

OPERA NEWS

EXCLUSIVE

Beth Morrison's
New Rules
p.32

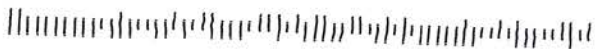


YOUR
BACKSTAGE
PASS

Game CHANGERS

YOUNG COMPANIES ARE REDEFINING OPERA

BY MATTHEW SIGMAN, p.26



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ELIZABETH D MORRISON
666 OCEAN AVE APT D1
BROOKLYN NY 11226-5337

**THE INDUSTRY
TAKES L.A.
ON A ROAD TRIP**

the F D C T E

of INNOV

By ADAM WASSERMAN



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© CONY WEAVER/PHOTOTYPE FESTIVAL (ANGEL'S BONE)

Abigail Fischer,
below, in
Angel's Bone at
the Prototype
Festival, 2016;
visionary impres-
sario Morrison,
opposite page

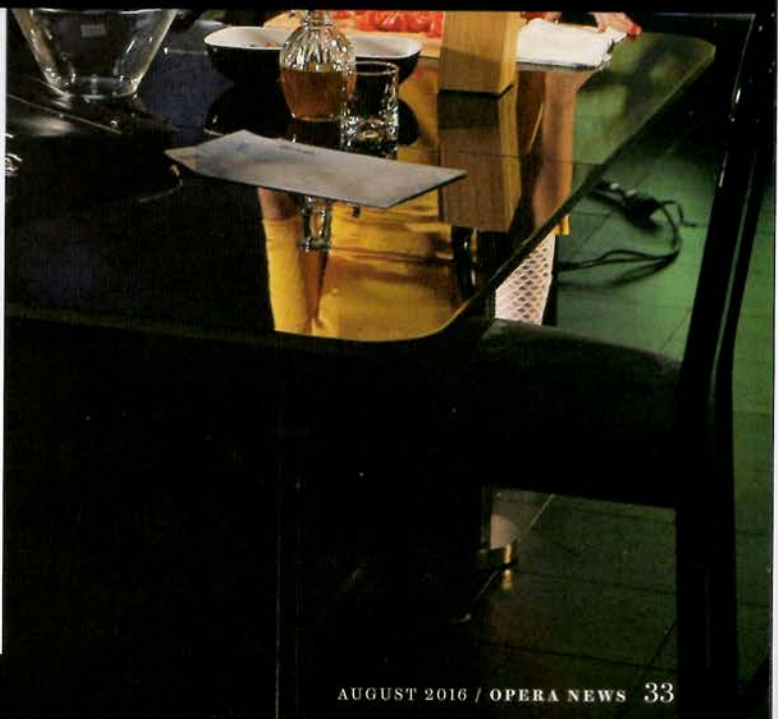
**BETH MORRISON HAS PRODUCED
A DECADE'S WORTH OF GROUNDBREAKING
OPERA-THEATER PROJECTS.**

OVATION

BETH MORRISON IS HER OWN GENRE.

A few years ago the impresario and creative producer was searching for a catchall term to describe the style of progressive, indie-classical contemporary operas she brings to the stage. There was a growing audience for her innovative creations in New York and around the country, but the works defied easy categorization. They were, so to speak, unbranded.

"One of the challenges that I felt very strongly at the beginning was overcoming the term 'opera,' and all of the baggage that carries—ivory tower, inaccessible, in a foreign language, singers just standing onstage," says Morrison, who seems equal parts punk-rock frontwoman and polished CEO. "I thought for years about this. So taking a page from 'music-theater'—an industry term signifying something that's more on the avant-garde side of things—we settled on 'opera-theater.' Just seeing it or hearing it is enough to make the experience different. You don't have an expectation, because you don't know what it is."



KEEPING AUDIENCES GUESSING

has proved to be Morrison's stock in trade since she founded Beth Morrison Projects in 2006. My mid-January meeting with Morrison, a few blocks from NYU's Skirball Center in the East Village, comes just a few days before the Prototype Festival—coproduced by Beth Morrison Projects and the multidisciplinary production company HERE—is to present the New York premiere of David T. Little and Royce Vavrek's postapocalyptic *Dog Days*, which has received as much acclaim as any modern opera in recent memory and epitomizes BMP's brand of opera-theater. Morrison's schedule is packed, but she's not flagging. "During Prototype, I don't sleep," she says. Her boundless energy comes

ture," she says, betraying the slightest hint of weariness. "I'm working really hard on that. I'm doing a massive amount of work on a very, very small staff. And after a while, that becomes tough."

The fourth Prototype Festival went on to reach nearly 10,000 audience members, and its success kicked off a period of explosive growth for Beth Morrison Projects. During 2016, the company doubled its annual budget and expanded its staff to seven people from three, and by year's end, it will have mounted a total of nine touring productions, six workshops and seven world premieres, including Paola Prestini's *Aging Magician*, which had a final workshop at MASS MoCA in February followed by the world premiere in Minneapolis in March (a two-week run is planned for Broadway's New Victory Theater in 2017); David Lang's *Anatomy Theater*, which opened at LA Opera in June; Missy Mazzoli's *Breaking the Waves*, which opens at Opera Philadelphia in September; and the September premiere at Boston's Arts Emerson of *Ouroboros Trilogy*, a Wagnerian-sized cycle of three grand operas by Zhou Long, Scott Wheeler and Prestini featuring librettos by Cerise Lim Jacobs, who conceived the project.

"It's the biggest project we've ever taken on," Morrison says of *Ouroboros* when we meet again in April. "It's been a huge investment of our time and energy and resources over the last several years. And we're coming into the home stretch." It amounts to something of a capstone for a dizzying season by a production company that Morrison still deems a "boutique operation," and which just a few years ago seemed unlikely to find traction in the operatic mainstream.



Two Beth Morrison Projects: *Aging Magician*, above, at MASS MoCA in 2016; James Bobick in *Dog Days*, right, at Fort Worth Opera in 2015



from adherence to a strict vegetarian diet; avoiding sugar, gluten and caffeine; and hitting the gym every morning. It's a necessary routine when there isn't a moment to spare in her day. During Prototype, Morrison has scheduled pitch meetings, presentations, tech rehearsals and industry powwows that will determine the scale of her company's activity for the following season. "For me, right now, the most important thing is to stabilize my infrastruc-

ture," she says, betraying the slightest hint of weariness. "I'm working really hard on that. I'm doing a massive amount of work on a very, very small staff. And after a while, that becomes tough."

True to countercultural tides, the operatic mainstream came looking for her. In 2013, LA Opera president and CEO Christopher Koelsch cold-called Morrison and brokered a working plan to present two BMP productions a season under LAO's aegis. The following year, Morrison partnered with Fort Worth Opera, which presented *Dog Days*. During the 2016–17 season, Morrison will take *The Source*—an experimental installation piece by Ted Hearne about the trove of classified military data leaked by Army Private Chelsea Manning—to both LA and San Francisco Operas. In 2018, Pittsburgh Opera will produce the world premiere of Mohammed Fairouz's *Bhutto*—starring Kate Lindsey and Nathan Gunn—with BMP serving as creative and developmental producer.

After the widespread success of *Dog Days*, and with a decade's worth of groundbreaking projects to her name, Morrison has hit an inflection point. Yet her success in establishing the company's brand of opera-theater with both downtown audiences

and mainstream opera companies testifies as much to her longtime business model as to her role as a tastemaker. Unencumbered by the challenges big companies face in developing new works, Morrison capitalizes on the leanness of her operation to offer presenters a polished product with the cachet of new work. "Our model is that we commission, develop, produce and tour. We don't rent spaces—we partner with presenters. I can't do anything without a partner," says Morrison. "They take the theater costs, they take the marketing costs, they take the stage-labor costs—and then we take the artistic costs." It's a paradigm that Morrison honed while studying theater-management and production at Yale's School of Drama and later through a fellowship at Pomegranate Arts, which manages and produces tours for the likes of Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson.

MORRISON ORIGINALLY PLANNED TO be on the other side of the footlights. She grew up performing in community theater in rural Maine and earned a degree in vocal performance at Boston University School of Music with the intention of becoming a singer. She received a master's degree in pedagogy from Arizona State University and became the director of Boston University Tanglewood Institute. In her undergraduate years, she says, "I was obsessed with art song and lieder, because a whole opera happened in one song. The opera that I was seeing onstage just bored the shit out of me." A self-described "nervous performer," she characterizes her time at the Tanglewood Institute as "a defining change. Because I realized that what I was interested in was effecting change outside of myself."

It's a philosophy that Morrison has continued to espouse as her company's influence and footprint have grown. "It's our job to respond to where the artists are leading us," she says. "It doesn't resonate for me to commission a composer and tell them, 'You can't use amplification,' or 'You can't use this kind of instrumentation,' 'You can only have ten players,' or 'It has to be this voice type.' I would never do that. For me, it's, 'What do you want to write? What's the idea in your mind that you think nobody's going to do? What is too weird, or you're afraid of it, or you think somebody else is going to be afraid of it? Talk to me about that.'"

It's clear that, for Morrison, every professional endeavor is also a personal affair. The composers, designers and directors with whom she seems to be in constant collaboration are more than just colleagues. "People always ask me, 'Do you have a life outside of BMP and outside of work?' For me, my life is my work is my life. I like it that way. The artists I work with are my friends. We form very strong,

deep personal friendships through these projects. I feel very strongly that I have to like people that I work with, because these projects are so hard." Morrison admits that her professional efforts leave her little time to attend to other areas of her life. In a good month, she'll see her boyfriend, Boston University professor, conductor and ethnomusicologist André de Quadros, "maybe twice. We're not a couple who goes out to the movies together."

Asked to choose a favorite among the pieces she's currently working on, Morrison's reply is telling: "It's not possible, because they are all my children. In fact, when I moved to New York, I told my parents that I was never going to have children—that my projects were my children, and I expected them to behave in the same way that they behave with my brother's kids. They were expected to come and support my projects and see them, like they were their grandchildren."

Morrison's process, coupled with her own individual taste, has resulted in a crop of works—operas, oratorios and multimedia concert pieces—that are at once wildly diverse and immediately identifiable as Beth Morrison projects. Yet encountering *Dog Days* followed by a bleeding-edge piece such as Du Yun's oppressively dark *Angel's Bone*—which seemed to luxuriate in the distress of its characters at its Prototype premiere—makes one wonder if Morrison's vision for opera-theater might accommodate a little levity. "The work that I'm attracted to has dramatic importance that is socially relevant, that feels like it connects to a contemporary audience. But yeah, a lot of my stuff is dark and heavy," she says. "WQXR called me 'The Queen of Post-Apocalyptic Opera' a few years ago, and I haven't been able to shake it.

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I'm interested in real things and how they connect to our world. We live in kind of a dark time, but that doesn't mean that there isn't hope."

Has Morrison, in her innovative approach to developing and presenting new works and her partnerships with traditional institutions, discovered the most viable path forward for opera? "I've had people say that to me. But I never would be so presumptuous," she says. "I feel that I've hit on something that works for the company that I have, and that works for the artists that I work with. I'm an idealist—I think that's the overriding thing. As a producer, ten years into this, I've been burned, I've been screwed, I've had people treat me terribly and bad things happen. But that's not what I carry with me. I go into every project like a child, with wide eyes, thinking, 'Let's make something beautiful and amazing.' I really do carry this idealistic view of what the world should be and what we should be making. Does that mean that we always live up to it? Probably not, but that's just who I am." ■