

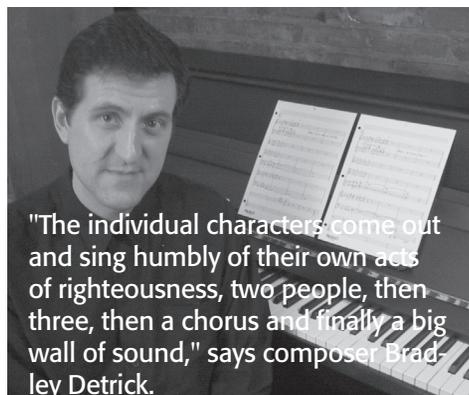
Music

A Marriage Of Form And Content

Opera chronicling the Danish rescue of Jews, getting its world premiere next week, hits close to home for a non-Jewish jazz trumpeter.

George Robinson

Special To The Jewish Week



"The individual characters come out and sing humbly of their own acts of righteousness, two people, then three, then a chorus and finally a big wall of sound," says composer Bradley Detrick.

What makes a jazz trumpeter decide to write an opera? And one with a Holocaust theme, to boot?

Bradley Detrick, whose opera "The Yellow Star: Celebrating Extraordinary Acts by Ordinary People" will have its world premiere on Wednesday, Feb. 13, has been moving away from the music that earned him a solid living, writing more and more for the classical orchestra. A veteran of the contemporary version of the Glenn Miller Orchestra as well as an arranger, he's also been writing more for the human voice, a decision, he admits was influenced more than a little by his wife Charlotte Detrick, who plays one of the leads in "The Yellow Star."

"I am married to a wonderful soprano," he says, "So even though I came up as a jazz musician, she has converted me into an aficionado of opera."

His choice of subject matter is almost as unexpected as his choice of form. "The Yellow Star" is an operatic retelling of the story of the heroic rescue of Denmark's Jews by its non-Jewish population during the Nazi occupation of the small country.

That choice, too, was influenced by Detrick's marriage.

"My wife is a full-blooded Dane, one of the first generation of her family to be born here in the United States," he explains. "Her dad is a Danish sea captain."

However, it was a children's book that sparked his interest in the rescue, a recounting of the legend of King Christian X, who according to urban folklore, wore a yellow star in defiance of the Nazi invaders. In reality, Denmark was one of the few occupied countries in which the Nazis did not require Jews to wear the cloth insignia.

Given his wife's heritage and the inherent drama of the story of the rescue of Danish Jews by their fellow countrymen, Detrick, although not Jewish himself, felt that this was a story worth retelling.

"I was looking for a subject for an opera when I came across the book," he recalls. I started to do a bit of research, and found out what actually happened, and the real story is incredible. There had been other books and TV shows, but I thought there must be other people besides me who don't know this story yet. Why not do it in an operatic way?"

Briefly, in 1943, when the Danish government resigned rather than submit to new demands by their German occupi-

ers, the German military commanders ordered the roundup of all Danish Jews for deportation to the East. The response of the Danish people was a virtually national effort to smuggle the country's Jewish population to neutral Sweden by sea. In the end, only 500 Danish Jews out of about 8,000 were transported to Theresienstadt, and they became the recipients of food and provisions sent by other Danes; it is generally believed that public attention focused on those 500 prisoners prevented the Nazis from sending them on to Auschwitz.

Detrick had planned on working on the libretto for "The Yellow Star" in collaboration with a friend who is a screenwriter, but when she dropped out due to pregnancy, he found himself working alone. After writing about a dozen short synopses, each attempting to tell the story from a different perspective, he heard opera director Peter Sellars speak at a conference in which he put forth the idea of the community as hero and driving force for a narrative, and Detrick knew exactly what to do. He took his short synopses and integrated all of the storylines into a single work.

"The idea of the opera is to show how a bunch of different ordinary people in their small acts of courage, and many independent parts working together made it happen," he says. "I focus on that whole theme in the finale. The individual characters come out and sing humbly of their own acts of righteousness, two people, then three, then a chorus and finally a big wall of sound. It's a reflection of the reality of the event. Once it got going, and people were participating at the grassroots level, it had a tremendous outcome."

For Detrick, in the end, the storyline — whether it unfolds in an opera or a jazz solo — is crucial. "As I've grown up I have become more interested in what story are we going to tell," he says. "I tried to do that with jazz, too. But now I feel like I had been working with eight crayons and suddenly somebody gave me the 64-crayon box. I've done some song cycles, art songs, and an oratorio. I'm still learning how to write for singers. It's an ongoing learning process." ■

"The Yellow Star: Celebrating Extraordinary Acts by Ordinary People" will have its world premiere on Wednesday, Feb. 13 at 6:30 p.m., in Edmund J. Safra Hall at the Museum of Jewish Heritage (36 Battery Place). For information, call (646) 437-4202 or go to www.mjhnyc.org.

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as an unruffled, self-confident young woman who remains smilingly above the fray in all her family's toxic, internal struggles with each other.

The most layered performance of all is given by Cindy Katz, who plays the financially successful but extremely unbalanced AUNT who bursts in near the end and tries to insert herself back into a family that she has long ago left behind, and that she has felt abandoned by. Leigh is finally on familiar emotional territory, and the dialogue finally becomes blistering and lacerating in a way that all the back and forth about religion and politics never manage to be. Even the son is finally able to express how he feels about being ostracized by the rest of the family, and his tone ultimately softens. At the end, his yarmulke is gone.

Leigh was quoted last week in this newspaper saying that he finds all religion, including Judaism, to be "ridiculous." His new play is a good example of what happens when a playwright writes about something that does not mean anything to him. But while Leigh has nothing of value to say about Judaism or Israel, he has much to say about the workings of the human heart, and this is what makes him one of the great playwrights and filmmakers of our time. ■

"Two Thousand Years" runs through March 8 at the Acorn Theatre, 410 W. 42nd St. Performances are Monday evenings at 8 p.m., Tuesday evenings at 7 p.m., and Wednesday through Saturday evenings at 8 p.m. Matinee performances are only on Saturdays at 2 p.m. For tickets, \$56.25, call TicketMaster at (212) 279-4200.

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