

War's trauma informs opera

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Caroline Worra, left, and Daniel Belcher, seated at middle, during a rehearsal for Opera Saratoga's "The Long Walk."
(Photo by Amy Biancolli/ Times Union)

Guns and yoga: not a common mix in any context, and certainly not in opera. But there they were, a phalanx of armed young troops in an Iraqi firefight, running around a yoga class as it stretched languidly from the mountain pose to upward dog, then downward dog, then warrior. Shouts of "We're taking potshots, sir!" and "Get the bomb suit! Put it on me!" filled the room as a group of calm and oblivious yogi curved, bent, peaked. But one class member, breaking from formation, was neither calm nor oblivious. This was his flashback. This was his fight. "Warrior!" he sang, his arms hefting an invisible rifle. "Warrior!"

Finally, a bearded man in a Hawaiian shirt stepped in. "Let's go back over this much again," said David Schweizer, stage director of "The Long Walk," an adaptation of Brian Castner's memoir of war and its aftermath, being prepped for its world premiere Friday, July 10, at Opera Saratoga.

In Italian, opera means "work," and an awful lot of it was going on at a strip mall in Clifton Park on a recent Thursday. In a drab white shoebox of empty retail space, cast and crew gathered to rehearse scenes from the opera, written by composer Jeremy Howard Beck and librettist Stephanie Fleischmann and developed with Manhattan opera incubator American Lyric Theater. (Opera Saratoga director Lawrence Edelson runs both.)

All operas are labor-intensive, combining the demands of serious music with the spectacle and stagecraft of theater. But conceiving and birthing a new one — Opera Saratoga's first in 27 years — involves a different kind of labor over a longer stretch of time. Years of work preceded that rehearsal in a store off the Northway, and weeks more were ahead of it. Translating Castner's dense, raw, nonlinear memoir, which interlaces his time as a bomb disposal specialist in Iraq with his struggles at home with "The Crazy," was no simple matter of altering its format and adding a few tunes.

Schweizer took the cast through blocking, yoga positions, enunciation, nuances of acting and the emotional direction of a moment or a scene. Conductor Steven Osgood, wielding a baton in the corner, provided musical direction — clarifying pitches, beats, rhythmic emphases, cutoffs. Edelson sat quietly at one end. Fleischmann and Beck sat quietly at the other. "We might be the first yoga scene *ever*" in an opera, Beck said at a lunch break.

Earlier that morning, the group rehearsed a more hushed excerpt — in which Castner, embodied by baritone Daniel Belcher, has a breakthrough with his shrink, played by soprano Caroline Worra. In a scene of heartbreak and revelation, he sang of lost memories: his son's first steps, the night he proposed to his wife. ("I need to remember!") She sang of luck, strength, humanity and trauma.

"You have blast-induced traumatic brain injury," she intoned in a bit of *recitative* which, like the yoga firefight, is sure to be a first in an opera libretto. "I'm crazy," he sang. "We don't use that word," she sang back.

He wanted to kill a group of screaming women, he told her. But you didn't, she replied. Osgood jumped in. "Keep it as conversational and natural as possible. ... I'm going to keep the momentum going," he said, promising to slow the beat slightly in performance.

They retook the scene a touch more conversationally. Then again, and again, and again.

Schweizer asked for clarity from Worra, a sense of "this is *way* more than I bargained for" from Belcher, a suggestion of trust, simplicity and matter-of-factness from them both.

"We should feel like you know each other better," he said, and they retook the scene once more. Without music. With music. Sitting this way. Sitting that way. And each time, the pain of Castner's memories — those he lost and those he couldn't forget — became more lucid and direct. "That simplicity," Schweizer said, "is actually more profound."

Back in March, Castner appeared at a preliminary event for the opera — a sort of panel-with-music — held at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, where he spoke of the strangeness of watching his life take shape as an opera. He didn't attend that rehearsal in Clifton Park, but he was present. That was him sitting opposite a shrink. His life and battle scars blocked for the stage and set to a shifting time signature. His flashbacks in yoga class.

"Gonna take the long walk!" sang tenor Javier Abreu, donning an unseen (for now) bomb suit. The other men with guns helped him into it. "Jacket tucked! Face shield down!"

Nearby stood a stricken Belcher, frozen at the ready with his invisible weapon. Soprano Donita Volkwijn, singing the part of the class yogini, put her hands on his shoulders.

"Let your rifle go," she sang. And slowly, painfully, he dropped it.