to figure out how to make people who might be ciphers emotionally believable, at least to themselves. One of the things that I love doing in general, and what I loved doing with this play specifically, is looking at the characters and not imagining them as historical figures, but kind of selfishly projecting my own feelings onto them. Then I can imagine, if I'm in Theseus's position, if I'm in Phèdre's position: How do I feel? So I don't really look at it as an opportunity to show something from the past, or an opportunity to set someone else's vision free, but instead as my great opportunity to imagine myself in a different emotional universe, and to ask myself vaguely therapeutic questions about what my emotions are and how they relate to the characters. What I really like about writing music is that I get to spend a lot of time thinking about myself. The thing that's great about plays with lots of different characters is that you get to see lots of different aspects of yourself, you get to think of lots of different ways of how you relate to them.

DOES EACH CHARACTER HAVE HIS OR HER OWN MUSICAL THEME?

There's a basic harmonic world that they all share, but I did try to group general characters and emotions into different kinds of musical actions. There's a certain kind of way that the cello chords work, a certain kind of slowness and tunefulness that's associated with Phèdre; I change her music by speeding up or slowing down those chords, but the chords themselves don't really change. There's a way in which there's not very much material; it's just put into different environments. So you'll hear something, and it will take you back into a different moment in the play, and it will subconsciously tie things together for you.

There's only a little bit of music that is underscored. I hate underscoring, and I've known Carey for so long that she humors me. I think, if there's going to be music, why can't we just listen to the music? This play is so intense that it's nice to have some moments to take a breath. It is really overwhelming, but I also think it's meant to be, so you don't want to break it up too much because it's so taut.

AT THE END OF THE PLAY WE HEAR ONE LONG NOTE; COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THAT NOTE IS SUPPOSED TO MEAN FOR THE AUDIENCE AND THE PLAY?

After such an intense play, it's really necessary to get a sense that you have permission to sit and think about it. I don't like music to tell you exactly what to feel and think. It's possible with this play to construct music so there's only one right way to think about it and at the end of the piece to have it all wrapped up in a bow, but I didn't do that. What is important when you have something so powerful, so emotionally and psychologically problematic, is time to take a deep breath and to digest it. So I think with that note I don't really want to tell people how to evaluate this experience—I just want to put them in a mood where they feel that it's okay to sit and evaluate the experience of the play for themselves. It's a time for extra deep breaths.

YOU'VE SAID, "WHEN I WRITE MUSIC . . . [IT IS] A VOTE FOR THE KIND OF CULTURE I WANT TO MAKE SURE SURVIVES." HOW DOES THAT RELATE TO PHÈDRE?

Well, the people who come to see *Phèdre* are not the same people who watch reruns of *Friends*. It's a question of what kind of messages you want to receive from the things you do with your spare time. Do you want to receive messages that massage you into an unthinking kind of submission? Or do you want to get messages in your spare time that make you think about your life not as your spare time, but as your main activity? That's what *Phèdre* is. In a way everyone who reads this article has already voted for that. They're saying that thinking deeply about people and their emotions, really thinking deeply about their own emotions, is a very necessary and unfortunately unusual part of our lives. So I would call that a vote.