



LAURA WAYTE AND ANICE THIGPEN REHEARSING *THE WOMAN OF SALT* IN THIGPEN'S HOME PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

photo books of vacations with her two grandchildren, a boy and a girl.

"My girls and I are super close. We've never not been super close," Thigpen says.

"When they were younger, my daughters referred to me as their fairy godmother. Erin Lee called me her Yoda," Thigpen says. "Since I couldn't be with them day in and day out, when I was with them, I showed up."

Thigpen leans in.

"Losing my kids made me a better mother," she says. "I was so aware of time, and how little there was of it."

'IT HIDES IN THE SILENCE OF MIST AND FOG'

As a young mother without access to her kids, Thigpen did whatever she could to keep her relationship with her girls alive.

"I felt like Joan of Arc," she says.

Thigpen stirs, opening up a file of early musical sketches from the opera. She rifles through the pages, some with just a few notes and mostly empty space.

"My girls had to grow up — and be okay — so my fairy godmother could die," she says. "Trauma is unique, as a psychic wound. It is the distant past, the proximal past, it's happening and it's about to happen. Trauma is uncontained by time."

Thigpen had done the best she could to mother her children from a distance, but the pain of losing her parental rights to them never went away.

Then one day, out of the blue, Thigpen received a legal-sized envelope from her ex-husband.

"He was trying to clean up estate issues, property — there were some leftover questions," Thigpen says. "I was reading this document and it put me right back there. In it."

Thigpen remembers taking that walk in the woods — five years ago — to clear her head. "My dam broke," she says. "A lot of our close friends knew I had children but not about the trauma around losing my motherly rights. We, as humans, spend an enormous amount of energy defending ourselves against — and containing — our wounds."

But Thigpen didn't have a choice.

This was a story that was finding its way out.

'TO BE REBORN AS MUSIC'

The journey toward creating *The Woman of Salt* took Thigpen through a deep depression. Still, as she navigated the well of hurt that had settled in her decades before, Thigpen says she was continually comforted by what she calls "infinite creative energy."

"When there is a death — that's when things flood up. And that emotional flood is the germinal seed of creativity," she says. "In my case, music has — literally —

been transformative."

The story for *The Woman of Salt* comes from the Torah, in chapter 19 of Genesis. Before God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, he allows Lot and his family to leave and be spared, but their successful escape depends on not looking back.

Lot's wife, named AhDoo in this opera, looks back and consequently becomes a "pillar of salt."

"This work focuses on her contemplating her given choices, rejecting them and creating her own path," Thigpen says.

In the midst of heartache about the past, Thigpen began weekly composition lessons five years ago with her friend and neighbor Larry Wayte, a professor in the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance.

At first, Thigpen says, she wanted to explore the way music is scored — but in the midst of emotional turmoil, it wasn't easy.

She shows me a printout of the correspondence between her and Wayte. Some days, she just couldn't get to the lessons — she was just too sad. Wayte patiently cajoled, "Hope you feel better soon, Anice."

But Thigpen's experience crafting music soon took on a surprising dimension.

In January 2013 Thigpen wrote to Wayte, "I think I have the beginning of an opera."

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