

# Sweeney made me do it!

Opera librettist Mark Campbell on his own creative epiphany

**"A**lmost everything I know about writing for opera, I learned from studying Sondheim's work. Any success I have had is due to him," Mark Campbell, the highly regarded and prolific librettist of new American opera, said in October 2014, sitting in his Greenwich Village kitchen. He chatted about the singing theatre, American popular culture and his determination to make opera accessible to American audiences.

Over the past 10 years, Campbell has been commissioned to author significant works for opera houses all across the United States. His collaborators include a gallery of distinguished composers — John Musto on *Volpone* (2004) and *Later the Same Evening* (2007) Ricky Ian Gordon on *Rappahannock County* (2011); and Kevin Puts on the 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Silent Night*, now reaching international audiences, and on *The Manchurian Candidate* (premiering in March 2015 as part of the Minnesota Opera's New Works Initiative). Looking ahead he is collaborating with classical composing luminaries including William Bolcom (*Dinner at Eight*), Paul Moravec (an adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining*) and Mason Bates (an opera about Steve Jobs). In between he dabbles in smaller projects — chamber operas, song cycles and pieces that have one foot (or perhaps only a half-foot) in musical theatre and the remainder in opera.

Regardless of the project, Campbell measures his inspiration, his education as a writer and his vocational ambition through all things Sondheim. "When I first heard *Company*, it changed my life," he says with gentle excitement. "I was in high school and I thought, 'Wow: musical theatre can be grown up, deal with adult issues, be funny, controversial and relevant.'"

He had started out as "an actor, a really bad actor," but soon abandoned performing for writing. It gave him a chance to tell a good story, to make an audience laugh and cry, to be thoughtful, inspiring, healing. But he was also drawn to the conventions of opera: sung-through, exalted and using music to elevate and embolden. "Sondheim," he explains, "was my motivation to write for the musical theatre, but *Sweeney Todd* impelled me to write for opera." That work, Campbell believes, is the ideal model for contemporary opera. He adds that *Sweeney Todd*, Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking* (2000), and John Corigliano and William Hoffman's *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991) represent how opera can connect to American popular culture.

"Those of us who write for musical theatre and strive to bring American opera into this century sometimes just depend on good old-fashioned show business," he says. "Our operas

are more story-driven, more geared to plots and characters. We care deeply about our audiences. We're pushing forward a narrative about American lives in new story-driven opera. Everyone I work with views opera as a popular art form, much as it was back in the 19th century. We want an audience."

He describes contemporary opera as "a merging of American musical theatre with opera — an idea that I've found certain critics disdain, but one that audiences embrace. And if we want audiences to attend new opera in this country, this is our best bet at doing that." He goes on to challenge opera companies to commission new works and not reinvent traditional repertoire. "Why do opera companies keep having to, say, set *Rigoletto* in Las Vegas to make it 'relevant'? I'd rather see a new opera about money laundering, racketeering and the Rat Pack set in Las Vegas."

According to Campbell, contemporary American opera is the beneficiary of Sondheim. "His musicals push the drama forward in a way that hadn't been done before. This is ironic, as Sondheim has been known to have some disdain for the form — because music has traditionally been favored over the story and the words. I'm trying to take what makes the story more important, trying to raise the power of storytelling in the libretto as well as the music."

The librettist believes that audiences really go to the opera for the "big moments," those heightened, cathartic turns when the marriage of music and word carry a listener into overdrive. He points out that Sondheim does this effortlessly in such works as *Sweeney Todd*, *Passion, Pacific Overtures* and *Sunday in the Park with George*. He notes, "I've only met one young composer who said he didn't know if he really cared about Stephen Sondheim. But the important opera composers, among them John Musto, Bill Bolcom, Paul Moravec, Mark Adamo and Jake Heggie, have all been influenced in some way by Sondheim's scores." In fact, Heggie dedicated *Moby-Dick* (2010) to Sondheim.

As a wordsmith, Campbell was inspired by the structure of *Sweeney Todd* and its use of repeating song sections in, for instance, "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd." To give the work cohesion and minimize recitative, he constructed *Volpone* similarly, creating 26 different song sections that repeat. Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's seminal 1979 melodrama was his bible. "You can find ingenious lyrics throughout *Sweeney*, and I emulated that structure. Doing a reprise and then changing it. One of my favorite moments in *Sweeney Todd* is the Act II reprise of 'Johanna.' For me, it's a truly operatic moment: Sweeney no longer cares about who he kills. He

is no longer avenging the destruction of his family. It is a moment of high tragedy, and it gets me every time.”

There is a bounty of arias in his adaptation of *The Manchurian Candidate*. The opera is filled with large “showbiz” moments, the kind that Campbell believes keep opera fans glued to their seats. The character of Eleanor Iselin, portrayed in the film versions by Angela Lansbury and Meryl Streep, provides ample nutrition for him to pen a few meaty arias.

“Eleanor has two big arias,” he says, “and one spectacular moment at the end of Act I.” Kevin Puts had recently sent Campbell a digital file of the orchestration of this rich and dramatic moment. “I needed to let my mind go. And be as crazy as she is.” Eleanor is a character with real rage, like Rose in *Gypsy*, but whereas Rose’s big aria (“Rose’s Turn”) is about thwarted ambition, “Eleanor’s arias are about madness, patriotism and fanaticism all mixed together. And they are wildly obsessive, going to a musical place only opera can go.”

He credits contemporary American opera for heightening opera singers’ acting abilities. “At Juilliard, for example, opera singers are given some strong musical theatre training as well as traditional training. It’s not just about hitting the big notes. You now have to act and move. I’ve found that opera singers are usually thrilled to do new operas in which they get to create roles that don’t bear the weight of historic performances.”

Campbell mentors young librettists through such organizations as American Opera Projects, Washington National Opera’s American Opera

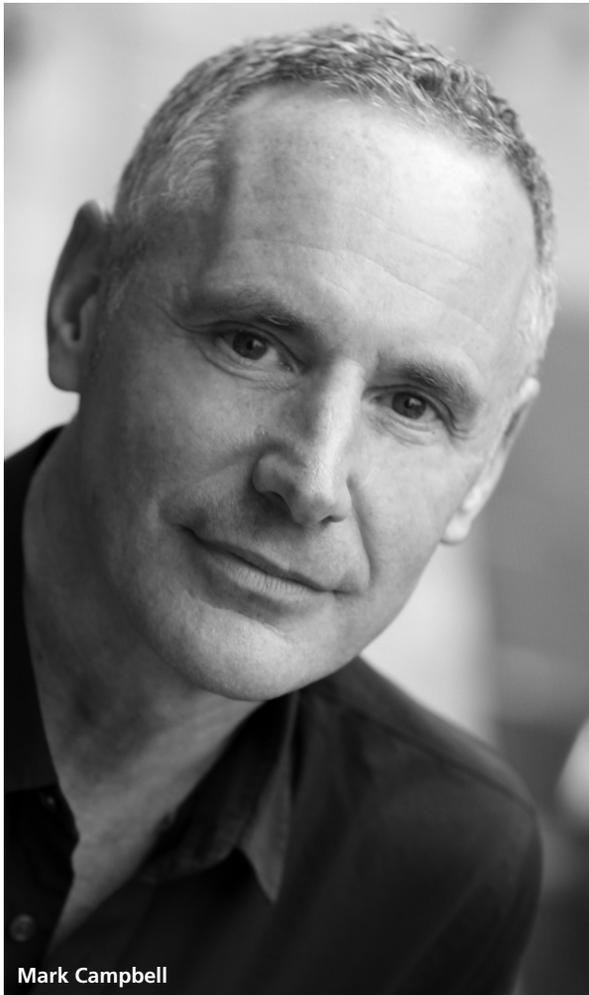
Initiative, American Lyric Theatre and Opera Philadelphia’s Composer in Residence program. He often teaches Sondheim to budding opera librettists. “Take ‘Someone in a Tree’ from *Pacific Overtures*. It’s one of the best ensemble [pieces] ever created. All of these very different perspectives finally merge into one. It’s equal to or better than anything Mozart and [librettist Lorenzo] Da Ponte wrote.”

In 1990 Campbell became the first recipient of the Kleban Prize for lyricists and librettists, a lucrative award for aspiring musical theatre writers. Sondheim was one of the first

judges and, when Campbell met him in his Midtown East townhouse, Sondheim said, “I really envy the way you can get inside a character and speak through their voice.” Campbell was stunned. “What?” he thought, “I learned everything from him! And I was almost in tears, perhaps influenced by a tall vodka tonic. I didn’t know how to process his praise, because everything had been leading to this moment for me. Here was a man who had been a hero for so long suddenly being very kind and generous to a weepy, young writer.”

It was a moment of empathy and joy, exaltation and excitement — in fact, quite operatic. Campbell

says that moment changed his life. “It led me to believe that I could write for the theatre,” he recounts, “and when I received my first full-length opera assignment — to write *Volpone* — it helped give me the courage to do so. Yes, I can write for opera — because of what I’ve learned from musical theatre.” [TSR]



Mark Campbell

PHOTO BY THERESA MURRAY