Fox Fables

Libretto by Rhoda Levine with Peter Winkler
Music by Peter Winkler

These three short fables follow the adventures of a crafty fox as he attempts to capture his prey.

In “The Fox and the Grapes,” the Fox introduces himself: he is not your typical fox but a “fox of distinction, of discriminating taste, a connoisseur.” He aspires to “something finer: the delicate, the piquant, the pure.” He hears the “seductive hum” of a bunch of grapes, who sing as they bask in the sunshine high on their vine. The fox attempts various ruses to persuade the grapes to come to him. At first the grapes refuse, then one of them is tempted by the fox’s seductive offers. She is overruled by the others, who remind her of their vow: “We must never let go of our vine ’til our vine lets go of us.” Frustrated, the fox attempts to take the grapes by force, but is unable to reach them. In disgust, he declares that the grapes are sour. Offended, the grapes announce that they will no longer sing to him.

In “The Fox and the Hen” we meet a hen, which the fox chases up a tree. He attempts to lure her down by telling her that at a “convention that met in Peru” the animal kingdom had declared universal amnesty: “killing each other is a thing of the past. The peaceable kingdom is here at last.” The hen joins in as he sings “we are no longer beasts of prey; today shall be our dancing day.” She agrees to come down and join him, announcing that from her perch in the tree she sees “new friends approaching to join in the dance:” three foxhounds and a man with a gun. The fox makes a hasty exit, and the hen sighs, “So much for the peaceable kingdom. Alas, too good to be true.”

In “The Lion and the Fox” the fox is found lurking by the lion’s den hoping to catch a scrap of food. A dove enters, announcing that she has been summoned to see the king. The fox’s pursuit of the dove is interrupted by a fierce roar from the lion’s den. The lion appears, announcing that he the king of beasts, but he is old and sick, and has summoned his subjects to comfort him as he lies at death’s door. The dove allows the lion to usher her into his den; her cooing is suddenly cut short, and the fox wonders what has happened. A lamb appears; she has also come to comfort the lion, and she suffers the same fate as the dove. The lion asks the fox to come into his den, but the fox refuses: “I see many footprints that enter your den, but for all the footprints I see going in, none do I see coming out.” We hear the ghostly voices of the slain dove and lamb, lamenting that they never should have trusted the lion. The fox delivers the moral: “If we do not question our self-proclaimed kings, we richly deserve the fate it brings.”
The Wooden Sword

A One-Act Opera by Sheila Silver
Libretto by Stephen Kitsakos

Scene i
As the curtain opens, we see a poor peasant family, Hazim, his pregnant wife, Benefsha, and his mother-in-law, Anya, singing in their hut – a mixture of powerful prayer and joyful song.

At the same time, King Zamani, alone in his chambers, is fretting. In spite of all his wealth and power, he is not happy. He worries that something bad will happen -- that his lands might be invaded, that one of his generals will betray him, that illness or disaster might strike his people. As a distraction he decides to disguise himself as a wanderer, mingle with the populace and see how the common folk live. Concealed in a cloak and wig he goes out into the night.

This evening he hears music coming from a shack. He approaches curiously and peers in the window only to see Hazim, Benefsha and Anya sitting around their meager table, singing happily. He knocks and is received warmly. Commenting on how little it appears they have, he asks the young man, “Why are you so full of joy?” Hazim explains that he is a cobbler and each day he goes out to fix shoes on the street and earns enough money to provide for his family. That is all that he needs. “I trust that all will be well”, he exclaims, “it is that simple.” “I see a path when I am still, it winds its way around my heart, finds its way into my thoughts, and shows me where I need to go. Because I trust in joy and not in fear, I know a new path will appear. Call it God, Call it Spirit, Call it Wisdom, Call it Truth, Call it Oneness, Call it Love.”

The disguised King finds the man’s response absurd, but, intrigued by the cobbler’s simplistic philosophy he decides to amuse himself by putting the cobbler to the test.

Scene ii
The next morning a King’s Guard announces a proclamation from the King that no man is allowed to cobble on the streets. When Benefsha and her mother hear this, they are alarmed, for how will they survive? But Hazim calms them. “If a door to my livelihood has been shut, another will open to take its place.” He sits calmly for a moment and when he sees some water-carriers passing by, gets the idea that he too can be a water carrier.

Scene iii
That night, once again, joyful music is being sung by Hazim and Benefsha, but this time Anya looks on, reflecting that Hazim is a dreamer and worries what will happen to them if bad times come upon them. “They have nothing!” she bitterly laments. She then warns her son-in-law, “Hazim, you were lucky this time,” while Benefsha tries to calm the tension in the house. Their discussion is interrupted by the re-appearance of the disguised King explaining that he had heard of the King’s proclamation. Returning to see how the cobbler has fared he is surprised to find him well. Hazim explains that he became a water-carrier and was able to earn the same as a cobbler. Nothing has changed for Hazim and King Zamani, chagrined, leaves determined to test the man more harshly.

Scene iv
The next day it is decreed that every person in the kingdom must carry his own water. Benefsha and Anya are alarmed. Anya taunts Hazim, “How will we survive this time!” but Hazim remains undisturbed. Then, he sees a group of woodcutters approaching and ponders them for a minute. He runs in the hut and asks Benefsha for his axe.

A couple of days pass: we catch glimpses of Hazim as a woodcutter; Anya worrying about their fate and Benefsha defending her husband; the two lovers singing happily together; and Hazim, Benefsha, and even Anya, singing joyfully together. Meanwhile, Zamani has grown furious. “Is he smarter than King Zamani?” asks the King and he vows to test Hazim even more harshly.

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But one night Hazim returns home empty handed, his shoulders slumped, his spirit defeated. He is wearing the uniform of a palace guard. He explains that all woodcutters were enlisted into the Palace Guards and issued uniforms and swords. Anya thinks this wonderful until she learns that all guards are not to be paid until the end of 30 days. This time Hazim has no money to buy food for his family. His mother-in-law chides him but his wife, Benefsha, comes to his defense. “Go sit down my husband, rest and be still. You will think of something. I know that you will.” She sings: “Life is always changing, nothing ever stays the same” declares her unwavering love for him. In this dark moment Benefsha’s words soothe and inspire him and suddenly he gets up and leaves the house.

Later that night the disguised King returns to a house ablaze with light. The neighbors have gathered and are all singing, the table is set with abundance and the women are wearing new clothes. Standing aside, Zamani expresses his outrage that somehow this man has prevailed again. The “wanderer” again visits Hazim, who welcomes him warmly and reveals that he has sold his sword for enough money to live for thirty days. He explains that he cleverly carved another sword out of wood to replace the real one. When he gets paid, he will be able to buy back the real sword. The King is stunned and outside the hut he ponders, “I wonder if it is his faith that makes him so clever. Or is it his cleverness that makes him so faithful?” He strengthens his resolve to bring down the cobbler and prove himself smarter.

Scene v

The scene opens on the town square where everyone is gathered to witness an execution. A Prisoner is brought forth, begging for his life. Hazim, standing with the Palace Guards, does not recognize the King who is now dressed in his royal apparel. Suddenly the King turns to Hazim and orders him to cut off the Prisoner’s head. Hazim is shocked and tells the King he could never take the life of a human. The King insists, “Obey you must or else your head will be the one to roll in the dust instead!”

The crowd calls for justice as a myriad of thoughts instantaneously pass through Hazim’s mind. Benefsha and Anya, shocked and terrified, utter prayers for him. Hazim recalls Benefsha’s sweet encouraging words, “Hazim, you always say a path will appear, and I know that it will.” As the noise of the crowd dies down Hazim comes out of his reverie. He approaches the Prisoner and prepares to draw his sword, and then with great aplomb he declares:

“Trusty sword, be so true
If this man is guilty then cut him through.
Trusty sword, be so good
If this man is innocent then turn yourself... to wood!”

He dramatically draws his sword and the crowd, seeing that it is a wooden sword, exclaims “A miracle! A miracle! It’s a wooden sword.”

Everyone cheers except for the King. At first he says nothing and then, filled with astonishment and utterly charmed by Hazim’s cleverness, he starts to laugh ... and laugh ... and laugh. Dismissing the crowd Zamani summons Hazim. “Do you know who I am?” he asks. “But you are the King, my Sovereign.” “Yes,” the King answers, “but I am also the wanderer who visited you each night, the poor man whom you fed at your table.” Hazim kneels before the King and proclaims, “I am your humble servant”. But the King responds, “Get up my friend, Hazim the wise. Although you’ve won, I get the prize.” Hazim and his family are invited to live in the Palace under the King’s protection, where Hazim will serve as advisor and friend. Whether it’s his cleverness that makes him faithful, or his faithfulness that makes him clever, King Zamani is inspired to learn more from Hazim. “You shall want for nothing,” Zamani exclaims, as he walks off with his new friend.
Meet Rhoda Levine

Rhoda Levine is an internationally acclaimed Opera Director, choreographer, and professor at leading conservatories. Miss Levine is also the author of eight children’s books.

Amanda Sherlip and Rhoda Levine had the opportunity to sit down and chat earlier this month.

Amanda Sherlip: According to the press release for our production, you and Peter Winkler have worked together for a long time in your improvisational opera company "Play It By Ear." Please tell us about the work you do with this company, and what your roles (both yours and his) are.

Rhoda Levine: Well, I was teaching at Juilliard when I was asked to come back to the Curtis Institute, which I always thought of as my home school. Some of my students at Juilliard were very upset about my leaving New York, and suggested that I establish myself as a private teacher in New York. So, I rented a dance studio, charge $5 for a 3-hour class, and people came in and started improvising and creating theatre pieces for the fun of working together. When our original pianist left, Peter Winkler joined us. Eventually we began doing this professionally, and formed our own small company, “Play It By Ear.” With “Play It By Ear” we are the advocates for the audience. We ask them questions, they give us answers, and we create operas on the spot, based upon their answers. We have been at various festivals in Chicago and Holland, and we have worked with under-privileged children in upper New York State, under a program set up by Glimmerglass Opera. We work with both children and adults—you name it, we’re there.

AS: The preface to the vocal score of Fox Fables states that "several of the ideas for this work originated in improvisations by members of [...] Play It by Ear." Will you please elaborate on this statement? How did you and Peter then work together to shape those improvised ideas into a fully notated opera?

RL: Basically, we presented our cast with the text of what we had created, and then we all experimented with the material together, and Peter wrote down any new ideas that emerged from this work. It is really hard to describe just what we did. They sang a lot of what we had written, so we could get a sense of what was there. It was a very organic creative experience.

AS: You are directing this production, and at the same time you are one of the authors of this opera. Is there a significant difference between directing one of your own creations, as opposed to a work created by someone else?

RL: No. I think that we originally staged this work at the Duffy Institute at the Virginia Arts festival. And the way I work is I create a structure and give my ideas and then ask the performers to add what they bring to it – so it’s a collaborative act. And the production is extremely simple and my main hope is the performers have fun doing it. I’ve done very serious works at NYC Opera and Scottish Opera, Netherlands Opera, San Francisco Opera, Chicago. I’ve done a lot of political works such as The Life and Times of Malcolm X, Die Soldaten, and The Good Soldier Schweik. In contrast, for me Fox Fables is playful and fun, and hopefully a happy collaboration between the performers, Peter and me, and Aesop.

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AS: The preface to the piano-vocal score suggests that these three animal fables are quite relevant to contemporary human issues. Will you please tell us a little something about each fable, and what you see as its relevance to contemporary life?

RL: There is a lot of lying going on in our society, on the part of politicians. We have been in two immoral wars. In “The Fox and the Hen”, the fox lies and tells the hen that there was a conference in Peru where all the creatures on Earth agree not to kill one another, in order to convince the hen to come into his home so he can kill and eat her. This clever hen exposes this fabricated story. With “The Fox and the Grapes”, the fox tries to seduce grapes on a vine because he wants to drink their juices; they won’t come down from their vine, and he is in despair. The fox’s proclivities are to eat very nifty food, not like most foxes that are busy with road kill, but at the end he is forced to be the fox he is and indeed, he eats road kill. Now, in The Lion and the Fox,” the self-proclaimed king of the beasts convinces a dove and a lamb to come into his lair because he claims he is dying and needs consolation. Of course, he kills and eats them both upon their entrance. The moral is, you must beware and not believe people who claim to be leaders who know the “truth;” we as human beings have to be thoughtful and watchful.

AS: Tell us a little about your approach to the production of this opera.

RL: We do it in a very simple setting, which we think is appropriate for it, and I maintain that setting. Also, I think that for those who are interested in doing musical works for children, it would do them well to do these things in very simple ways, and talk to the children about what they think it is about. So in our case, one might ask the children how they think of the fox, and how the stories make them feel. This is what it is to involve our audiences, just as we do with “Play It By Ear”: we use them for collaborative ideas. And if we do things for these audiences and these children, the results can be very interesting and thought-provoking.

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**Box Office**

Tickets for *Fox Fables/The Wooden Sword* are $20 general, $10 for students and senior citizens and are available at the Staller Center Box Office. There will be free pre-opera panel discussions with both composers in Theatre 2 one hour before the performance (7 pm on Friday March 25, and 1 pm on Sunday March 27). For tickets call (631) 632-ARTS or online at [www.stallercenter.com](http://www.stallercenter.com). For more information call the Department of Music at (631) 632-7330.

Tickets for *Fox Fables/The Wooden Sword* at the Leonard Nimoy Thalia at Symphony Space in New York City are between $15-$29 and may be purchased in advance at [https://tickets.symphonyspace.org](https://tickets.symphonyspace.org) or by calling 212 864 5400. For more information, contact the website at Symphony Space. There will be a panel discussion with the composers and Symphony Space Artistic Director Laura Kaminsky at 6:30 pm. Specialty drinks and delicious light fare are available at the new Thalia Café.
Meet Joachim Schamberger

Joachim Schamberger has worked internationally as a Stage Director, Virtual Theater Designer, and Opera Singer.

Amanda Sherlip caught up with Joachim Schamberger, stage director for The Wooden Sword, during a rehearsal break.

Amanda Sherlip: You were a professional singer in Germany before you became a stage director. Why did you decide to change professions in this way?

Joachim Schamberger: Unlike many singers who come to opera through singing, I came to singing through opera. I grew up with opera, and had seen many productions long before I attended the conservatory. During my years as a professional singer, I always used my imagination to picture the operas the way I would want to see them. I soon realized that this was called directing and was indeed a profession, so my career change happened very naturally.

AS: Does your experience as an opera singer inform and influence the way you work with singers in the staging of an opera? How does working with singers differ from working with theater actors?

JS: Although straight theater and opera have many things in common, acting in opera presents very specific challenges to the performer. Portraying a character through music, through the sound of your voice, is a special skill a singer needs to develop. A lot of my work is actually dedicated to coaching. I give master classes in young artist programs, universities, and festivals, working on role preparation, style, and language. Bringing all of these elements together is where my experience and training as an opera singer is very valuable.

AS: In your stage directing work you make extensive use of projected scenery that you design yourself. Your production of Cosi fan tutte for Stony Brook Opera in 2009 used such projections. You don't plan to use them in your production of The Wooden Sword. Please tell us about your approach to this upcoming production, in particular with relation to its visual aspects.

JS: The Wooden Sword is being presented along with Fox Fables as a double bill, and so we were looking for an approach that would work well for both operas. A fairy tale and a fable, they are both simple, straightforward stories that draw metaphorical messages from the relations between the characters for these timeless stories, the setting of lesser importance, and so we decided on a minimalistic approach. Simple costumes, along with distinctive lighting, will allow for the audience to recognize themselves in these characters and find the operas’ universal meaning.

AS: The Wooden Sword is based upon an ancient tale. What do you see as the main dramatic message of this story? Do you see connections between its plot and contemporary events? Does your production attempt to clarify such issues for the audience?

JS: I believe the message in the opera is timeless. It is thousands of years old, and at the same time is a “New Age” message. In essence it says: Have faith in life. Hazim, the poor man, trusts in his fate. He believes that life will always present him with a path. King Zamani, on the other hand, is
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... driven by fear. He needs to control his environment environment and is deeply unhappy. Countless books have been written on the question of happiness, from classic philosophy to new age spirituality. Although musically the opera suggests some middle eastern influence, it is not clearly related to any particular religion. With regard to contemporary political connections, the story couldn't be any more relevant. A leader who is driven by fear, subjecting his people to hardship and not wanting to give up control, sounds quite familiar when looking at the recent events in the Arab world. This is not something we will express explicitly in our concept, but by keeping it universal, the audience will be able to make the connection.

AS: How does directing a new work such as this differ from directing a well-known standard opera?

JS: First of all, we have the amazing possibility to ask the composer questions, something we can't do with Mozart. There are even moments when the composer, attending rehearsal, will make minor adjustments after seeing how things play out in the scene. It is also liberating to work on a piece that does not carry a long tradition and preconceived ideas. It is a clean slate. With an art form as old as opera, we need to make it accessible to modern audiences. It's fun to be part of the creation of a new work and to present evidence that opera is very much alive.

STONY BROOK OPERA PRODUCTIONS

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We look forward to seeing you at our upcoming performances!

Amanda Sherlip
Managing Creative Editor
New York premiere productions of:

**Peter Winkler’s *Fox Fables* and Sheila Silver’s *The Wooden Sword***

(Four performances)

- Wednesday, March 23, 2011 at 12 noon: preview of excerpts, Brookhaven National Laboratory
- Friday, March 25, 2011 at 8 pm: Stony Brook University, Staller Center Theatre 2
- Sunday, March 27, 2011 at 2 pm: Staller Center, Theatre 2
- Thursday, March 31, 2011 at 7:30 pm: Symphony Space, New York City