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Interview: Julia Adolphe on *Sylvia*

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Julia Adolphe's chamber opera, Sylvia, for which she wrote both the libretto and the score – and let's be honest, she produced it too – was, in a word, killer. With lush writing for what could be sparse instrumentation, strikingly effective (and pretty damn clever) storytelling, and great performers (I was especially impressed by Matthew Miles' handling of a challenging tenor part), Julia seriously hit her mark. (Full disclosure: she's a friend, but so is pretty much everyone I talk to on here). I had hoped to talk with her about the opera shortly before its run at the Lost Studio Theater a couple of months ago, but she was so busy running things that we weren't able to get it together in time. The good news: we held off until now so that I could use this opportunity to tell you that the entire thing is being broadcast on Sunday, July 8, at 7 PM on [Kinetics Radio](#). Also, Julia's band is playing tonight at Bar Lubitsch at 9. Listen in, and read on:



Sylvia is an opera set in psychodrama therapy, dealing with the repercussions of a young Jewish woman's affair with a much older man, who is a family friend, and both of

whom are descendants of holocaust survivors. This is heavy stuff. How did you go about approaching such a big, and perhaps sensitive, topic?

The story of *Sylvia* has been in the back of my mind since I was sixteen years old. It is based on a true story, on the experiences and struggles of a close childhood friend. It took me many years of sifting through the content to find the appropriate outlet, format, and structure to communicate such difficult and complex material. I wrote my first version of *Sylvia* when I was eighteen. At that time, the plot focused on how Sylvia's past sexual abuse impacted her relationship with her boyfriend. It was mostly a play, with musical moments appearing alongside poetic dialogue. I did not realize at the time that I was trying to write an opera. Nor was I ready to really deal with the content head on. By emphasizing Sylvia's current relationship with her boyfriend, I was leaving all of the dramatic, emotionally explosive material in the past, alluding to it but never exposing it. The character of Nathan, the family friend who abuses Sylvia as a teenager, was never mentioned by name and was not a character in the play. (He is still not mentioned by name in the chamber opera until the very end).

As an undergraduate, I concentrated on expanding my musical language. I continued to rewrite the story, this time introducing a scene where Sylvia attends psychodrama. When I showed this draft to Dr. Stephen Hartke at the beginning of my Masters program at USC, he seized on the idea of psychodrama as the framework through which to tell the entire story. I began researching psychodrama extensively and found that there were fascinating parallels between the goals of psychodrama and the goals of opera. Both seek to open the creative mind, to provoke new thought patterns and solutions, and to evoke a collective memory. Both are larger than life and engage the wildest parts of our imaginations. With the psychodramatic format as my guide, the structure of the opera fell into place. I was able to move fluidly through past, present, and an imaginary future. Finally, it became clear to me that my friend's background as a second generation Holocaust survivor, and my own identity as a young Jewish woman, could not be left out of the story any longer.

I only know you as a composer and singer, but for Sylvia, you've written the libretto. A few questions here: is it based on anything? And what's your writing background like? Did you study literature or theatre formally at any point?

I did study English as a double major at Cornell. From age nine to thirteen I was in a youth theater company in New York City, so yes I do have a theater background. I did theater in high school and always loved its collaborative nature. That was one of the main reasons I wanted to write an opera: I missed collaborating. I loved that magic you feel in a theater when you're making something new.

What was the experience of working on this like? Did you establish an emotional connection with your characters?

I had the opposite experience, actually. I came into this project extremely attached to the characters for they were real people to me. I had to cast aside all of my personal opinions and write what was best for the opera. The greatest challenge was overlooking my personal contempt for the man who Nathan is based on. I was forced to identify with him, to make him three-dimensional, to delve into what motivated him and how each person has the potential to get to that point where they abuse another. Again, the psychodrama helped: Nathan as a

person doesn't really exist in the opera; he is conjured up and embodied by the doctors and the patients in the therapy session. The fact that the four singers take turns portraying Nathan, showing him in different lights, helped me distance myself from him a single, threatening entity as well as demonstrate how we all have the potential to slip into the role of abuser.

Were you working on the music and the libretto side-by-side, or did one come before the other?

The libretto came first. I did not start any of the music until I was completely satisfied with the libretto and could not imagine changing it. Then of course I started the music and ended up cutting about a third of the libretto. It became astoundingly clear to me which sections needed to go once confronted with the task of setting it all to music.

Tell me a bit about what went into pulling this all together. How hands on have you been in the production?

My role as producer began a full year before the performance you saw on April 14, 2012. Soprano Sophie Wingland had signed on as early as the fall of 2010. First, I chose the Lost Studio, an intimate black-box theater, as the venue. I secured a grant from the Puffin Foundation and a *Subito* grant from the American Composers Forum. I then selected the director Maureen Huskey, my co-producer Lester Grant, and booked my friend and colleague conductor Eric Guinivan, who is a very talented composer in his own right. We held auditions for the remaining three roles and were thrilled with our selection of baritone Mario Diaz-Moresco, mezzo-soprano Jessica Mirshak, and tenor Matthew Miles. The three of them were fellow Masters students at USC. I was very involved in the rehearsal process, perhaps too involved, but I had to wear a lot of hats since we were working on a tight budget.

How did you come into contact with Maureen Huskey? And what has it been like to work with her? Have you collaborated with directors before?

Maureen Huskey is a dream come true. The Dean of the Directing Program at CalArts put us in touch last summer. We began an email correspondence about *Sylvia* that transformed into long personal essays back and forth about the story's content. Maureen had so many important questions for me that I had not yet answered. She had unbelievable insight into the characters, and she challenged me to think about them in a way I had not done before. Maureen brought the production to a whole new level. There was a tangible difference in the atmosphere once she entered the rehearsal process: she charged project with this fierce energy and excitement that brought the piece to life. Two of the singers told me that she was the director they had always dreamed of, and that she had changed them forever as performers.

Where do you see independent opera fitting into the scene here? Have you found an interested audience eager to hear this premiere, or have you had to fight to build one on your own?

I think as long as a story is compelling, engaging, and evocative, there will always be an audience, no matter the genre. As long as people can identify with the characters and *change with them*, even if only for the duration of the performance, the piece will be successful. I

believe that independent opera needs to stop thinking of itself as a separate entity that is somehow more complex or higher than others. Opera is very simple: it's drama, it's music, it's people, and the more inclusive opera becomes the greater an audience it will attract.

You've been in LA for a couple of years now, and (I believe) just finished your MM at USC. What's next? Plan on sticking around?

I am actually staying at USC to get a Doctor of Musical Arts Degree. So I will be here for the foreseeable future!

Anything else you would like to add?

A full recording of *Sylvia* will be broadcast by Kinetics Radio, a station devoted to new music of all genres hosted by composer Thomas Kotcheff. Tune in at 7 PM PST on Sunday, July 8th to hear the performance!

For more on Julia and Sylvia, visit JuliaAdolphe.com and SylviaChamberOpera.com

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