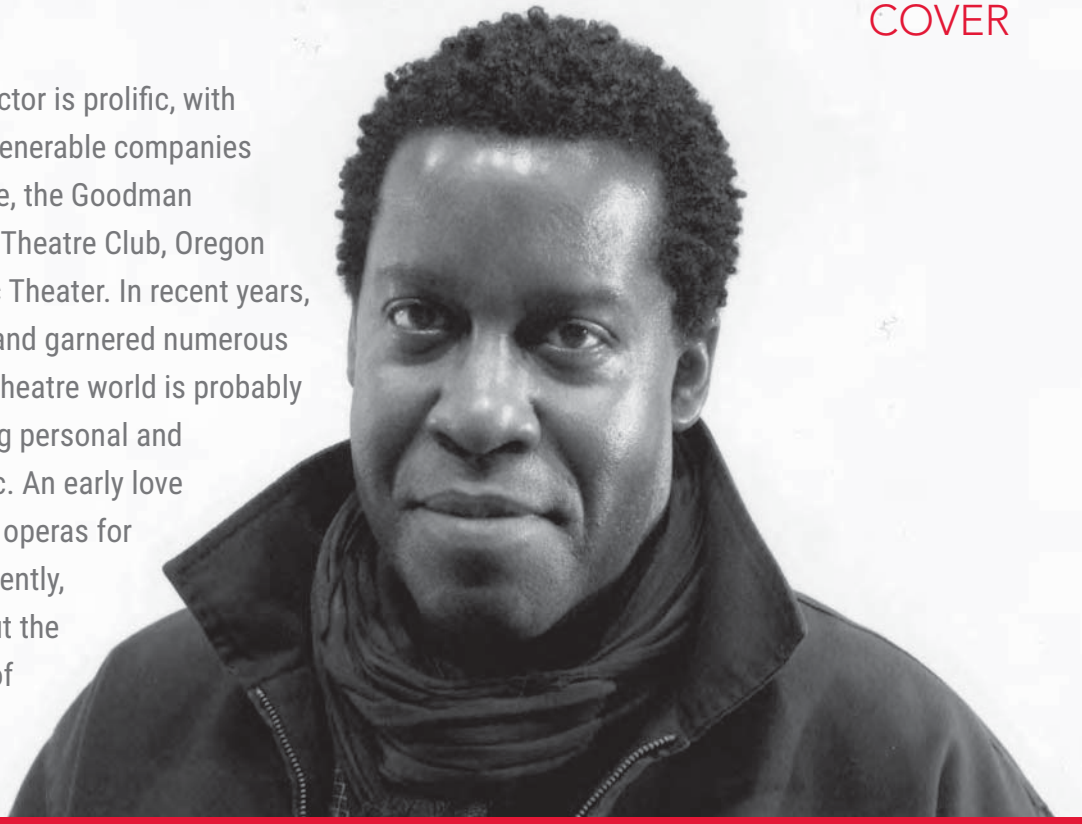
Tazewell Thompson's work as a director is prolific, with more than 75 production credits at venerable companies including Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Goodman Theatre, Guthrie Theater, Manhattan Theatre Club, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and the Public Theater. In recent years, he has written award-winning plays and garnered numerous playwriting commissions. What the theatre world is probably less aware of is the director's lifelong personal and professional engagement with music. An early love of opera has led Thompson to stage operas for companies all around the world. Recently, Thompson shared his thoughts about the craft of working in a dramatic form of stories sung through.



Tazewell Th

One of your earliest successes was with a production of the Aaron Copland opera *The Second Hurricane*. Could you tell us a bit about that production?

In November 1985, I directed my first opera, *The Second Hurricane*, in New York City—my hometown. It was part of a month-long celebration of Brooklyn-born Aaron Copland's 85th birthday. There were performances of Copland's work all over the five boroughs, from Lincoln Center to Carnegie Hall to schools, churches, and basements, and other venues large and small. I had heard about this event two years earlier. I had found and purchased a recording at the Strand Bookstore of the opera and became obsessed with wanting to stage the piece somewhere.

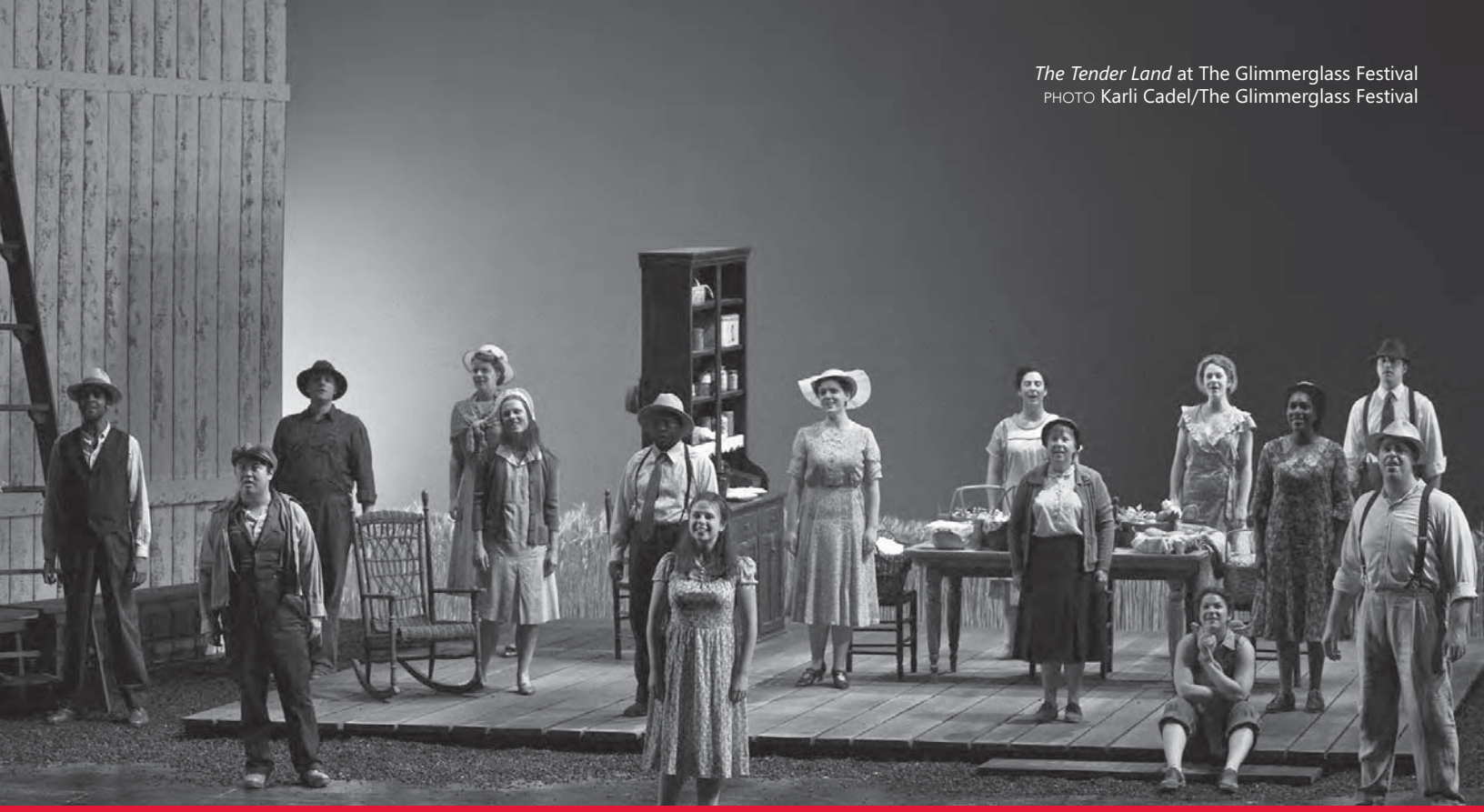
I approached the organizers of the Copland celebration and Boosey & Hawkes—the publishers and owners of the copyrights—for permission to produce and direct, and I negotiated the rental fees. I was given permission to be a part of the Copland festival—provided I raise funds and find a space on my own. I began a campaign of contacting friends and associates of Copland and librettist Edwin Denby to create the props and backdrops and furniture pieces for the opera. They included Willem and Elaine de Kooning, along with Red Grooms, Robert Wilson, Larry Rivers, John Cage, Alex Katz, Pat Steir, and others. They came forward to honor their friends and supported the production by contributing artworks, scenery, and props for the opera. I wrote letters to large and small organizations and corporations; it was my first venture into producing. Con Edison gave $500; the NEA's Opera Division gave $20,000. Willem de Kooning donated a painting toward the fundraising.

In my research, I discovered the opera premiered in 1937 as a concert at the Henry Street Settlement in Lower Manhattan. I was able to rent the Settlement and give the opera its first fully staged production. I restored an aria and a ballet cut from the original and was permitted to rewrite the libretto. The production was a major success. It was also my introduction to directing opera and meeting with and working closely with Aaron Copland.

At his home and studio in Peekskill, New York, I was granted close-up observation as Copland demonstrated on his piano the stories and ideas behind segments and scenes and arias from the opera. He talked of his special fondness for *The Second Hurricane* and how he hoped the opera for young voices might gain new popularity. He was excited by the fuss of the citywide celebration for his 85th birthday. "I am a native New Yorker. From Brooklyn. Nice to have a big party in my backyard," he said. We spoke at great length of *The Tender Land*, his only other opera. I directed that at Glimmerglass in 2010.

Please describe for us the process you have in preparing for an opera. Is that different from your preparation for a play?

Endless hours of listening to the score and rereading the libretto over and over. Research! I always collect stacks and piles of visuals. I



The Tender Land at The Glimmerglass Festival
PHOTO Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

OMPSON: THE WORK I MUST DO

do the exact same approach when I direct a play: I find music that I can associate with wherever the play's environment is set. That music becomes my listening device feeding my imagination as I read the play and develop images.

When you're directing opera, are you led most by the music or the libretto?

Both. They are symbiotic. The music provides the emotion, the setting, the atmosphere, the soul of the composer, and the temperament of the characters. The libretto provides the concrete meaning of the language of the opera, the narrative.

Unlike directing a play, I spend no time around a table discussing character and motivations and meanings underneath the libretto. During the first couple of days, I interject during the maestro's sing-through rehearsal my impressions, and then we are on our feet no later than the third day of rehearsal.

In my rehearsal hall, research of photos and artwork overwhelms the walls, and I refer to them often in the staging. I reinforce and demonstrate what the singers already know from the music in terms of how a psychological gesture or movement can express so much.

I love big operas with large choruses. I enjoy movement in unison with big groups and telling stories through the subdivisions of groups, bringing out and encouraging individual moments from the chorus as they continue to remain connected to the whole. More intimate scenes are treated no differently than I would approach a two- or three-hander in a play.

The time to rehearse an opera is much shorter than for a play. Understandable. Singers report on the first day "knowing their lines," the score, by heart. A day-after-day rehearsal schedule of singing needs to be confined and carefully planned out; otherwise a singer will have very little to give vocally as the stage and orchestra rehearsals approach. Today's singing artist is called upon to do so much more: act their roles convincingly; dance; learn combat; perform from impossible heights and depths on outrageous scenery, wearing sometimes outlandish costumes; all the while singing at the top of their unamplified God-given lungs in all kinds of languages over the gigantic sound of a great orchestra.

In addition to Copland, you've directed operas written by a huge range of well-known modern composers, from Poulenc to Benjamin Britten to Philip Glass. Are there particular qualities or issues that you are drawn to in the work you choose to direct?

Great stories. Unforgettable characters. Brilliant music. Operas that have contemporaneous relevance. An ability for me to find something new and compelling with the telling and presenting of the opera that hopefully will captivate and leave a lasting impression on an audience.

Lost in the Stars at The Glimmerglass Festival
PHOTO Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

You've explored the Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* in multiple stage productions as well as directing a televised version of your production. What most appeals to you about that particular piece?

A community that I recognize personally and culturally. A humble people loving and living and thriving and surviving; a community of hope and pride and determination. And, of course, that impossibly timeless, magnificent, memorable, classic score full of great standards recorded by a variety of great musicians. It is a supreme masterpiece.

For opera houses at the box office, it is what *A Christmas Carol* is for theatres across the country. Always a sellout, deservedly so.

What are the joys and challenges of directing an opera with the kind of verbosity as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*?

No challenges. Only great joy. I'm not a fan of comic opera. But I love Gilbert and Sullivan. I love everything about the wacky cloud-cuckooland, Theatres of the Absurd & Ridiculous, outrageous world of G and S, the thrilling patter songs, hilarious language, and the memorable melodies. *Patience*—a blatantly clever, ever-enchanting, and fantastically silly satire of the Aesthetic Movement—was extraordinary fun to rehearse. I cannot remember a time when a rehearsal hall was filled with constant laughter and delicious carefree experimentation and practical jokes. I so wish to direct more Gilbert and Sullivan.

We wanted to ask you about the experiences you've had with directing operas that had particular resonances with the locales in which you were working. When you directed *Porgy and Bess* for the New Orleans Opera Association in 2010, was there a different resonance in that city, given that it was still recovering from Hurricane Katrina?

The city was in recovery. The audience was aware of the parallels of the great hurricane in the opera. However, like the denizens of the opera, the resilient spirit of the people in the city is what I recall most. There was an involvement from an audience that was not merely holding tickets. Not eavesdropping or gawking, but attending and witnessing truth. Their truth. Their experience. They surrounded the event unfolding on stage in a very personal, meaningful way.

And with your 2011 production of Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars* in Cape Town? What was the impact or meaning for you of directing an anti-apartheid opera in such a historic place? How did audience members react to it there?

[It was] one of the great experiences of my life as an opera director. Imagine directing *Lost in the Stars* in the place and all the settings and circumstances that inspired it—South Africa—with South Africans! [It is] a work about deep and wide racism—apartheid—that unfortunately speaks to us [as] vividly today as it did in 1951. A great work of social and historical significance carried aloft by a masterwork score. The work is a shattering, gut-wrenching, intimate tale of the struggle of the quest of two fathers to recognize, know, and accept each other in the difficult chasm of the apartheid system, with themes of personal heartache and pain, compassion and understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness, and moral transformation—all set against Kurt Weill's magnificent score.

Many members of the company had experienced firsthand the cruelties of the apartheid system. They knew this tale personally. They were passionate to tell the story. The audience was unlike any audience I've ever experienced in opera or theatre. People stood up and shouted at moments of conflict. Waved handkerchiefs at passengers leaving on an ill-fated train trip. Sobbed openly at the trial scene. Laughed at moments of deception and irony. Cheered loud and long at the ending. Unforgettable. I must also add: to be in Africa, the land of my ancestors, was

Dialogues of the Carmelites
at The Glimmerglass Festival
PHOTO George Mott/The Glimmerglass Festival

particularly and personally special and moving to me.

You've had some strong influences in your life who were associated with performing. What are the different ways that these people in your life led you to the path you're on now?

I was made a ward of the state of New York and sent to the cloistered confines of a convent when I was eight years old; taken from my parents, deemed unfit to care for me. My father played alto saxophone. I hardly remember his playing. My paternal grandmother had dreams of a musical stage career. So I suppose deep in the marrow of my bones, while I was an egg in my mother's belly, was an unbeknownst wish to express myself in the world through the arts somehow, some way, some day.

My greatest childhood influence came from the nesting, nursing, nurturing, protective, and loving guidance of the good sisters of Saint Dominic's Convent in Blauvelt, New York. I had many "mothers" during my seven years' stay. It was the nuns who very early on, like any mother would discover in their child, realized that I had artistic leanings. I was entwined with music constantly, on a daily basis. Everything was sung: morning prayers at rising, at meals, and, of course, during daily Mass. I was a choir boy and an altar boy. I read music very easily. Through life at the convent, I entered and won oratorical contests citywide and statewide. I knew all the great hymns and Gregorian chants. I was soloist for the great feast days of Christmas and Easter. I know practically every song written to honor Saint Patrick!

Then, of course, there was Latin. I was an altar boy responding in Latin to Father Farrell's prayers in Sunday Masses and all other events at the altar; separate advanced religious instructions with reading, writing, and Latin in conversation! The roots of Latin were an incredible kick-starter for me in directing opera some 25 years later in foreign languages.

I was encouraged to elaborate on the stories I made up to entertain my "siblings." I never performed in the plays because I was a natural comedian and caused chaos at rehearsals when I disrupted the proceedings by showing off with impressions of the nuns and volunteer workers and breaking up the casts with laughter.

Many years later, my dearest friend and mentor and new mother figure, **Zelda Fichandler**, brought me to Arena Stage in 1987 as an Associate Artistic Director. I attribute solely to Zelda everything I know about the work of a director with actors and designers and how to unlock the puzzle inside of a play on the page and in the empty space. Among the many bouquets Zelda threw my way, I caught, grasped, and devoured the reading list of plays and authors I should want to know.

For almost 30 years, wherever I was in the world, Zelda advised and guided me through my career with tender and tough love. I will remember, love, and miss Zelda forever.

What was the first opera you heard or attended a performance of?

I heard many an opera at the convent. Sister Benvenuta, who possessed a beautiful voice, played long-playing records of the warhorses: *Carmen*, *Aida*, *Madame Butterfly*, *The Magic Flute*, and others. It was literally "Greek to me," but oddly seductive and thrilling. Wherever I am in the world and I hear certain operas, I am immediately transported back in time to the memory of hearing Sister Benvenuta's wonderful scratchy Longines Symphonette long-playing records opera series.

The first opera I attended was the famous John Dexter production at the Met of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, where the curtain rises and dozens of nuns are spread out on the floor in the form of a cross. I had a standing-room ticket five levels way up, behind the family circle. I burst into tears at the image of the

Appomattox at Washington National Opera
PHOTO Scott Suchman for WNO

cross and the true story of the 16 Carmelite nuns of Compiegne and their courageous act of sacrifice and martyrdom, for refusing to denounce their vocation during the French Revolution Reign of Terror. It left an indelible mark on me. It is my favorite opera.

In 2002, I directed my own production at Glimmerglass Opera, and subsequently at New York City Opera and later Vancouver Opera. I never tire of the piece. It always leaves me weeping, shaken, inspired, and enthralled.

What continues to draw you—as a creator and audience member—to the form of opera?

The assault and explosiveness to the senses from astounding music and the fun challenge of making a world and inventing visuals and adding real dimension to sometimes outsized human beings.

Over the last 10 years, an increasing number of opera companies have hired directors thought of as theatre artists to helm opera productions. Why do you think this is? What do you think the crossover brings to both forms?

It's the smartest, most innovative move that opera companies have made in a decade. Opera is theatre. Who better to interpret the form but directors from the world of theatre?

So often, audience members—and artists!—draw lines between theatre and opera. What do you feel the similarities are? How do you feel about the recent shifts in the forms that seem to be bringing them closer together?

No difference to me at all. Never has been.

You're continuing to expand your experience with opera as well as your artistic skill set and are writing a libretto! Are you comfortable describing the Glimmerglass Festival commission to us?

I can say this: **Francesca Zambello**, artistic leader of both Washington National Opera and the Glimmerglass Festival, commissioned me to write an original opera. My own story. Not an adaptation. It involves a black family and community torn apart by the shooting of an unarmed teenager by a police officer. It will have its world premiere summer 2019 at Glimmerglass. Jeanine Tesori, the most prolific and honored female theatrical composer in history, will write the music. I will also direct.

What are the different modes of thinking employed when you are writing an opera compared with directing one? Or is the director in you helping to write the libretto, too?

The director in me is playing a very strong key role. The writer is constantly editing and being tough and ultra-precise about locating the exact words needed to get my point across.

At times it feels like I'm trying to get through an overdue term paper, but most of the time the work is extraordinarily fulfilling. Lots of fun; a great new disciplined way of working; and for never a moment do I not realize how fortunate I am to have this opportunity

Do you have any advice for artists who want to pursue careers as directors, librettists, and composers for opera?

Have an absolute: "I cannot live another day unless I do the work I must do as an artist in the world of opera."

Listen to recordings. Read the librettos. Rent DVDs of opera. Attend opera productions if you can afford it. Assist directors. Write something every day. Distill it the next day. Keep a journal of images. Adapt a one-act play into a libretto.

Light candles for your journey forward as a flash on the road ahead and a hope that the flame will reach a higher source that guides and watches over you. I'm wishing you my own good luck. SDC