



The Incubator.

American Lyric Theater concentrates on teamwork.

► **THE TAGLINE ON AMERICAN LYRIC THEATER'S** website is “Great operas don’t just happen”—an apt mantra for an unusual venture. ALT is not a conventional opera company; it does not mount a regular season of productions. Rather, the New York City-based ALT and its signature Composer Librettist Development Program (CLDP)—recipient in May 2016 of a \$40,000 Art Works award from the National Endowment for the Arts—were created to initiate successful collaborations between composers and librettists that would lead to the creation of significant and durable repertoire.

“Every opera company in the country has some sort of young-artist program for singers, but nothing existed on the same scale for writers,” says company founder Lawrence Edelson, a stage director who began his career as a singer and took some unexpected detours as a dancer and a musicologist. “I wanted to do something that was the

Conductor David Alan Miller leads an orchestral workshop of Jorge Sosa’s electro-acoustic opera *La Reina*, above

equivalent of a master’s program without the formality of an academic institution. There isn’t a master’s program for writing opera anywhere.”

ALT presents readings of in-progress CLDP works and discussions by their creators and promotes the works to potential producing companies, which don’t have to bear the cost of commissioning or copying fees. Companies that stage operas midwifed by ALT can save between \$150K and \$300K, depending on the work’s scale.

ALT’s track record since its founding, in 2005, is quite impressive. Peter Ash and Donald Sturrock’s comic opera *The Golden Ticket*, an adaptation of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the*

Chocolate Factory, had its world premiere at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2010, and there have been subsequent productions in Wexford (2010) and Atlanta (2012). The Atlanta production was recorded for Albany Records. Jeremy Howard Beck and Stephanie Fleischman's *Long Walk*, inspired by a searing

four composers and four librettists are accepted into the program every three to four years, but they do not enter as pairs. Instead CLDP's instructors—which have included composers Kaija Saariaho, Ricky Ian Gordon, Nico Muhly and Paul Moravec; composer/librettist Mark Adamo; librettists Mark Campbell and Michael Korie;

“Collaboration is a core value for ALT.”—EDELSON

post-Iraq War PTSD memoir, was staged by Opera Saratoga in July 2015 and comes to Utah Opera in 2017. David T. Little and Royce Vavrek's *JFK* recently had its world premiere at Fort Worth Opera (April 2016), and the production will subsequently be staged at Opéra de Montréal, its coproducer.

Other CLDP alumni include Kamala Sankaram (whose politically charged *Thumbprint* was a highlight of the 2014 Prototype Festival) and Christopher Cerrone (whose immersive, site-specific *Invisible Cities* was a finalist for the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Music). The relationships nurtured through CDLP continue after participants complete the program. “ALT’s program grounded me in the opera world by situating me within a community of contemporary opera-makers and performers, many of whom I continue to work with today,” says Sankaram.

But before any collaborative projects are initiated, CLDP participants undergo an intense year of nuts-and-bolts professional training, all tuition-free, in a highly structured curriculum of more than sixty classes and workshops adding up to 200-plus hours of instruction. Up to

dramaturge Cori Ellison; and stage directors Rhoda Levine and Edelson—look to identify creative sparks between composers and librettists before matchmaking collaborations, which are commissioned by ALT during the participants’ second year. The works created through this process are then extensively workshopped through the residency period, which is typically

From top:
ALT founder
Lawrence Edelson
with composer
Justine F. Chen;
Quincy Long
and Jeff Myers's
Buried Alive, part
of ALT's "Poe
Project," at Fargo
Moorhead Opera,
2014



three to five years. Thus far there have been only two composer/librettists involved in the program, and they were expected to collaborate with others on projects. “Collaboration is critical, and it is a core value for ALT,” Edelson explains.

By treating composers and librettists as equal partners, ALT places equal emphasis on music and drama. As a result of that, and of the greatly expanding definition of opera since the bel canto and verismo eras, the range of work has been extremely diverse. But there is still some common ground.

“We live in a period that is in some ways convention-less, which is very exciting but also very challenging,” Edelson says. “There are many more colors to draw with in the crayon box. But really excellent dramaturgy—musical, textual and structural—is a prerequisite for a great opera, whether it’s an opera for string quartet and one or two singers or a grand opera for the Met stage. And that’s what we aim to work on with the writers. For us, opera is a storytelling form.

“That doesn’t always necessarily mean a direct linear narrative, but I’m interested in both composers and librettists who want to use the resources of opera to tell stories that resonate with them, and that they feel will resonate with their audiences. I am personally interested in composers and librettists who are excited by the expressive potential of the classically trained voice. I want to go and have an experience that takes me out of where I am in my day, that tells me a story in a way that I am moved or challenged or entertained or surprised or all of the above.” ■

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