



photo by Gary David G... Opera Saratoga

Jennifer Zetlan (left) works with director Emma Griffin, and Assistant Director Colter Schoenfish during the rehearsal of *Ellen West*.

RICKY IAN GORDON'S 'ELLEN WEST'

A Work that Mirrors Everyone

BY KATHLEEN FARRAR BUCCLEUGH

Ricky Ian Gordon's new opera *Ellen West* premieres on June 30 at Opera Saratoga at the Spa Little Theater in New York. Starring Jennifer Zetlan and Keith Phares, on the surface *Ellen West* shares the difficult story of a young woman's struggle with the perceptions of her body and the doctor who treats her—but the opera contains a much deeper meaning for the composer and performers. Read about the creative process for this new work and the thoughtful collaboration that brings it to life.



photo by Gary David for Opera Saratoga

For Ricky Ian Gordon, the process of composing his new opera began, in a way, more than two decades ago when he first read the poem “Ellen West.” Now, the words by Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning Frank Bidart have inspired this month’s Opera Saratoga world premiere, a rumination on America’s superficial culture and our obsession with achieving perfection.

“We live, particularly in America, in an incredibly externally based culture,” says composer Ricky Ian Gordon from his Upper West Side Manhattan apartment in March. “Everything is about appearances, and everyone is going to the gym, everyone’s starving themselves—it’s insane.”

Bidart’s poem is based on the true story of a woman, pseudonym Ellen West, who, in the early 20th century, underwent psychiatric evaluation and treatment for an eating disorder. After a few months in a Swiss sanatorium under Dr. Ludwig Binswanger’s care, her husband took her home, despite warnings from Binswanger about her risk of suicide. Only a few days later, West took her life using poison. But, as Gordon says, his opera is about so much more than an eating disorder. It’s about a crippling ideal all humans must face.

“It is hard to mirror yourself against contemporary culture—and I suppose one could say that about the entire 20th century—and feel successful,” Gordon says. “People have an inherent anxiety. ‘How can I make my mark? What is success?’ And with Ellen West, that translated as ‘Am I thin enough?’” As a writer, there was more to her feeling of inadequacy.

The poem fictionalizes writings for West. Bidart writes that she felt her poems were “hospital poems . . . weak—without skill or perseverance; only managing to beat their wings softly.”

And during a memorable, meaningful, and rather brief 90 minutes in his apartment, Gordon described more about the opera and what led him to compose it.

The Opera’s Genesis

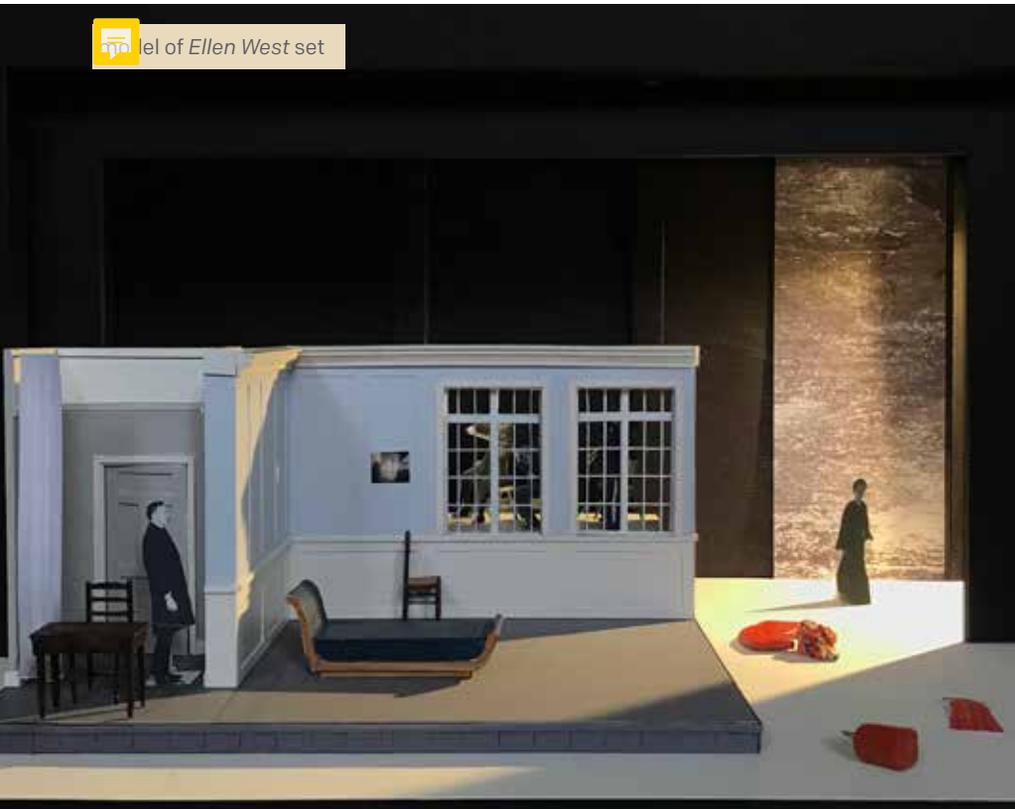
“My partner Jeffrey died in 1996, and I went on this sort of pilgrimage,” Gordon recalls. “I needed to get out of my life. I needed to leave everything and, without knowing it, what it seems I sought out were poets.”

Gordon needed to connect with those who could understand his pain. “I could only relate to people that had been through what I was going through,” he says. “Jeffrey died at the tail end of everyone I know dying. So, I went to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to the Fine Arts Work Center there. One poet would guide me to another poet, and someone guided me to Frank Bidart’s work.”

One of the poems Gordon read was “Ellen West.” It stuck with him—for nearly 20 years. “I knew I would do something with it,” he says. “I don’t know what it was but in 2015 . . . there was this moment: ‘I’ve got to do *Ellen West*.’”

“I think I just looked up Frank Bidart and I somehow got his email, so I wrote him a long letter. It was so impassioned and it was very much about me and what the poem made me feel and why I felt that I needed to

Detail of *Ellen West* set



set it.” Bidart replied with a lengthy, thoughtful email expressing his interest in Gordon’s project.

Having obtained the permission he wanted, he set out to get the rights and backing he needed. Gordon approached Beth Morrison of Beth Morrison Projects, which just this season brought about the world premieres of Joseph Keckler’s *Train with No Midnight* and Ellen Reid’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *prism*.

“I thought, ‘Beth [Morrison] is the one doing these smaller pieces,’” Gordon says. “I emailed her and said I’m doing a piece that I think is right for you and I think you should come talk to me about it.” Morrison came over, Gordon read her the poem, and she was sold.

Later, Gordon received a call from Opera Saratoga’s Lawrence Edelson, who said he’d heard about the piece

and wanted to come over and hear some excerpts. Ellen Gordon decided to program the opera for June 2019.

“The truth is,” Gordon says, “once I decided to do it and I got the rights, I had other things I needed to write.” One of those things was *The House without a Christmas Tree*, which premiered in 2017 at Houston Grand Opera.

“I would wake up every day in Houston and would work on *Ellen West*,” he says. “Talk about a split brain. It helped me, because *The House without a Christmas Tree* was a very joyous thing to bring to life. Everyone in the room loved each other. So, I had this private life in the morning [composing *Ellen West*] that was very tortured.”

The poem “Ellen West” was difficult to set, both technically and emotionally. Gordon explains: “Technically because there are no patterns in the words, and yet I’m a songwriter and I need to find patterns in order to create structure. So, to break down the poem and make something musically sound was tricky.”

And the emotional difficulties almost need not be explained. “One of the reasons I picked the poem in the first place,” he says, “was her last letter to her friend from the hospital, when she takes the poison. It says:

Dearest.—I remember how
at eighteen,

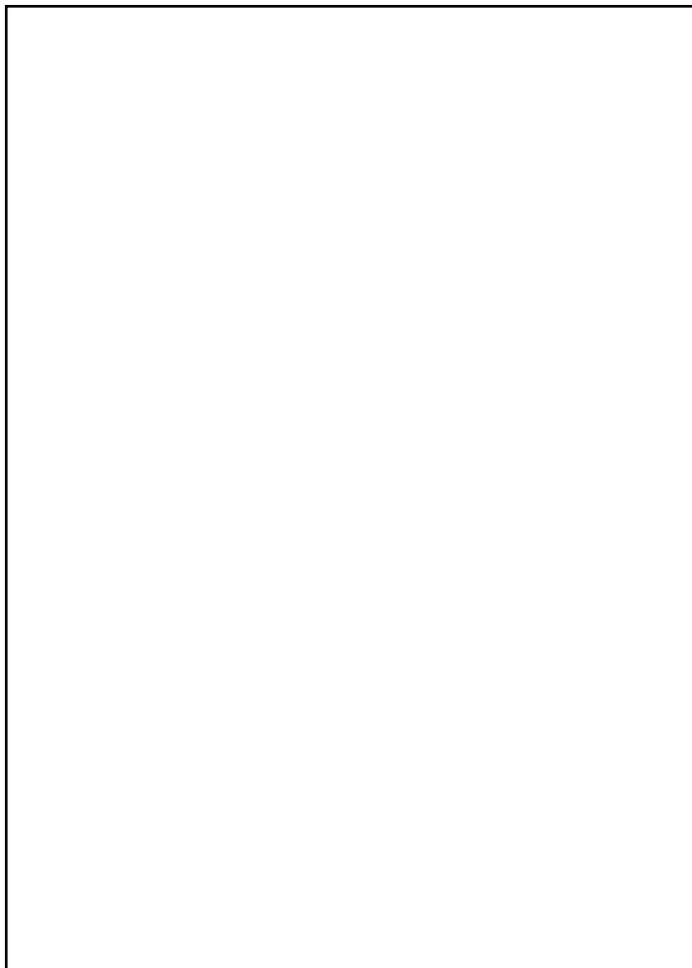
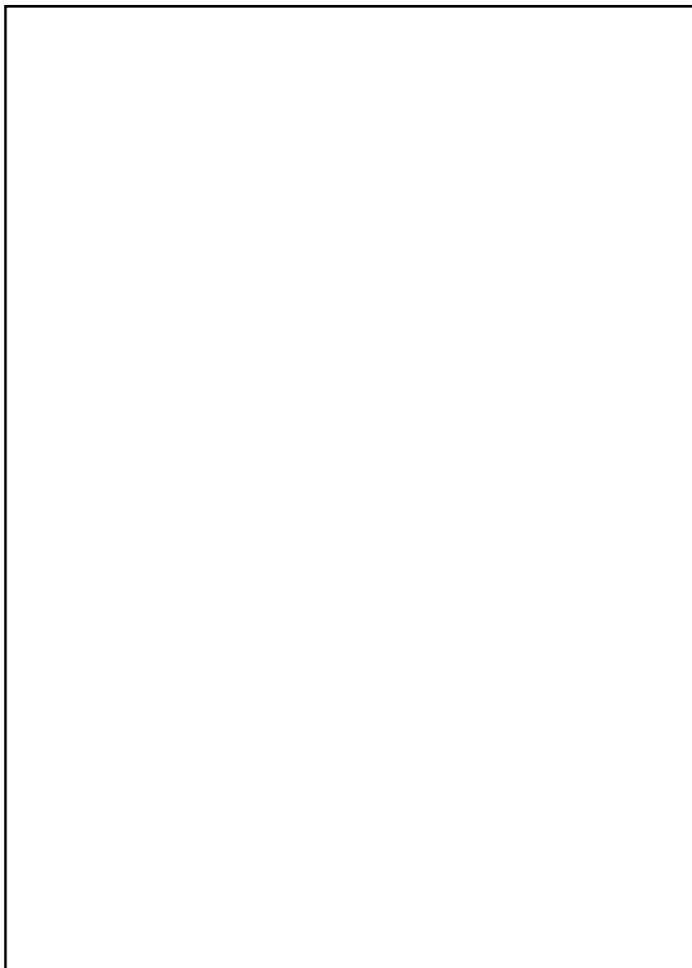
I hike with friends, when
they rested, sitting down to joke or talk,

I circled
around them, afraid to hike ahead alone,

yet afraid to rest
when I was not yet truly thin.

“I know that pain. I know what it’s like to feel like you cannot do enough—and I don’t think it’s just about thinness. I think it’s about never feeling like you have a place at the table, never really feeling like an insider. An inherent sense of outsidersness, marginalization. That’s what the poem is about to me.”

Gordon thought the poem “Ellen West,” to be successfully adapted as a theatrical piece, needed a prologue and an epilogue as bookends. “Some of it was exigency, some of it was the logistics of wanting the male character to have enough to sing, enough to do so that it was as rewarding a journey for him as it is for Ellen,” he says.



Ricky Ian Gordon's 'Ellen West'



photo by Fay Fox

Ricky Ian Gordon with Zetlan

Gordon set the prologue, followed by the poem “Ellen West” in its entirety (“I set every word”) and chose as the epilogue another of Bidart’s poems, “The Yoke.”

“It’s funny, because the first poem I discovered of Frank’s was ‘The Yoke,’” Gordon says. “And when I first started working on *Ellen West*, I had this inner feeling like ‘The Yoke’ had to be the epilogue. It just made sense to me. I told Frank, and it didn’t [make sense] to him.”

Gordon hoped Bidart would eventually come around to the idea. Even after seeing a video from

Gordon asked Bidart to write a prologue, and he says Bidart borrows from his more recent poem “Writing ‘Ellen West’” as well as other selections. “His prologue is so beautiful. That’s another thing that makes this piece special to me: that I approached truly a hero of mine and that he wasn’t only open to it but that he wrote me something.”

a workshop of the opera, Bidart simply did not believe “The Yoke” paired with “Ellen West”—so in the spirit of collaboration, Bidart wrote a new epilogue to replace “The Yoke.”

But their relationship is not solely a collaboration. “It’s a full and rich relationship,” Gordon says. “There is nothing more intimate than setting someone’s work to



photo by Arielle Domeston

Jennifer Zetlan: Ellen West



Keith Phares: Dr. Binswanger

“At the beginning of working on the piece I was a little concerned it would consume me, that it was too close to home . . .”

music. You are basically wrapping that poem around your entrails—and in every bone and the marrow, that poem is really circulating in me.”

Finding the Right Team

Mounting a world premiere while tackling a painful subject matter requires the best combination of people, from conductor to costume designer to the singer-actors embodying the characters onstage. Gordon says he usually has quite a bit of say in the creative team for his premieres. With this production, Edelson had some ideas that Gordon says felt right. “I really like Beth [Morrison] and Larry [Edelson],” Gordon says. “They’re very smart, savvy producers.

“Larry had this instinct that it should have a woman director and a woman conductor, and it ends up with women as scenic and costume designers, as well. All this female energy. And I am delighted about it, because I think it is very right to have that voice at the helm of the piece.”

The conductor will be working with a transparent orchestration of piano, five strings, and C-glockenspiel, plus soprano and baritone singer-actors.

“I’m over the moon about [conductor] Lidiya Yankovskaya,” Gordon says. “This woman has the patience of Job. She is remarkable. I can’t believe what she gets out of some people, so I’m really looking forward to working with her.”

Casting was originally done by Morrison.

“Right from the beginning, we all have our favorite singers, right? Beth, of course, loves Kiera Duffy because Kiera did [Missy Mazzoli’s] *Breaking the Waves*,” Gordon says. “She also loves Nathan Gunn, and I do too, so that was going to be the original cast. No objection.”

Duffy as West and Gunn as Binswanger, Gordon says, will be the Beth Morrison Projects cast in New York City—but Opera Saratoga is mounting the world premiere of the piece. “Kiera and Nathan couldn’t do [the Opera Saratoga production], so we were back to zero,” Gordon says.

Gordon had recently worked with soprano Jennifer Zetlan, who performed his *Morning Star* twice, and the two presented a concert together. “She’s a fabulous singer and a beautiful actress, so I just said, ‘You guys, you should at least hear Jennifer,’” he says.

Edelson heard Zetlan in an audition and then suggested baritone Keith Phares, and they agreed this was their Opera Saratoga cast.

Gordon had not worked with Phares before but says it’s been a pleasure to see his work. “He’s obviously very handsome but he reads as complicated emotionally,” he says.

When Zetlan was cast in August 2018, Gordon immediately sent her the poem and the Binswanger case study so she could begin her research. “Shortly after that [he sent me] the first completed score and some MIDI files so I could get an idea of the piece,” Zetlan says. “I think I was one of the first people to get to hear



Emma Griffin: Director



Lidiya Yankovskaya: Conductor

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the MIDIs, which I found moving even as produced by a computer. I immediately understood the emotional challenge before me, and I'm glad to have had time to sink slowly into the piece through our two workshops.

"I actually hope that rehearsals this summer will take me deep into those painful places so that I can feel how it is to go there in a safe space—and then know how to back up from the line just enough to not compromise the singing, but maintain the dramatic integrity."

To Live in Ellen's Skin

Zetlan had already workshopped the role a couple of times before heading into rehearsals for the production, so she had a thorough grasp on the music and character. Speaking about the role in April, before Opera Saratoga rehearsals began, she describes the intense mental and physical preparedness she underwent "in order to tell a compelling, realistic story."

Ellen West was less than 100 pounds at the time of her death. "Now, I obviously can't go around at that extremely low weight with a healthy body and mind able to sing this demanding role, but I did feel like—for the sake of realism, to remove any barrier between the audience and the content—I needed to slim down a little," Zetlan says.

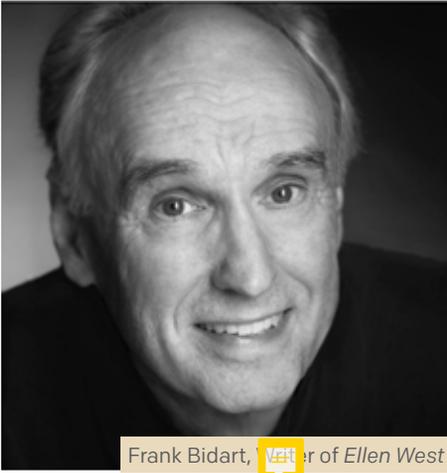
She put herself on a somewhat restrictive diet. "I've really learned a lot about myself through it, about how I was using food in my life and about how I can overcome my own life-long circular thinking about food and body acceptance," she says.

As for the mental preparation, Zetlan says she noticed that even in the workshops, she was beginning to "find ways to focus my attention more vocally here or there . . . I'm finding that I can breathe into the deep emotion and sit with it in a way that doesn't involve my throat negatively. I'm guessing (if the practice room is any indication) there will be many tears in rehearsals, and I actually look forward to the challenge of finding this delicate singer-actor balance. It's a gratifying artistic challenge that I am so grateful has come into my life."

Also gratifying is getting to realize the works of living composers and having "the opportunity to say, 'Can you explain this bit?' or 'How would you feel about changing this vocal line slightly to this other shape that feels better to me?', etc.," she says.

Having worked with Gordon before, Zetlan was looking forward to this process. "Everything Ricky writes is text driven," she says. "He has a real reverence for words and structure, and this piece is no exception. From





Frank Bidart, **Director** of Ellen West

the very first time he told me he was working on this—probably two years ago—I could sense how utterly important it has been for him to tell this story. I’ve sung a lot of his music at this point, and I find in this piece his harmonic and rhythmic

teenager. I have felt the fight between mind and body that Ellen is experiencing. I’ve never struggled with an eating disorder, but I have struggled to figure out how to drop those ‘pesky pounds’ everyone seems to worry about and also just to feel good in my body.

“Delving deeply into Ellen’s anguish about the body and the larger meaning of our lives has naturally stirred up my own complex feelings. I have struggled with depression for a lot of my adult life and so I feel a real kinship with Ellen in a lot of ways. I feel like I understand her struggle in such a deep, visceral way that sometimes I have to ‘zoom out’ in order to maintain the ability to breathe and sing well.

“I am getting myself into a place where I feel good about what’s happening in me, and then I will be able to live in Ellen’s skin. What an important story to tell—Ellen’s struggles with her mind and body are relatable for everyone.”

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language feel slightly different: deeper and more complex.”

Zetlan admits that the role is challenging in a variety of ways. “At the beginning of working on the piece I was a little concerned it would consume me, that it was too close to home,” she says.

“Like probably every woman in our society, I’ve had concerns and misgivings about my body since I was a

