

music

Voices Raised for Peace

Portland Gay Men's Chorus premieres brave new work

by Rebecca Ragain

When the Portland Gay Men's Chorus finished the first complete run-through of its newest commission, *BraveSouls and Dreamers*, several members were crying. Crying is not an unheard-of reaction to a Portland Gay Men's Chorus performance. During the past 27 years, the group has consistently used music as a framework to tackle complex and emotional topics such as spirituality and the AIDS epidemic.

Yet *BraveSouls and Dreamers* is different from other weighty works the chorus has performed in the past—pieces that board president Dwayne Davis describes as “issue music.” By commissioning and performing this new work, the group explores a topic with universal impact: war and peace.

“What’s so radically different for us about *BraveSouls and Dreamers* is that we’re really stepping outside the gay genre into issues that are geared to absolutely everyone,” says Steve Fulmer, a founding member of the chorus.

BraveSouls and Dreamers is a full-scale work, 42 minutes long, featuring a 25-piece orchestra to accompany the chorus and soloists.

It was created by composer Robert Seeley and librettist Robert Espindola. During the past 10 years, the Palm Springs, Calif.-based couple—known to friends as “The Roberts”—have been earning respect for their collaborative compositions for gay and lesbian choruses. (Portland audiences might recall the Portland Gay Men's Chorus performance last spring of Seeley and Espindola's *Metamorphosis*.)

The concept for *BraveSouls and Dreamers* dates back approximately three years. The United States was at war in Iraq, and the chorus' artistic director, Bob Mensel, felt as if arts communities of all kinds were accepting the status quo without commenting upon it.

“We wanted to be stewards, speaking not necessarily politically against war, but to bring it to the forefront,” he says.

Mensel thought the time was ripe for the chorus to address a universal concept that affects people of every sexual orientation. Such

a work would stand in stark contrast to the majority of contemporary music written for gay choruses, which he calls “gay-centric.”

“We’re all citizens of the universe... we wanted to step outside the gay circle,” he says.

Other leaders of the chorus agreed that addressing the theme of peace and war was important.

Davis, whose partner sings in the chorus, says: “We’re accustomed to having to stand up and speak and take on issues that are difficult ones....

When the artistic director proposed [the concept of *BraveSouls and Dreamers*], it felt like a natural thing to do.”

For Fulmer, who protested the Vietnam War as part of the Portland Gay Liberation Front in the early 1970s, anti-war sentiments and gay activism have always gone hand in hand. Although he realizes that there is still a lot of work to be done before anti-gay prejudice is wiped out, he also thinks “maybe we can spend some time supporting other progressive issues.”

When Mensel presented the idea to Espindola and Seeley, they were eager to lend their respective talents. Seeley says they were “absolutely on the same page.”

Espindola, who penned the words to *BraveSouls and Dreamers*, was excited by the freedom this work would allow him as a lyricist. For previous compositions, his process has included interviewing from 60 to 100 people, in order to “get stories to intermingle and blend.” But in this case, he was able to focus solely on the message, as opposed to trying to capture the essence of interviewees' stories.

So instead of doing interviews, Espindola spent long hours researching the words of the world's great proponents of peace, such as Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa. “We wanted to reawaken the voices of these great peacemakers who in so many ways have been misinterpreted,” he says.

The resulting lyrics are powerful poetry indeed, heart-wrenching and inspiring in turn.

“Robert’s lyrics are probably the best he’s ever done,” says Seeley. “They are so accessible, as a composer I could just run with it.”

Davis adds: “Espindola has the ability to convey emotions and feelings and thoughts, intelligent thought, in his poetry. The power of his lyrics... while they’re smart and sharp, they’re also easy to follow.”

Because the work features four pivotal characters—archetypes, really—Seeley describes *BraveSouls and Dreamers* as a mini-opera, rather than a standard choral piece.

Guest artist Jennifer Gill, an award-winning mezzo-soprano who performs with the Portland Opera, will sing the role of the Mother, a representation of all the women who have lost children in war. Two other principal roles are Soldier One and Soldier Two, who suffer and clash on an unnamed battlefield.

Fulmer will sing the role of the Sage, a character whom Seeley describes as the voice of peace and to whom Espindola refers as conscience. “The other three soloists sing about how it really is; I sing about how it is supposed to be,” summarizes Fulmer.



Throughout *BraveSouls and Dreamers*, the chorus acts as a Greek chorus, their voices interweaving with passages sung by the four principal characters.

The chorus acts as a Greek chorus, their voices interweaving with the passages sung by the four principal soloists/characters. At times the words are graphic, even gruesome; in fact, Mensel declares them to be some of the “most daring sets of words in gay music.”

When asked if there was ever a debate during the creative stages about how provocative the lyrics should be, he replies: “The words simply are what they are. They are what [Espindola] needed to tell the story.”

BraveSouls and Dreamers raises many questions: What are the reasons for war? What is an “acceptable loss”? It is possible to ever repair the damage done by war?

Espindola describes his hope for the work: “Ultimately, we want [the audience] to walk away with a question: What are we doing? How are we translating peace for this generation and for generations to come?”

Both the composers and Mensel are quick to clarify that *BraveSouls and Dreamers* is not a political work. It makes no comment on the war in Iraq, nor is it criticizing President Bush.

Mensel says the work is “generic” in that it could easily refer to the Vietnam War, World War II or the Civil War. “It doesn’t as much talk about or investigate the politics of war; it sings about the human consequences of war.”

The composition poignantly reminds listeners of the lives consumed by war. As Mensel points out: “People die, children die, mothers lose the hope of their future. It’s not just statistics on a piece of paper; they are human beings.”

At its heart, *BraveSouls and Dreamers* begs the question: Couldn’t we find a better way?

Davis encourages audience members to do exactly that. “I would challenge those who listen to be the next voice who stands and says, ‘Let’s not do this.’ *BraveSouls and Dreamers* points out that war is a choice, and asks us to make better choices.”

The PORTLAND GAY MEN'S CHORUS presents *The Peacemakers*, the final concert of its 27th season hosted by former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts, 7:30 p.m. June 16 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$20-\$30 from 503-226-2588 or www.pdxgmc.org. A portion of the sales proceeds will be donated to Mercy Corps.

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Composer Robert Seeley (left) consults with Portland Gay Men's Chorus artistic director Bob Mensel at a work session in Palm Springs, Calif.

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