

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

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>> Announcer: Some information in the following presentation may not be suitable for young listeners. Discretion is advised.

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[Applause]

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>> Mark Horowitz: We ran over so we didn't know if any of you would stay, but it's wonderful to have you here. I don't know about you, but I'm sort of feeling sensory overload. It's just remarkable to me that there could be three such extraordinarily talented people, who are also so extraordinarily different. It's sort of... [applause and laughter]...mind blowing. We won't make this too long. We will take some questions from you guys, so think hard. I shouldn't do this, but before we started David asked me to ask you what you think of him. [Laughter]

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>> David Yazbek: I said come on stage and say, "What do you think of Yazbek?"

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>> Jeanine Tesori: What? I was just like fawning all over you backstage. Let's not embarrass each other.

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>> [Inaudible]

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>> Jeanine Tesori: I didn't even have to be queued...

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>> Steven Lutvak: I feel a little left out of this...

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>> David Yazbek: [Inaudible]

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>> Jeanine Tesori: It's not that rare...you see sopranos fight. It happens all the time.

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>> Mark Horowitz: Being at the Library of Congress I feel like I should start with something somewhat serious, and I was kind surprised—both of you—Jeanine and David—mentioned not being particularly fans of musicals. And I'm curious about how much you know the histories of musicals, if you were influenced by any of them, if there were any songwriters who—and Steven I expect you to jump in too—but, what your relationship is with sort of the history of the musical?

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>> Jeanine Tesori: Well I think we're similar in that way. I was trained...I really didn't have a cast album until—I actually don't now. I thought "Gypsy" was an Eastern European musical. I really had no idea, because I played in bands and—I mean pop bands—and I studied hardcore classical music. I was on a sort of track, whatever you will...It's not that...I really love them in the way that I love how they're made, and they're hard to make. The reason why there are so many that don't work is [that] there are so many variables. They really are like one of those strange Da Vinci cryptogram things that you switch and it all falls apart, so I love the challenge of it. I just find that I go towards text-based...I love plays. I learn more from plays, and it might be that musicals—I work. It happened when I started scoring movies that—I don't know if my boyfriend is here somewhere, but—we'll go out of a movie and I go "that's a terrible cue," and he's like "stop it!" But, you know it's very hard to separate out. I should say I admire them, I know the history of them, I teach a lot from them, because I learned—I went to stage...and taught at Stagedoor Manor, which is the aforementioned "Gypsy" sort of story, and we did fifty of them in a summer, and then I started learning all about them and the history...

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>> Steven Lutvak: You went to Stagedoor Manor?

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>> Jeanine Tesori: I did, did you go there?

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>> Steven Lutvak: No. I never went there, no, but I know all about it.

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>> Jeanine Tesori: Ok. Well, it started you know that's when I...at 18.

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>> Steven Lutvak: Was it years ago you taught there?

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>> Jeanine Tesori: Mmhmm...David?

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>> David Yazbek: Similar, but in different...you know I was in bands too...very eclectic listening experience, including musical theater. My parents had a lot of musical theater and took me to it. I lived...grew up in New York City, but it was all kind of pre-1970 musical theater, you know? Sort of popular music, musical theater kind of.

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>> Steven Lutvak: I think oddly enough that shows in your work. I feel like I can feel the love of old song form.

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>> David Yazbek: Yes

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>> Steven Lutvak: Under your unrelentingly heterosexual pop sensibility.

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>> [Laughter]

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>> Jeanine Tesori: I believe we have our pull-quote for the evening.

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>> David Yazbek: I'd like to apologize to my husband Lance in the audience [laughter]...Yea, no...but, well thanks. Frank Loesser...

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>> Steven Lutvak: But that's really a compliment.

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>> David Yazbek: And I take it as a compliment. Frank Loesser is a hero of mine. Also, I love anything of high quality...you got me, you know? But, in terms of today's musical theater, and you know present company I really mean this as excepted in this case and a few other people, you know? People like Adam Guettel. People whose music exists aside from musical theater...just exists as something of a very high level that touches you. Musical theater breathes it—and almost any genre does this—and it re-breathes its own air and you just keep hearing the same stuff, the same stuff, pushing the same buttons, and that's why I'm not a fan of musical theater. It's like, come on, you know? When I teach master classes, which is rarely—because I just don't have the patience [laughter]—you know? But, when someone plays something, you know, occasionally I'll just say like “Dude...” I call everyone dude, you don't have to be a guy.

“Dude, just please...just listen...here’s your assignment. You have a year to listen to everything you can get your hands on, except musical theater. Maybe opera, you know? Listening to Finnish folk songs. Listen to everything, but don’t listen to musical theater. And then you can go back to it after you learn something about other types of music.

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>> Mark Horowitz: Steven?

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>> Steven Lutvak: First of all, I’m so excited to be sitting between the both of you, so I just want to state that. My fiancé was a modern dancer and hates musicals more than life itself [laughter]. And at first it was enormously challenging, and I sort of cherish that now because I feel like there’s a real balance to...I grew up with lots of musicals at home. Not lots, a small handful: “Oliver,” “Fiddler on the Roof,” all of the Gilbert and Sullivan stuff—it won’t surprise you, “The Happiest Girl in the World” (who knows why), and... [inaudible] everybody had “Fiddler.” I mean, every Jew I knew had “Fiddler,” and “Sound of Music” [inaudible], and that was sort of it. I hate most things I see. I mean, and I’m bored by most things I see, so I sort of land in that place. But, I do love the form, because I think when it’s done right—partly because there are so many elements at work—that it can take you to a place in a way that nothing else can. I’m working on a musical that’s based on a very obscure Peruvian film and when I spoke to the...

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>> Mark Horowitz: “Undertow.”

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>> Steven Lutvak: “Undertow,” maybe two of you might have seen it. It’s a wonderful gay love story, ghost story, and it’s much more than all of those descriptors. When I called the Peruvian director, who is living in Los Angeles, he said exactly what I just didn’t say: “I’m thrilled that you think this could be a musical, because things can happen in a musical that don’t happen anywhere else.” And so...I grew up learning those and I had a boyfriend in college—we could get high and he would play me Sondheim. So I didn’t grow up with all of that, but by the time I was seventeen I was getting high a lot and I knew every word of everything that Mr. Sondheim wrote.

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>> David Yazbek: And I’m...just want to say I can hear that in your music. [laughter] And this is a compliment [laughter]

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>> [Inaudible]

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>> David Yazbek: That's called a call-back in comedy lingo.

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>> Steven Lutvak: [Inaudible]

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>> Mark Horowitz: I'm going to do one sort of esoteric thing, and then I'll open it up to people there. I sort of am embarrassed to ask this, but...listening to you guys, it occurred to me...looking at so many of the manuscripts we have, it's become clear that I think that far more than most people know a lot of the Broadway songwriters, rhythm comes before melody. You can see so many cases where like they'll have a lyric sheet and they put the bar lines in it and the beats above it.

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>> David Yazbek: This is modern people you're talking about, or just in general?

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>> Mark Horowitz: I know Sondheim does it, Rodgers did it, Cole Porter did it.

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>> David Yazbek: Oh, you mean cadence, like the way the words land.

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>> Mark Horowitz: They'll have the lyric and then find out...and Jerry Herman, I know he walks when he writes so he gets the rhythm of the character. And I just...you guys are so rhythmic—all of you—and it seems like such a central part of your work. Nobody ever...people always talk about melody, but I'm just curious what you think of rhythm.

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>> David Yazbek: I'll just quickly say that...I have this conversation...There are a lot of writers—great writers, really good comedy writers—who think they can write good lyrics. And so you say, "Great, 'cause I hate writing lyrics." It's like "Come on, give me some lyrics!" And then the rhymes are what gets them. It's the cadence and the scansion, they just don't know. They don't understand that there's got to be something conversational, something natural about the way the words land. And some...a couple of people I know, they just can't get it. They just...you know if you're walking and you just hear Steve Reich... [he] made up whole pieces where he took people talking, interviews and stuff, old tapes, and he'd take a line of an interview—just a sentence—and then he would sort of hear it and then build an entire piece

around first that line, and then another line, because it had a certain kind of rhythm—and also there was a melody in the way it was said. Does that make sense?

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>> Steven Lutvak: I used to do that, but I—these days and actually for quite a few years—I much prefer writing all the music first and then writing...and then getting to the lyric. So, there won't be any sort of dividing with the lyric, because I don't...for me, I don't...I try not to do that anymore. Because I find that I'm much less musically inventive and I'll rely on the rhythmic cadence. I'm more interested in letting the music go where it wants to go. It's much harder to write a lyric that way, than when you've got the roadmap and you have got to get the rhymes in the right place. One of the great joys on "Gentleman's Guide" was discovering that's where it had to be. I may have changed my colors later.

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>> Jeanine Tesori: You know I'm just listening. It's so interesting, because we never...I think when you write you're sort of in your ice cube tray and you don't really get to do this, which is the great joy of it. Every single show I do is completely different in its approach, in just trying to figure out...I work with a lot of different partners and I work with playwrights. I'm sort of my seventh playwright in, and so I go from the text. I think that the rhythm, or the motor, or what the bicycle of the song, depends on the song on the moment. So, I love rhythm and I love [the] rhythm section, but I think a lot of musical theater sounds a lot...because people look at the keyboard, as opposed to: the keyboard represents the orchestra. Too many people I think write for the piano. The piano is not the thing, unless you're writing for piano. The piano is the only thing that goes too far and too low for an orchestra. And when you see it that way and you can see what dies down in a well-tempered instrument, lives on when you bow—that comes alive, and a lot of when...because of the economy of musicals you can't really get the orchestra. It lives on a piano for a really long time, and that's when I think—one of the things we were talking about—it lives on. You don't hear the drum pattern. You know, a lot of people do this, but that's really. It's not the piano. Everything that I do just depends on time and space. "Caroline" was different than you know "Violet," which was different [inaudible]. So it's not one way to answer that I guess.

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>> Mark Horowitz: Does it become easier? Do you learn from your past mistakes, or what works...or each show is new?

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>> Jeanine Tesori: I would say a big fat no.

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>> David Yazbek: Yea, a big no.

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>> Steven Lutvak: I think it's almost the opposite, I think it gets harder.

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>> David Yazbek: It gets harder.

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>> Steven Lutvak: Because you've done that before and you sort of recognize—you know the blind alleyways, so there are fewer and fewer places to go.

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>> David Yazbek: And you can't put up with your own laziness, it's harder to put up with it, you know? Like when you're first doing it...

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>> Steven Lutvak: Well you don't know when you know it's laziness.

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>> David Yazbek: Right, you don't know it's laziness. Then your standards get higher and then you're... [inaudible] [laughter].

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>> Jeanine Tesori: And there's our second quote

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>> Mark Horowitz: Let's open it up. I think somebody's got a microphone to bring to people. Or, I guess we're ok without it, so yes sir.

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>> Audience Member: Hi. I'm just wondering, continuing on with what you said, it was specifically to Steven [inaudible]. You worked on the show for 10 years, or however long work on it.

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>> Steven Lutvak: Eleven, but who's counting

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>> Audience Member: Ok. How do you start again? You know what...

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>> Steven Lutvak: So happily, I can't begin to tell you, because so much of the last eleven years have been about pushing that boulder off the hill that I can't wait to be diving-in and writing something new. I did a little bit of writing—Mark knows this—a few months ago, and it felt great. It felt like the best yoga class I'd ever taken.

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>> Mark Horowitz: Yes

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>> Audience Member: For Jeanine, in the some of your shows you have a character who's older singing with her younger self, and it's in "Shrek" opened with it and [inaudible]. What do you use that to try to explore? It seems different in each of them.

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>> Jeanine Tesori: Yea, I think I'm probably done with that now. I think I was exploring the wonder bread... I don't know if you guys remember that wonder bread commercial that had that little kid and then it grows up to be the geriatric. I think the thing that I've always loved about the stage is you know—except for the Greek chorus—it's where you can do something. There's a simultaneity and in musicals you can take someone in their 20s and someone in their 70s and you can have them... what's so beautiful about the stage is time and space. You can't do that in a film. Film doesn't do it well. When the two try to do what the other is, mirror the strengths, I think that's when they run into trouble. They run aground. So I guess I was exploring things, because I was such a strange kid and I grew up in a really strange house. If you look at what I've written, it's not a surprise. And I remember thinking in my nine-year-old self, I have a lot of thoughts that if anybody ever knew I think they'd be surprised, but no one asked. I didn't care to tell them. But I sort of have the Judy Blume recall of the time. And so I think that was my interest of putting things together and how they circle in. Memory works that way, it works forwards and backwards. But now that I'm three-in I think that I'm probably done.

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>> Mark Horowitz: Yes, sir.

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>> Audience Member: Yes. First I just wanted to say that it's a real treat to hear the writers singing the songs you wrote. And I do have a question—maybe because of your work with the Dramatists Guild—does the writer have to be vigilant about the artistic control once a play goes into production? Is that something that you really cherish and protect, as far as being produced by a producer, director, script writers and things?

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>> David Yazbek: Well, you're entering into it as a collaboration. One of the things I love about musical theater, as opposed to when I make an album, play with my band and I'm the boss of everything—when you're entering into a collaboration and if you've got real collaborators, it becomes very exciting. And part of that excitement is when you don't agree. So this is getting to the point here. There's this collaboration going on, the writers, sometimes the director is involved pretty deeply, and in every experience I've had, I've never had a producer trying to you know ditz with the process that's going on. Maybe they'll give you a note, or something like that, lots of them get ignored. Maybe this is different experiences, but you're protected. Dramatists Guild protects—what is it called, the something agreement—[inaudible] the standard agreement. So you have...you can say “No, I'm not changing this.”

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>> Steven Lutvak: It's the only medium where a writer is king, I guess...suppose apart from the novel, I guess...king, sort of.

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>> Jeanine Tesori: Or queen. [laughter]

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>> Steven Lutvak: Where we are protected in that way. But there are...when “Gentleman's Guide” opened out-of-town and we got the review that we did, a lot of producers came courting. We had the choice of—unquestionably the most successful of—the producers who approached us wanted us to reconceive the show top-to-bottom.

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>> David Yazbek: Oh, I'd love to know who that was.

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>> Steven Lutvak: I'll tell you later. It was fascinating because he also walked into the room and the first words out of his mouth—and I'm sure he would die to know, this is what he said—is “I kill collaborations.” And I thought, “I can't believe you're...” I mean it was Oprah who says, “Listen to what people say about themselves.” It was terrifying. My collaborators were less interested in working with this producer than I was, and I kept saying no, let's meet again. I kept thinking, if this guy's this successful there's got to be something there. One of the reasons we chose not go with him was he wanted to completely wholesale restructure the whole show. What we sorted landed on, the simplest thing, was that his production would obviate the review we had just gotten, and therefore there was no point in continuing. I was the only person who was

interested in working with him, just because he is very famous and enormously successful. I can be a whore sometimes...but I'm glad I wasn't with this.

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>> Mark Horowitz: I think your question was somewhat different, and I'm going to ask what I think what your question was anyway, which is [that] you mentioned that you think your shows are like children.

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>> All: Yea

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>> Mark Horowitz: Once your show is up and done, how protective are you of it, if there's another production in London or [inaudible]...

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>> David Yazbek: Oh, was that your question?

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>> Audience Member: Well you also talked about your children... [Inaudible]

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>> Jeanine Tesori: Well there is...it's an interesting question, because copyright...it's the difference between the east and west. When you write a song—I've written a lot of songs for films—and the studio is the author. Legally, the studio is the author. It's a work for hire and off you go. I don't like doing it, but sometimes you have to and I've done it. In the East, in theater, you...you have your copyright, you have your guild—it's not a union, there's no collective bargaining, but you have that. It's king. Arthur Miller started that and it's a great story for another time when we all have pizza afterwards. I think what's really important is that you are...what I've never had to do is hold up an agreement to any one of the collaborators and say...and I think it's partially because the reason why theater and democracy were invented [at] the same time, you fight for yourself and you fight for someone else. Now, when it goes out into the hinterlands, and it's licensed, there is an agreement that they sign to say "We're not going to change one word. If there's any problem, we're going to call you if we have a re-conception and we'll have to get to the authors." There was a very famous case a couple of months ago where there are a lot of liberties taken with a musical and they got a cease-and-desist, and they shut it down before the first public performance. And now with tweeting—and twitter, and all of that stuff—you find out right away, but for the most part you know, I don't mind if someone...I don't want to see any of those productions because I feel like, that's how people learn. That's how you learn how to music direct, sometimes you do it badly, but they don't want me there clucking in

the back. That's what they get to do as long as they don't change anything. I don't mind cuts, too, 'cause sometimes you just can't pull it off—that kind of evening. So I think what we're talking about is a calibration, a certain freedom, but not when we are involved in it.

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>> Mark Horowitz: I think we have time for one more question, so whoever is most passionate and thinks their question is the most important one... [laughter]...I think you're it.

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>> Audience Member: I saw your opera last year at the Washington Opera, loved it. And it struck me as I was listening to your two magnetic singers here that in the opera is the sound that is taking you, and the melody and the music, much more than the words, although you may hit me on the head for saying that. So I'm wondering what happens when you move between doing musicals and moving more into opera. How do you recalibrate?

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>> Jeanine Tesori: That's such a good question, and I think we all...it's also...what's great about the question is how you stand for something, understanding what the thing is. So, when I was writing a song for "Ariel 3," and I'm not kidding, my friend said "Is that when she finds a barnacle on her breast? What the hell is left?" And I thought...and I remember someone arguing with me about you can't put an advert. And I thought, "Oh, [inaudible]. It's 'Ariel 3.'" And meanwhile we were doing "Caroline, or Change," and we were really wrestling... It's so interesting. I think opera exists in the tessitura when you go above and you're riding on the vowels you can't...I don't know if anyone saw Thomas Adès' "Ariel" and she was above the staff the entire time. But, what you understood was the dramatic intention by the way that he handled it, and that's what I'm trying to explore is the sort of hybrid quality of the drama that happens, and trying my best to break peoples' heart and understanding that there's almost an intentionality to what I'm doing that's not going to rely on the text. That said, we all have supertitles now. I teach composition at Yale and a grad student said, "I don't believe in narrative. Narrative is so old school." And I thought, "good luck, my friend." And he's like, "And I don't care if anyone understands anything, because of supertitles." And I thought, "good luck, my friend." But, it's a real elitist way, because...but that's what the reliance is. So I would say, when you're stretching it out what I'm trying to do is understand—and I'm still exploring—what it is that I'm doing that's different than a musical, which has so much declamatory and so much plot. To me, opera's really about story and emotion. The story is simpler. So, I'm still new at it, I'm only three down, but thank you...thank you for liking it, I appreciate that.

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>> Mark Horowitz: Well, on behalf of everyone who is here—tonight and in your work previous

to tonight—you've enriched, I think, all of our lives extraordinarily. It's really a thrill sharing the stage and sharing this space with you, and thank you for sharing your talent with us. [Applause]

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