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Conductor Jeffrey Kahane and director Anne Bogart in rehearsal for "Lost in the Stars" at UCLA. (Photo by Reed Hutchinson)

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Anne Bogart Gets 'Lost in the Stars'

All theatre is about how we get along with each other, the director believes—a useful frame for a show about apartheid.

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

“Each lives alone in a world of dark / Crossing the sky in a lonely arc,” goes a haunting lyric from Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson’s 1949 musical *Lost in the Stars*. “Save when love leaps out like a leaping spark / Over thousands, thousands of miles.”

The distance among people, even or especially those living in close proximity, and the tenuous bonds they can form across that divide, are at the heart of the infrequently revived show, an adaptation of Alan Jay Paton’s novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a tale of racial injustice set in apartheid South Africa. As if to embody both the contrasts and the commonalities of the work, [a new concert staging](#) in Los Angeles this weekend (Jan. 28-29) will bring together the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, a quartet of African-American opera singers, the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers, and a group of [SITI Company](#) actors, all under the direction of SITI’s Anne Bogart.

It’s part of the orchestra’s final season under music director Jeffrey Kahane, who will conduct. This weekend’s run, at the Center for the Art of Performance at the University of California-Los Angeles, also constitutes *Lost in the Stars*’s first full performance in Los Angeles since its first 1950s-era national tour. (It occasionally appears at opera companies, and had a brief revival at New York City’s Encores series [in 2011.](#))

I spoke to Bogart late last year as she prepared for the show’s necessarily foreshortened rehearsal period.

How does this show feel at this fraught moment?

Lost in the Stars really speaks to the times more directly than I’d thought. It’s really about Black Lives Matter. Of course, in this current political environment, everything that I’m working on suddenly has changed meaning. Everything has got a different lens. You can’t avoid it.

I know about the famous *South Pacific* you did decades ago, set in a VA hospital where the patients put on the show as therapy. But I don’t really associate with you with musicals. Well, I have done *On the Town* and yes, that *South Pacific*. But I’ve done more opera than

musicals. I used to do a lot of new opera back in the early years; they'd give me all the bizarre super-modernist ones. I've been really happy in recent years to be given [chestnuts](#), which I've enjoyed.

This is a big project with lots of moving parts, but that seems to be your m.o. lately.

I find that in the last number of years, I've gotten more and more interested in the idea of what a community means. It comes from my understanding what makes the theatre different from other forms, that its subject is always: How are we getting along? Not just in the sense that every play is about a social system that's not working; it's about how the actors are getting along onstage. So I've done a number of projects now that have involved SITI Company working with other companies. We did a piece with [Martha Graham](#), with [Bill T. Jones](#), more recently with [Bang on a Can](#). These have all been about different communities intersecting, crossing into each other.

How will that show up in *Lost in the Stars*?

The central conceit of this is: The first thing the audience will see is a community climbing out of the orchestra pit. They're not necessarily South African; they'll be all ages, suggesting immigrants that have been traveling. Some will be little bit vintage, some a little contemporary, all one community—black and white, Latino, all different backgrounds. As the story develops, they split into black and white, as required by the story.



Zuri Adele and Justin Hopkins in rehearsal for "*Lost in the Stars*." (Photo by Reed Hutchinson)

So it's about a community moving through a story together. Once everyone's onstage, they're always onstage. Each one carries a stool and a suitcase. It's a community on the move—you get a sense of refugees trying to find a new balance. It might be resonant of Syrian refugees. But it's about the group of people.

In the same way in ancient days, people would stand in a circle and tell a story and enactments were done with very simple means. There are not sets coming in and out. It will look they're crossing a terrain; they won't look like houses. They won't have that colorful South African clothing look, and won't be 1949 necessarily. They're not using heavy South African accents; there's no attempt at creating a South African setting. It's more universal—I hate using that word, but there it is. It's about not being able to settle.

As you talk, I can really see that—the **show's opening** sings about the earth being torn up, and the show is a lot about people being displaced by mining, about migrant work, as well as the divisions of apartheid. In other words, it's a lot about not having a stable home, even in your own country—as you say, not being able to settle. Speaking of which, this staging sounds logistically complicated.

It is a lot of communities coming together, so we're going to have to work very fast with them. I've been doing a lot of preparatory work. Fortunately my assistant, Kim Kerfoot, is South African, which helps a lot.

I was fortunate to do the Suzuki/Viewpoints training with SITI Company in L.A. some years ago, and I'm wondering: When you work with all these other groups that haven't work with SITI before, how does that training come into play?

The central impulse behind everything we do is collaboration. That's at the heart of the training we do as well. As opposed to the director coming in and telling you what to do, instead we create an atmosphere where people aren't just waiting for things to happen. That's not always done with the same kind of training; it's done with different methods. With this project I'm walking a fine tightrope. We have to plot out every moment, but I still want rehearsals to feel like they're making it. So I come in super-prepared, and yet see where the Ouija board points.

I hope there is not one way that I work. I try to change the way I work. There is a training that my company does; on this show they'll probably do that for a half hour before the other people get there.

Is this a one-off, or do you think we'll see this *Lost in the Stars* elsewhere?

We had a request from the Skirball Center at NYU; they were interested in doing it. But it takes so much organizing, all the different choirs—I'd be surprised if it had a future life.

What's next?

In March we're doing a piece called *Chess Match No. 5*, based on a conversation that John Cage **had throughout his life** with Marcel Duchamp. That will be at the **Abingdon** in New York; it's the beginning of a much larger piece that will look at how John Cage influenced different artists.

So will it include some chance elements?

I'm a little averse to too much chance. I'm introducing that in a slightly perverse way: We're

going to stage that chess match with Duchamp and Cage, then I'm going to invite other artists to make something alongside it; Bill Jones might make a solo dance that runs simultaneous to the chess match. So I won't be in control of all the material on the stage.

It's funny that you say you don't like chance. If I recall correctly, Viewpoints training included some free improvisation.

Well, that's part of the training, not the work itself. I don't think art is an improvisation. We don't improvise anything. The improvisation we do is about how we learn to handle tempo, stress, emphasis—like musicians. The notes stay the same, but how you interpret it in performance changes.

Some theatre directors have trouble adjusting to the way time works when music is introduced, but it sounds like you're set for that.

Right, that's why I love opera; the conductor is in control of the time. It's how I function within that that's interesting.

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