



# Kaminsky *Method.*

Laura Kaminsky's *Today It Rains* bows at **Opera Parallèle.**

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Composer  
Laura Kaminsky

**A MERE FIVE YEARS AFTER** the premiere of her first opera, *As One*, composer Laura Kaminsky has become a key player in contemporary American opera. The compactly scored work, which depicts the struggles and triumphs of a transgender woman, has been mounted more than twenty times, and more outings are scheduled for the future. In the mean time, Kaminsky has completed two additional operas. When I met with her last October, she had just finished the first draft of her latest project, *Today It Rains*, which opens at San Francisco's Opera Parallèle on March 28.

The opera, scored for eight singers and eleven instrumentalists, follows painter Georgia O'Keeffe on her 1929 railway passage from New York City to New Mexico, where she would permanently resettle following the death of her husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz. But the opera is less a true-to-life biographical account than a fragmented psychological study of a great American artist at a liberating moment in her career. The libretto, cowritten by Kaminsky's *As One* collaborators Kimberly Reed and Mark Campbell, moves freely between reality and memory.

"A train is a journey, and it allows you to jigger with chronology," says Kaminsky. "One goes into dream states, because

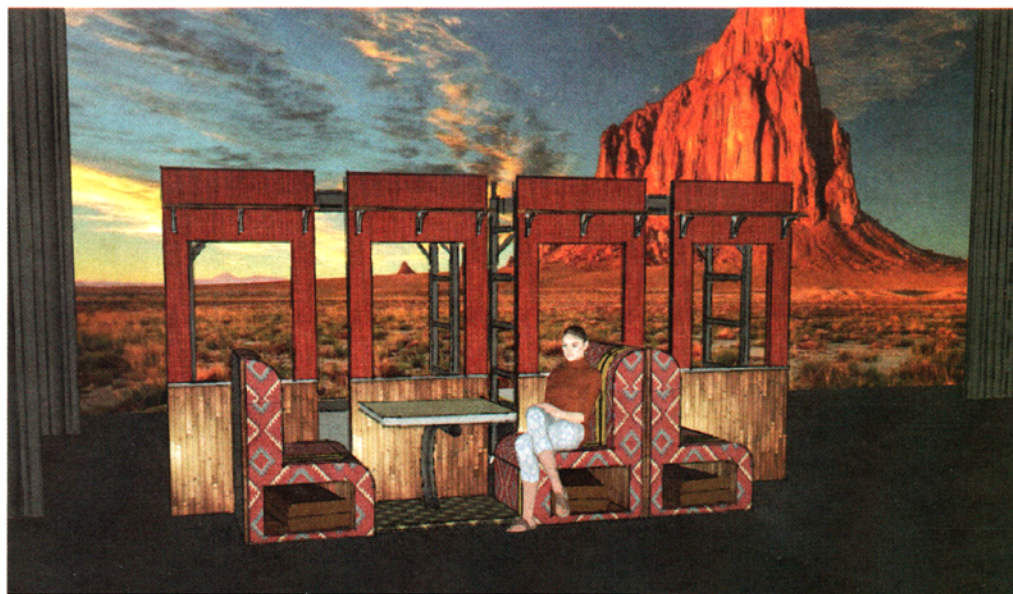


there is so much dreamy, reflective time on a train. For O’Keeffe, this was a journey where she was struggling with her life as an artist, her life with Stieglitz—the boundaries of that life—and feeling at a loss for inspiration.”

This is the second opera by Kaminsky and her creative team to deal with visual art. In their 2016 *Some Light Emerges*, six characters reflect beneath the monochromatic canvases of Houston’s Rothko Chapel. Kaminsky also has a personal connection to the art world; it was her wife, painter Rebecca Allan, who introduced her to O’Keeffe’s correspondence with Stieglitz. Kaminsky saw operatic potential in the details of O’Keeffe’s relationships and search for self-realization.

“It wasn’t so much that I’m a great, passionate fan of her actual work,” says Kaminsky. “I respect it enormously, and I love some of it. But I’m not an O’Keeffe groupie. It is her strength and originality that sparked my imagination.

“So as to whether I’m trying to create music that sounds like what I think Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings sound like—no,” Kaminsky notes, though she adds that visual elements do play a significant role in *Today It*



Set design by Sean Riley for *Today It Rains*, above; Georgia O’Keeffe, right, in a photograph by her husband, Alfred Stieglitz



maker, also produced projections to accompany *As One*. For this opera, she incorporates footage from a cross-country train trip that she and Campbell took together to New Mexico—a recreation of O’Keeffe’s maiden voyage. Kaminsky made this same railway pilgrimage not long after. Her score weaves in locomotory musical motives and evocations of the landscape—what she calls “big, open, rhythmically motivated, American sound.”

While *Today It Rains* is grounded in the world of the 1920s, Kaminsky says the opera

my music has been inspired by political and social issues, concerned with the environment, civil rights, AIDS, war and peace, human rights.” Her next operatic commission, with Reed as librettist, is based on the 2008 immigration raid in Postville, Iowa.

“I’m not a ‘word writer,’” she says. “I tell my stories in music. And I can’t fix the world by being a lawyer or a politician—because I’m not. And I’m not a surgeon, so I can’t make people healthy. But I care about the fate of the world we inhabit. So what I can do is write music that deals with things that I care about, that I think need to be attended to.” ■

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*Rains*. “It was really important to me in the conception, as Mark and Kim were developing story lines, that there was going to be a place for music that wasn’t about singing, but that was about the visual and psychological and creative world.” She calls these passages “visual arias”: “It’s just the orchestra and projections that Kim is creating. It’s a series of nonlinear flashbacks, imagery reflecting Georgia’s life.”

Reed, an accomplished film-

also pulls back to ask bigger questions. The status of women in the arts becomes a central theme, one that still resonates nearly a century later in the classical-music industry, where female composers are rarely programmed.

Kaminsky has made a creative mission of composing from a socially conscious perspective. “Even in my pre-opera days, when I was mostly writing instrumental music, much of