



A Report on ‘A Fire in Water’ at Silver Finch Arts Collective’ by Terry Byrne

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— Composer, Producer, and Musical Director Michael Oberhauser.

A Fire in Water, a modern, one-act chamber opera in Silver Finch Arts Collective’s cooker, has all the elements of a masterwork: timeless themes of love and war, a stunning score by Terrance Johns and Michael Oberhauser, and marksman-like singing.

But for this one, you’ll need a flow chart.

Playing on ancient Greek myth and legend, the action unfolds in the heavenly perch of two doleful goddesses, Artemis and Thetis, as they survey the foibles of men. And not just any men, but the immortalized hot-heads Achilles of *The Iliad* scrolls (mid-700 B.C.) and world conqueror Alexander the Great (mid-300 B.C.). Rather than showing lofty indifference, these immortals dote on their earthbound targets, for Achilles is sea nymph Thetis’ son, and Alexander, ambitious ruler of

Macedonia, is but the coddled charge of Artemis.

The power pyramid piles on as each man has a valet in tow – non-singing confidants they’ve trusted all their lives, “yes” men who mostly beg to differ. For Achilles it’s Patroclus, who sacrifices himself for his master in battle (he reminds me of the guy in *Hair*); for Alexander, it’s second-in-command Hephastian, whose untimely death pierces the king’s heart like a lance.

Librettist Shannon Berry reveals the soft underbelly of these indomitable men as they each get consumed by parallel grief. She also settles the age-old debate about the nature of Alexander’s relationship with his right-hand man – most recently probed by Oliver Stone’s controversial film *Alexander*. *A Fire in Water* sees these “bromances” and raises them to full-blown romances. The beauty, grace and playfulness of their interplay are among the opera’s rare buoyant moments. Kudos especially to Brian McDermott (Hephastian),

who delivers his lines with a boyish twinkle and injects needed levity. And there's an expertly staged "lie-down" between Achilles (volcanic baritone Scott Thomas) and Patroclus (sexy Kyle McGruther), in which they sit back-to-back on folding chairs while leaning their heads on each other's shoulders contemplating the heavens. Pure euphoria!

Inconsolable grief is the villain, though, and it moves Achilles to rage and revenge, while Alexander, sung with sweet surrender by David Merrill, shifts from hawkish eye to dove's cry. The music toggles from fiery, chaotic trajectories – drumbeats of war? – to tonal droplets of ratcheting pain. Steep, step-like intervals are assembled as if by chemical fusion, then land on the ear as a sigh. The singers – all divine – ride via mechanical conveyor belt or turbulent river (a reflection of Johns' and Oberhauser's intertwined compositional styles) toward their tragic ends, which even their female protectors are powerless to stop. What's interesting is that the chinks in the soldiers' armor mirror the goddesses' girdle of helplessness. The effect is almost a role reversal of deity and humankind. The women reluctantly direct the action, even attempt to realign the stars and fates, oblivious to the limits of their powers, i.e. the power of love. Such inadequacy is something every earthly mother can relate to – for what mom has not felt like an omnipresent seer of the dangers ahead for her kids but still felt her hands tied or mouth zippered?

Director Courtney Kalbacker creates simple yet spellbinding stagecraft, portable enough to move between two vastly different venues: the cavernous Church of the Holy City in DC's Dupont Circle and a fluorescent-lit, cinderblock classroom at the Greenbelt (MD.) Community Center. As the centerpiece stand two linen-covered tables, perhaps folding TV trays, topped with mammoth, martini-shaped vases. Inside each is a modicum of water. The goddesses lithely dip in digits and, over the course of the opera, stain the life force from clear to teal to red to black. Danielle Buonaiuto (Artemis) does this so hypnotically as she sings – her dazzling soprano as entrancing and fluid as the shimmering knell of fingers fondling a moist crystal rim. She smooths out any rough edges of these demanding melodies, which coil and circumvent conventional lines.



— Producer/Composer
Terrance Johns.



— Librettist Shannon
Berry.

As Thetis, Megan Ihnen's syrupy mezzo is more of a caress – she is earth mother to Buonaiuto's radiant glint and spark. Their "Stars" duet, supported by a stellar constellation chorus (Katherine Riddle, Zoe Kanter, and Tanya Ruth) – all five in formation tossing yellow chiffon star puffs – could rival Lakmé's "Flower Duet" as hit material, ending with a hauntingly sweet-and-sour alien chord.

At the Dupont performance, two violas, a percussionist and a flautist joined pianist Irene Kim, under the direction of Oberhauser. The pit sounded as menacing as a high-noon showdown in one spot, with

Kimberly Eloshway taking a star turn on flute, exhaling and quivering sounds that seemed synthesized. At the Greenbelt performance, Johns accompanied the pianist on “crystal glasses.” Sparkly!

Another musical highlight is Merrill’s “House of Cards” aria, in which he flips a Tarot card making self-revelations as we revel in his lovely levitational tenor — so well-placed it’s as if he’s “throwing” his voice. This vocal magician sustains the words “no more” at a seemingly impossible height and length. His Alexander is like the wind to Thomas’ fire. And as Achilles, Thomas gets us worked up with his frothy tantrum “Stop!” – which gallops, ironically, in a relentless plea for dominion over death. (This idea is repeated in an epilogue full-company chorus at the finale). Otherwise, much of Thomas’ recitative hovers around a single note, but he brings so much intensity and variation to it, it sounds melodious.

The pairing of these classical heroes is no accident, as Berry explains. Alexander’s legend was molded to mythical proportion and he did look up to Achilles, having visited his gravesite with Hephastian. That scene is represented in the opera, in which Hephastian voices a kinship that defies time.

Turning the sidekick/bodyguards into spoken roles helped fulfill the troupe’s mission of fusing all art forms, explains Oberhauser. The actors are the wildcards,” Johns jokes. But the device also illustrates a class difference between those born noble and servile, Berry says. From an audience’s perspective, it seems to accomplish one more thing: the bookish Patroclus is a voice of reason for the impetuous Achilles, while Hephastian sports a reckless optimism in an effort to assuage Alexander’s fears. Two parts of a whole, two conquerors surrendering to love, the only thing any of us should ever die for.

Along with a decided anti-war theme, the moral seems to be: One can’t outrun mortality, even those who stumble upon immortality.

Berry borrows a couplet from Homer that is strung through the work, sung mostly by the Greek chorus – who sing like angels but whose notes are arranged more so they mimic insects:

“There is nothing alive more agonized than man, of all that breathe and crawl across the Earth.”

A Fire in Water’s story is intricately woven, the music tightly wound, but this mournful work is likely to worm its way into opera legend, given a favorable alignment of the stars. If you missed it – and most of you did – take heed: A more polished version may find its way to Fringe next season, sayeth its creators.

Running Time: 90 minutes with no intermission.



A Fire in Water played for two consecutive workshop performances on Thursday, September 19 , 2013 at Church of the Holy City - 1611 16th Street. NW, in Washington, DC, and on Friday, September 20, 2013 at Greenbelt Community Center -15 Crescent Road, in Greenbelt, MD. For more information or to encourage another run, visit Silver Finch Arts Collective's [website](#).



ABOUT AUTHOR [TERRY BYRNE](#)

Terry Byrne is an editor at USA TODAY who has been forever drawn to the darkened theater as a source of light and insight. Though not on stage in a decade, she has nurtured young talent as a theatrical consultant and works at revising a handful of unfinished plays. Before joining DCMetroTheaterArts, she was an independent critic and community theater junkie, and still is. Follow her @terryism or on her blogs: [mommytongue.com](#), [tis4theatre.wordpress.com](#), and [wordwhoops.wordpress.com](#).

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