

# Mother of Us All

*The collaboration between two of Portland's premier artists is effective on many levels*

by Sandra de Helen

Concord Choir under director David York will perform a new oratorio with special guest artist Obo Addy on African drums. Written by David York (music) and Judith Barrington (libretto) *Mother of Us All* will take place at 8 pm on Friday and Saturday March 1 and 2 at the Northwest Service Center, 1819 NW Everett.

It is a rare treat when lesbian and gay artists of the stature and renown of Judith Barrington and David York collaborate to produce such a gift to the community and to the world. Their full-length oratorio explores the relationship between humans and the natural world. According to Barrington, the piece progresses in a sequence of musical styles from the rise of patriarchy and loss of female deities to the present ecological crisis.

Concord Choir is a professional chamber choir dedicated to affirming peace through music. Selected to sing at the inauguration of Governor Barbara Roberts, the choir will perform in Estonia, Russia and Finland this summer. They will participate in "Bridges of Song" an East/West United Song Festival. For the winter solstice, they performed York's *Return of the Light* at OMSI's Planetarium — complete with laser light show.

David York directed the Portland Gay Men's Chorus for eight years, leaving only recently in order to focus on his own compositions and Concord Choir.

Judith Barrington is the author of *Trying to be an Honest Woman* and *History and Geography*. The latter work was a finalist for the Oregon Book Awards. She is also co-founder of "Flight of the Mind," an annual summer writing workshop for women. This May, she'll go to New York and England to do a reading tour.

The two artists came together when York began a search for a poet to write the words for his music. Together they created a music plan, and then embarked on a series of conversations, which in turn sparked Judith's writing. When her words were complete, David wrote the music. They started on a grand scale: how to change the world.

*JO: Why don't you start with discussing the process, and then we'll talk about the product.*

*Judith: I found the process mystical. We would get together for these intense conversations about deep subjects, such as right and wrong, life and death. Then the words came two or three days later, seemingly nothing to do with the conversation.*

*David: We initially got together because I was looking for a lyricist. I was at the Metropolitan Arts Commission, speaking with Donna Mulraney. They happened to have some material there regarding "Flight of the Mind," and it mentioned a woman called Carletta. I called Judith, she gave the information about Carletta, she also said she would be interested in working with me herself. Then I spoke with Ursula Le Guin who spoke highly of Judith. One thing led to another, and we ended up in a joyful and productive collaboration! It was not like it was an effort, but as if art drew us together. Judith is one of my favorite people now.*

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*Judith: I feel like it was an absolute gift. I couldn't have done it 10 years ago, which I think is a reflection of where we are as a community that a lesbian and gay man could do this together. It is a great gift to be personally ready for it. I have to say, there was one most frightening moment. We had no idea yet what the oratorio would be about... and [David] asked me 'if I were to give you a telephone hookup to everyone in the world which provided simultaneous translation, what is it you would want to say to them?' Talk about giving someone writer's block for the next 75 years!*

*JO: What were the first words then?*

*Judith: I don't remember exactly... something about the loss of the female principal and rise of the patriarchy... the loss of the goddess. As I look back, I see that that [loss of the goddess] played a role in the breakdown of the planet.*

*JO: Something about the way you describe the process sounds almost like channeling.*

*Judith: What do you mean?*

*JO: First you had the conversations, then a few days later, the first words that were written had to do with the goddess.*

*David: There is a version of channeling in all fine art. Art is a conduit to universal truth.*

*Judith: Alice Walker talks about voices coming through her onto the paper.*



PHOTO BY PAT POLLAK

*David: I impress upon the choir members to let the music come through you. Be a receptor to the moment as much as a creator. What's going on in the room contributes to the performances. I find that I listen to the silence more than the applause.*

*Judith: We had a lot in common even though our art is in different areas. I showed David the libretto, and his comments were right-on in picking out the weaknesses. His sensibility works across the genre.*

*David: It's happened the other way around too. I have to tell you about something that happened. I had made some changes to the end of a piece, and was late to rehearsal because I was running off copies of the new ending. One of the choir members had started the rehearsal, and I was able to walk into rehearsal and hear the music being sung — as if I were the audience. It was wonderful!*

*Judith: In one piece, I was able to contribute to the music too — in a small way. There was a humorous piece I was working on before we started the oratorio, but it fit perfectly with the theme. I had been humming a melody for the refrain and David picked up that melody and used it for the piece. So there is some crossover into each other's territory.*

*David: It's not different for the sake of being different though. Its uniqueness is its breadth of harmonic language. It begins with a medieval quality, moves to a Renaissance piece and even within the 17th century counterpoint, it becomes a 20th century piece with consonant resolution. The first half represents the steady development of human relations to one another and the environment. The first half ends with a rock and roll*

song about acid rain. The texture builds and builds, beginning with the Renaissance piece with the words 'who will remember we are all one?'

*Judith: An interesting thing about our collaboration is our difference for tolerance of negative statements. We balanced each other very well.*

*David: If you read the libretto, it is a progression. There is a beautiful piece, the words are 'I will burn a candle for the darkness of the forest. I will lift my head and see the buzzard in the sky. I will raise my arms and hold the perfect blue together. I will remember what lies beyond the ocean's clear green eye.' That's a treble voice. Then the bass voice comes and takes on a more dominating quality. Yet the very next piece is a hopeful one.*

*Judith: Things get better in the second half.*

*David: They-all have a 20th century feel to them — relentless, steady, then bursts into a heavy rock and roll (as much as a chamber choir can sing rock and roll!) The elegy is romantic, lush, full. It rains during intermission. Then we return for the second half. This would be a good time to acknowledge the use of the drum. The drum represents the voice of the earth. As people enter during the overture, they interact with it as they would with a voice. Some are interested, some are scared, some are indifferent, some pay attention. Then it is silent throughout the entire first half. The drum opens the second half with a few brief hits, there is a prologue similar to the first half. Then a major drum solo by Obbo Addy. The choir enters again, sings a song similar to the Renaissance piece, this time in a major key. From there it is upswing all the way to the end. We have hope for a better way.*

*Judith: People ask me how are you going to do that? Are you going to tell us how to change the world?' I answer them that it give glimpses into the process of change.*

*David: Even if we knew the answer to how we can all live more harmoniously with each other and the earth, knew the blueprint, it would be presumptuous to tell them.*



*Mother of Us All runs one weekend only, Friday and Saturday at 8 pm, March 1 and 2. Tickets are available in advance at Artichoke Music, Classical Millennium and Stiles for Relaxation, or at the door (1819 NW Everett).*

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