

## Veteran's Story is Basis for an opera

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Baritone Daniel Belcher, right, performs a song from the opera "The Long Walk" on Thursday, March 12, 2015, at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Joining him from left, are Opera Saratoga's Jeremy Howard Beck, Stephanie Fleischmann and Lawrence Edelson and author Brian Castner. A reading, discussion and performance introduced an opera based on Castner's Iraq War memoir that's being developed by Opera Saratoga. (Cindy Schultz / Times Union)

When many of us think of opera, we think fusty. Foreign. Dull. Women in Viking helmets, or maybe a cat in a tux singing *figaro-figaro-figaro*. What we don't imagine is this: an Iraq War veteran singing from the top of a staircase — and from the depths of PTSD — fingering his rifle and planning to kill anyone who dares approach his sleeping children.

"Whoever tries to mount these stairs will die!" he intoned in a thundering baritone, his face flushed with murderous paternal love. "Whoever tries to pass this choke point will perish!" The man singing was Daniel Belcher, a Grammy-winning operatic soloist. But the voice belonged to Brian Castner, an Air Force ordnance expert who served three tours in the Middle East, two in Iraq, and came home with what he calls "The Crazy."

It was last Thursday night, and Belcher was performing an excerpt from "The Long Walk," an adaptation of Castner's 2012 memoir of the same name (subtitle: "A Story of War and the Life That Follows") that's set to premiere July 10-25 with Opera Saratoga.

The preliminary event, held at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, mixed renderings of a few arias from the opera with readings by Castner and remarks by its creators: composer Jeremy Howard Beck, librettist Stephanie Fleischmann and Opera Saratoga director Lawrence Edelson.

Edelson emceed the evening, passing a microphone around the semicircle like a dutiful host ("Barbara Walters/'The View' style") as all discussed the opera's inception, the story's power to move and the layers of psychological and artistic complexity required in transforming someone's life into a staged musical narrative — while that someone is right there, observing. The responsibility involved is "intimidating," Belcher said. "The onus on my shoulders is: I wanna do it *right*."

When Castner's agent first related the operatic offer to him, "He said, 'Sit down, don't laugh and hear me out.' " But after meeting with the team, the author said, "I could tell how dedicated and serious they were."

And so he trusted them. He still does.

At the museum, Castner read excerpts describing his battle with "The Crazy" — his term for the post-traumatic madness that seized him in the aftermath of war — and a related, dual consciousness that allowed "the logical one" to observe "the crazy one" from a distance.

The aria Belcher sang, full of dark, roiling music and blunt-force lyrics, captured this split reality with a visceral force: "There are two of me now. There are two. The Crazy! The Crazy! The Crazy! The Crazy!"

Writing the book was, Castner said, less a decision than an imperative. "I think that I didn't *want* to write the book. I *had* to write the book. ... This book was coming out, one way or another. It felt like a very biological process."

"The Long Walk" marks Opera Saratoga's first world premiere in 27 years. As much as Edelson loves the classics — the 2015 season also includes Rossini and Purcell — he also feels that opera needs to push forward to stay vital. This same belief drives his other job, as producing artistic director of American Lyric Theater, a Manhattan opera incubator that develops new works for production elsewhere. Like this one. Here.

Back in 2012, when Edelson first asked Beck and Fleischmann to collaborate on a full-length opera for ALT, the pair couldn't agree on a topic. Finally, in a desperate move, Beck visited a Barnes and Noble and zapped back photos of books on the new releases shelf.

She zeroed in on Castner's memoir. Read it. ("The book immediately felt like a voice in my ear. ... It is quite hallucinatory, and it takes you on a wild ride.") Rang up Beck. Ordered him to read it, too. In short order, they had their subject, albeit a knotty one: turning Castner's nonlinear, intensely inward memoir into a more linear and outward-oriented stage piece was a complicated process.

Early on, they pored through the book and painstakingly assembled its events chronologically, pulling characters and episodes embedded in memory into real time. They also gave Castner's family — his wife Jessie and four sons, reduced to three in the opera — significant roles.

The opera "couldn't just be the voice in Brian's head. We had to depict a family, basically," Fleischmann explained. Castner understood. He was too focused on the incessant and claustrophobic Crazy to think, or write, from anyone else's point of view, he said. "There wasn't room for my wife. ... And I didn't want to presume that I could speak for her." Beck and Fleischmann "were able to give voice to my wife in a way that I could not."

That night at the military museum, mezzo-soprano Heather Johnson rose and gave her voice. In an aria titled "My Grandmother Said," she sang of Jessie's grandfather, changed by war, and her grandmother's words before Castner left for Iraq: "I hope for your sake he dies over there!"

Johnson sang these terrible, terrifying words with power and beauty. And as she did, they seemed to crack her in two.

"It's been unique and wonderful and humbling as an artist" to bring Castner's life to life, she said. The result "is an extremely special, magical piece."

Later in the evening, during a Q and A, a Korean War veteran named Mark Lawton thanked Castner. "I don't think anyone has adequately written until this book ... the story of what it means to come back," he said.

"That's *exactly* why we're doing this thing," Edelson remarked.

Castner spoke of his obligation, as a veteran, to try to get it right. He spoke of timelessness: "Since Homer, in the Odyssey, 'we've all been writing the same story — for thousands of years.'" He spoke with humility, too: "I was just trying to write a little story of what happened to me."

But in opera as in all art, it's the little stories — the intimate tales of valor, and love and pain — that explain what it means to be human.