

ENTERTAINMENTBOOKS

## Ricky Ian Gordon talks about sex, drugs and opera in 'Seeing Through'



Composer Ricky Ian Gordon, who grew up in Harbor Isle, with Lynn Nottage, who wrote "Intimate Apparel." Credit: Chasi Annexy

**By Daniel Bubbeo**

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Ricky Ian Gordon's life has been as chock full of high and low notes as any of the many operas he has worked on.

The Oceanside native who grew up in the hamlet of Harbor Isle has received critical acclaim for composing the music for a number of Metropolitan Opera productions including "The Grapes of Wrath" and "Intimate Apparel." Now he has published his frank memoir, **"Seeing Through: A Chronicle of Sex, Drugs and Opera"** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$32), which is packed with plenty of drama (a strained relationship with his stern father, relationships with older men while still a teen, losing his partner Jeffrey Grossi to AIDS). Amid all those incidents, Gordon still manages to inject humor into them, including the time he got extremely drunk at Stephen Sondheim's home.

Gordon, 68, recently chatted by Zoom with Newsday about the book.

**The book is subtitled "A Chronicle of Sex, Drugs and Opera" and you didn't hold back on delivering plenty of all three, which I fully appreciate, especially the first two. Who decided on that subtitle?**

After I sent Jonathan [Galassi, his publisher] four chapters, he said, it feels like it's about sex, drugs and music. But I said to him, you don't necessarily have to say that because I don't want people to know what it's about yet. I didn't want anyone parenthesizing it, but it ended up he was right.

One of the most moving chapters is the one dealing with AIDS and the loss of so many friends, in particular the death of your partner Jeffrey. Did it take longer to write that section than the others?

That stuff is right here [touching his heart]. AIDS is still the centerpiece of my life. That's when everything happened. Everybody died and then my lover died. To talk about that, it may be painful, but it's not laborious. It flies out of me and it doesn't take long. because it's so immediate. ... It didn't taker longer to write, but that may have been one of the hardest sections to edit. There may have been 10 books I could have gotten out of that.

# SEEING THROUGH

A CHRONICLE OF

**SEX,  
DRUGS,  
AND  
OPERA**

**RICKY  
IAN  
GORDON**



"Seeing Through: A Chronicle of Sex, Drugs and Opera" is a memoir by Ricky Ian Gordon. Credit: Farrar, Straus & Giroux

**Well, I think you could get a few books out of your life growing up on Long Island. You didn't have an easy childhood, especially when it came to your relationship with your father.**

When "Home Fires" [Don Katz's 1992 book about the Gordon family] came out, we were on all the talk shows. One day we were on one of these talk shows — me, my mother, my sisters, and my sister Susan's daughter Shoona, and Faith Daniels asked "What was your relationship with your father like?" and I said "Dostoevsky" and I don't think anyone in the whole audience got it. But that's what it was like, "The Brothers Karamazov." It was terrible but I am lucky in that there was healing later on. And I got to see my father love me later on in life.

**What would your father have thought of the book?**

He wouldn't have read it. He didn't read "Home Fires." He didn't read any of my sister Susan's books. He was too afraid to read them because he knew what he was like. He was wracked with guilt and shame about what kind of father he was." I don't know how he'd feel about how I sexualized him.

**You also had a difficult relationship with Stephen Sondheim. Why was it so important to you that you had to make amends with him?**

Do you what the first title of this book was? “Will You Be My Father?” Stephen Sondheim was just another stand-in for a father whom I was trying to heal my own doomed relationship with. If anything, he had even more power than my father because he was a hero of mine. ... Stephen Sondheim was a creative god and for me to be derided by him was horrible. If you look at that little chapter, it’s a sort of a microcosm of my relationship with my father because there is healing at the end of it.

**You talk about many of your hangouts growing up, like Green Acres Mall. Do you ever get back here and revisit any of those places?**

My best friend Peter, and I, every once in a while we rent a car and drive out just to see what Harbor Isle is like now and Island Park. And we go to Long Beach. The only sad thing is Hurricane Sandy really reshaped a lot of that part of the world. For example. The Harbor Isle Beach Club, which figured so prominently in my childhood, is not quite the same anymore. ... I have a big thing with Kevin, my spouse, because he’s never been there, whereas I’ve been to Ohio where he grew up. So I really want to drive out there with him to see it. It won’t be the same, but it will smell the same. And that’s so much a big part of what Harbor Isle was to me, the smell of the sea all the time.