

Kevin Lawler (libretto), Nevada Jones (music), Hal France (conductor). *Stranger from Paradise*. 26-27 May 2017. Opera Omaha and the Great Plains Theatre Conference.

Reviewed by Kristin M. Girten

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- 1 OMAHA, Nebraska, was in bloom with Blake this past May. What is William Blake doing in the land of Willa Cather? Opera Omaha, Nebraska's only professional opera company, had commissioned the locally based playwright Kevin Lawler to write and direct an opera focused on Blake, with the goal of premiering the production at the 2017 Great Plains Theatre Conference. The conference is an annual regional festival hosted by Omaha's Metropolitan Community College and designed to nurture the talents of a wide array of local and national theatre artists. However unlikely, it proved to be an apt site for an operatic portrayal of Blake's life and work.
- 2 Not just a flyover city, Omaha holds its share of somewhat secret (at least, nationally speaking) treasures. Opera Omaha is one of them. The Great Plains Theatre Conference, Lawler, Nevada Jones, and Hal France are others. *Stranger from Paradise* was a venture that joined all of their energies, along with those of a stellar cast and orchestra. The result was a highly engaging multisensory and multifaceted production. It is a shame that no future productions of the opera are currently planned, as national as well as international audiences would no doubt respond with as much enthusiasm as Omaha audiences did. The three performances were sold out, and if the highly spirited buzz among the crowd following the closing-night performance I attended is any indication, the audience felt profoundly invigorated by their night with Blake. The experimental features of the

libretto, score, and set lent a provocative air to the work. Moreover, while highly trained vocalists and musicians were required to meet the technical demands of the production, its contemporary style, use of a thrust stage in an urban black-box setting, and subtle theatricality created a casual and inviting atmosphere, which counterbalanced its operatic features. One did not have to be an aficionado of traditional opera to be enamored of the performance.

- 3 Given the location of the premiere, one might reasonably assume that, for many in the audience, *Stranger from Paradise* marked a first extended encounter with Blake. As a "companion of Angels" (Blake's letter of 6 May 1800), the author can present special challenges of accessibility for a general audience. Popularizations of Blake tend to focus on his more approachable works, such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and/or to portray the visionary elements of his works in contemporary and too-familiar terms. While both approaches have ensured Blake's enduring appeal to twentieth- and twenty-first-century audiences, they have also skewed modern audiences' sense of the author. Rarely do adaptations of his work engage in a resolute way with the intricacies of his mystical cosmology, radical philosophy, religious passion, or political critique.
- 4 In *Stranger from Paradise*, Lawler and Jones seem to have been determined to explore Blakean heights and depths that most contemporary treatments tend to avoid. While they emphasize *Songs*, they honor the complexity of the work through a provocative libretto, swirling instrumentation, highly expressive vocal performance, dramatic staging, and an immersive set design. Lawler and Jones recognize that the simplicity of *Songs* belies the powerful and regularly mind-bending insights of the poems. "The Tyger," for instance, is depicted as part allegory of artistic creation and part elegiac critique of a fallen world. Moreover, they do not restrict their attention to *Songs*. They weave elements of Blake's cosmological cast into *Stranger* throughout: Enitharmon, Urizen, Los, and Albion are each given time on stage. The portrayals of these figures, in conjunction with the visually arresting set and emotionally moving score, conjure an otherworldly dimension and mythical significance for the production. Placed just before the gorgeous culminating aria by "Old Catherine," which leads into the scene of William's death, "The Song of Los" is one of the most transporting pieces in the opera. Its final lines, "I have forged a ball of fire / To light this wretched darkness," have a lasting impact, preparing the audience not only for Blake's death but also for a profound sense of his immortality.



Above: Mary Carrick as Old Catherine and Terry Hodges as Old William.
Below: Amanda DeBoer as Young Catherine, Matthew Clegg as Young William, and Terry Hodges as Old William.
Thomas Grady Photography. Images courtesy of Opera Omaha.



- 5 Focusing heavily on the biographical details of William's relationships with his wife, Catherine, and his brother Robert, *Stranger from Paradise* concerns itself at least as much with Blake's life as it does with his works. Organized around a series of flashbacks witnessed by Blake from his deathbed, it is firmly rooted in his concrete lived experience. However, in the spirit of Blake, Lawler and Jones resist an easy separation between experience and visionary transcendence. In fact, a major theme of the production is the difficulties the author himself faced in straddling the two domains. *Stranger* reinforces the relatively common view that Catherine was instrumental in helping Blake to maintain a balance between both poles. When he soars too high, she brings him back to earth. However, she is also shown to foster his visionary flights by taking care of domestic responsibilities and supporting his poetic passion with loving care. In its portrayal of Catherine and William's relationship, the production periodically verges on sentimentality and, at points, would have benefited from a slightly lighter touch. Moreover, it is disappointing that *Stranger* neglects to feature Blake's innovative printmaking techniques—preferring to portray him writing in his notebook rather than engaged in engraving, printing, or coloring—especially because the libretto otherwise foregrounds the complex dynamic between materiality and transcendence in the author's life and works. Nevertheless, *Stranger* inspires an appreciation of Catherine and William's creative partnership as well as the deep affection that seems to have accompanied it. It also effectively invites a nuanced consideration of the benefits of the relationship to both, recognizing that, while their love may have been shared, the gains they achieved as a result of it were not likely the same. The opera acknowledges that particular historical realities contextualized and informed their dynamic while at the same time holding their relationship up as a timeless model of reciprocal love and marriage. This approach invites audiences to admire William and Catherine as historical figures and to reflect on how the issues of love, marriage, education, and creative expression resonate with our present moment.
- 6 We are told in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that “Without Contraries is no progression.” Contraries provide a striking underlying structure and theme throughout *Stranger from Paradise*, much as they do in Blake's works. Perhaps the opera's most affecting expression of them is in its music. Jones juxtaposes major and minor keys throughout the score, and the result is moving, providing emotional depth and complexity to the production. With Blake's deathbed scene as the frame and backdrop, *Stranger* maintains a melancholy tone. However, heaviness and darkness are frequently accompanied by lightness and color. In fact, the negative often leads to the positive, the minor to the major. In the words of Blake, “Joy & Woe are woven fine / A Clothing for the soul divine / Under every grief & pine / Runs a joy with silken twine” (“Auguries of Innocence”). Thus, when Blake dies at the end, though the audience is left in mourning with Catherine, we are also simultaneously invited to marvel at the creative spark that surely must have transported Blake, if not to a higher sphere, then certainly to a more complete union than pale divisive earth could possibly have afforded him. Moreover, we are left hoping that Catherine may ultimately have a similar transport; though she may not have possessed the philosophical genius or poetic prowess of Blake, the opera encourages us to believe that, in many respects, she too subsisted on “the milk of Paradise” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”). Finally, we are encouraged to consider how we might ourselves “Hold . . . Eternity” in the brief “hour” that is our life, much as William and Catherine did (“Auguries of Innocence”).
- 7 When I had the opportunity to meet with Lawler after the production, I asked him to describe what had inspired him to create *Stranger from Paradise*. He informed me that he was a longtime admirer of Blake. As a poet-artist himself who publishes poetry and often pairs it with his own photography <<http://windingroadtravel.blogspot.com>>, he identifies with Blake's commitment to radical forms of creative expression. Lawler seems particularly influenced by the visual and visionary qualities of Blake's writings. In our conversation, he quoted the opening of “Auguries of Innocence,” explaining that one of his hopes for *Stranger* was that it would invite others to celebrate the experience of “see[ing] a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.” Speaking with Lawler while reflecting on *Stranger*, I was reminded of the profound transformative effects of such vision. Not only does it manifest everyday wonders, making divine pleasure readily accessible, but it also affords hope while conferring great significance to quotidian (including domestic) existence. As a result, it is broadly and deeply empowering. To recognize, along with Blake, that such vision is available to all of humanity is to recognize that all of humanity—women as well as men, the poor as well as the rich, children as well as adults—is imbued with dignity and deserving of respect. *Stranger* pays homage to these philosophical and political underpinnings of Blake's visionary poetics, and, in doing so, it presents subtle lessons for our time even as the story it tells is of another time. In a political climate such as ours, where serious threats are being posed to inclusive access to education and opportunity, it is important to be reminded that the greatest insights and most significant inspirations often come from the humblest of places. It is also good to honor the value and power of individual acts of quiet rebellion. That Lawler and Jones conveyed these sentiments in Nebraska, a red state, only accentuates the significance of their collaboration.

- 8 The Omaha premiere of *Stranger from Paradise* was a provocative and riveting production. Depicting Blake's rebellious visionary spirit presents unique challenges. Through their inspired and dynamic partnership, Jones and Lawler met these challenges, transforming them into unique opportunities. The opera's cast and orchestra supported their inspiration, realizing its conceptual, aesthetic, and emotional power with grace and impressive musical artistry.

Kevin Lawler and his collaborators are currently considering opportunities for mounting productions of Stranger from Paradise outside Omaha (nationally and internationally). To explore the possibility of bringing the opera to your community, you may reach Lawler at kmlawler@mccneb.edu.