

Wonders Are Many a Film About the Making of *Doctor Atomic*

By **Becky Shankland**

In July, the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe sponsored a viewing of the film, *Wonders Are Many*, about the making of *Doctor Atomic* by Emmy-winning director Jon Else, and a follow up discussion led by Peter Sellars, the composer of the libretto for *Doctor Atomic*. Historical Society member Becky Shankland, who attended the film and saw the opera in San Francisco, shares her thoughts about these experiences.

Act I Introduction by Peter Sellars:

Doctor Atomic is an intense, demanding opera--but compared to *Gotterdammerung*, it's a breeze. For Wagner, the end of the world was an image; for us, it's a reality. Poetry and music allow us to experience serious issues in all their complexity, unlike the sound bites or sales pitches that are the staple of our modern culture.

Greek democracy knew how important art was to political democracy. Greek drama was a public event that made the audience think about serious issues publicly and fully. J. Robert Oppenheimer is like Hamlet and Oedipus — there is no simple right or wrong way to judge any of them. Kitty's character takes on the role of a "Cassandra," daughter of the Greek rulers during the Trojan War, who foresaw the destruction of Troy but could do nothing about it. Adams and Sellars wanted to create a feminine presence watching in fear [from home during the Trinity Test] while the masculine figures pace about with their coffee cups and ham sandwiches upstage. The female presence in the opera is to make a point — that we have forgotten who suffers in war. In WWI, 85 percent of the casualties were men, but since then it's reversed. Sellars wants to make us feel this.

This opera, with some of the libretto based on recently declassified documents, allows us to hear the

real words spoken by the principal figures, not just what someone else said they said. In addition, the libretto uses poetry by the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) because Robert and Kitty communicated in Baudelaire snippets — which security couldn't understand! At the Alamogordo test site, Oppenheimer carried both Baudelaire and the Bhagavad-Gita.

Act II Introduction by Sellars:

Act II is the dream world, the 98 percent of our being that is usually suppressed. Here we have Kitty again as a Cassandra figure, and the perspectives of the other women and the Native Americans. The rain dance of Act II presents a contrasting way of looking at nature--the scientists are terrified of the dangerous lightning, with Groves and the meteorologist arguing about what to do; the dancers and Indians present a humanistic rain dance (Sellars said that the "scientists are hallucinating a corn dance.")

Kitty is singing Muriel Rukeyser's poem "Easter 1945" — about how a pacifist came to feel that we had to fight, and fight to the finish.

The Trinity "countdown" is announced as 20 minutes, but it takes 47 minutes in the opera. This was intentional to give the sense that the tension is unbearably stretched out. For 10 minutes, the people lying painfully on the stage stare directly into the faces of the audience. At the end, the lighting

shifts from orange to purple to green. At the end of some performances, the audience sat in silence for 3 or 4 minutes before applauding.

The last sounds are voices in Japanese pleading, "A glass of water, please," because they are on fire, burning, and without water. The film gives no subtitles to translate this because artists wanted no busy words flashing on this terrible quiet. Peter Sellars said, "No artist should profit from disaster, so we don't show the Japanese aftermath."



Gerald Finley plays Robert Oppenheimer in the Met's production of *Doctor Atomic*. Photo by Ken Howard of the Metropolitan Opera.