

An Update on *Doctor Atomic*

By J. Arthur Freed

Doctor Atomic, the still-new opera by John Adams with libretto by Peter Sellars commissioned by the San Francisco Opera, had its world premier in 2005 and was next performed in 2007 by the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam and the Lyric Opera of Chicago. These performances were directed by Peter Sellars with almost the same cast in each.

The opera takes place in Los Alamos and the desert of southern New Mexico shortly before the Trinity test of the first atomic device. It is the story of the people of the Manhattan Project, their dedication, emotions, disagreements, and accomplishments.

The principal character, of course, is J. Robert Oppenheimer, *Doctor Atomic*. Others: his wife, Kitty, General Leslie Groves, Edward Teller, and Robert Wilson. The libretto was fashioned largely from written material, so that the characters recite words the people they play actually spoke or wrote.

The Metropolitan Opera of New York prepared its own production this fall. The director is British filmmaker Penny Woolcock. The libretto was unchanged, the cast nearly the same as before. However, the sets, staging, and the manner in which some characters are portrayed differ from the first production.

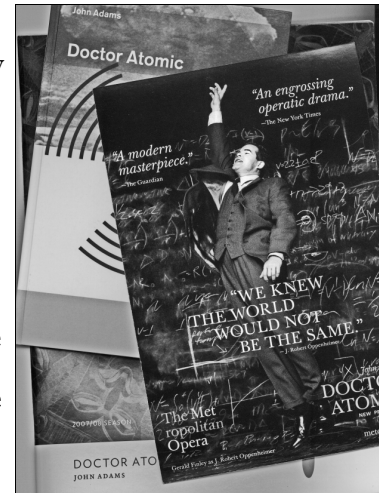
The English National Opera will present this production in London early in 2009.

Those interested only in traditional opera or music, may not consider attending *Doctor Atomic*, despite its generally favorable critical reviews, but they would be making a mistake!

(Full disclosure: I've seen both productions in each city where they were presented, a long story not for here!)

A number of people involved with *Doctor Atomic* visited Los Alamos, including the Historical Museum and the Bradbury Science Museum, to prepare for the opera. Others made use of photographic and other archives at both museums and the Laboratory for stage and costume designs, etc. Still others were already acquainted with the area, if not Los Alamos itself, through their association with the Santa Fe Opera.

J. Robert Oppenheimer died in 1967. The Cold War is long over. Yet interest in the man, his life, and all that surrounded the Manhattan Project continues to this day, as witnessed by very substantial audiences for *Doctor Atomic* and talks on related subjects organized in the opera's host cities and by the seemingly unending publication of books on these topics.



A collage of *Doctor Atomic* programs donated to the Los Alamos Historical Museum by J. Arthur Freed.