

## No, 'The Long Walk' is not your typical opera

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Rehearsal of the yoga-flashback scene in "The Long Walk."  
(Photo by Amy Biancolli/ Times Union)

### *Don't walk out*

That's what I wanted to tell the couple behind me at "The Long Walk," the world-premiere opera that opened last Friday and runs for two more performances — 2 p.m. Friday and 7:30 p.m. next Saturday, July 25 — at Opera Saratoga.

As soon as the first act ended, the woman grumbled. Her words were indecipherable, but her irritation was clear. "What do you think?" she asked her companion. "It's very impressive," he replied. "But."

I could almost hear him shrug. Off they went.

In a way, I understood. "The Long Walk" is not an easy work of art. It's not full of sex and soapiness, as so many operas are. There aren't any instantly catchy arias to belt out in the shower afterward. The first act is tough going, marked by spiky, difficult, disconsolate music expressing the darkness of a man returned from war and the struggles of his wife and children as they cope with his profoundly altered state.

But in leaving, the couple behind me missed the aching second act. They missed the life-affirming lyricism, the exquisite ensemble work, the spine-chilling emotional revelations and startlingly delicate harmonies.

They also missed the point: that opera isn't just one thing. That art isn't just one thing. That beauty, especially in the form of a new and bracingly different work, can unsettle rather than soothe. More than almost any other medium, opera hauls around some heavy baggage of expectation and cliché; we envision horned helmets and bohemians dying of consumption, not an Iraq War veteran in jogging clothes. Most of us don't partake of opera all that often, and when we do, we expect it to be familiar, tidy, romantic, old.

"The Long Walk" is none of that. Adapted by librettist [Stephanie Fleischmann](#) and composer [Jeremy Howard Beck](#) from [Brian Castner](#)'s memoir, the opera weaves Castner's stints in a bomb-disposal unit with his family life in the aftermath. Flashbacks enmesh with daily scenes in ways both unsettling and mundane: An eat-your-carrots countdown at dinnertime triggers memories of defusing ordnance in Iraq, one of many unnerving juxtapositions that propel the opera forward.

Developed with Manhattan's [American Lyric Theater](#), the incubator run by Opera Saratoga head [Lawrence Edelson](#), "The Long Walk" marks the Saratoga company's first world premiere in 27 years. I was lucky to follow its emergence from an early event in March through a mid-June rehearsal, and I was deeply curious to see the final product.

First: because I love opera, and I often defend its honor against charges of fusty and boring elitism. Second: because this one, I hoped, might make a stronger-than-usual argument for the form in general, persuading otherwise-unpersuadable audiences that a mix of powerful voices, an urgent subject matter, dramatic storytelling and imaginative stagecraft can make for relevant and moving art.

But the fact that it's new — so new that its protagonist fought in a war just barely over — is a sticking point unto itself. Many people dismiss contemporary serious music of any sort, which I find myself defending almost as often as I defend opera. Not all new music is alike, which seems obvious enough. (Not all *old* music is alike, right? And wasn't it new once, too?). What's more, most modern works no longer fall into the chilly realm of serialist abstraction that alienated so many listeners in the mid-20th century.

And while Beck's music for "The Long Walk" is not strictly tonal, it has a fierceness, an almost frightening volatility, that aims for the gut and hits it. When two Iraqi women wail at the sight of their dead children, their wild soprano keening nearly drives Brian (baritone [Daniel Belcher](#)) to violence.

Or listen to his three boys. "There once was a soldier ... but he felt like a stranger, not like a dad," they sing, lamenting their father and "the war that followed him home."

Later, in a bit with yet more pathos and powerful harmonizing, Brian and his fallen comrades sing of love, dust and bomb suits.

This is haunting, haunted stuff. But there's a long tradition of ghosts in the operatic canon (see: "[Don Giovanni](#)"), and another long tradition of mulling what it means to live and fend off madness. "The Long Walk" may focus on the experience of one ordnance expert from Buffalo, but its narrative hits on all that makes us human.

Most fathers don't try to rig a pistol onto the console of a minivan. Most don't guard their children's bedrooms with a rifle. But when Brian sings of "The Crazy" — of feeling like two people at once, one of them trapped in the insane past — he could be anyone in the wake of any trauma. He could be you. He could be me.

This is what art does or should do: tell an intimate story that resonates universally. It shows us who we are. And "The Long Walk," for all its death and trauma, portrays us as survivors, suffering but pressing ahead, pounding the pavement on a long run toward normalcy. It ends on a note of resilience and light that answers the darkness of that first act.

On Friday, the crowd rose to its feet with whoops and cheers. They were grateful they stayed past intermission, and so was I.