

As she came out of the cloud of depression and anger, Thigpen looked to Wayte as a writer looks to an editor. For nearly four years, Wayte and Thigpen worked their way to the opera's completion.

"In the beginning, there was technical work in simply translating Anice's musical ideas into music notation, something Anice had very little experience with," Wayte says. "But as the opera came closer to completion, I might make comments that some section needed to be longer, or shorter, for maximum dramatic effect."

Wayte offered his perspective on what was working and what needed to be honed further. "But the musical inspiration and core dramatic ideas you hear and see in this piece are all from Anice," Wayte says.

Until he began working with Thigpen, Wayte had never helped anyone write an opera. "Nor have I ever written an opera myself," he says.

"I've written vocal works, but not an opera, and there's a big difference," he says. "That was a new experience — keeping track of not just the small-scale musical moments and how they work individually, but also how all those moments interact to tell a cohesive, long-form dramatic story. Fortunately, Anice had that story internalized and so I let her vision on that guide my reactions to the individual musical moments."

For Wayte, it's surprising that this opera exists at all.

"From the moment Anice first had the idea of it, up until she decided four years later that it should be produced, there were hundreds of opportunities for the project to get sidetracked, back-burnered, or to just wither away in the face of other daily obligations," he says. "The fact that it will be performed on stage this month is a testament to perseverance."

## 'BEING HUMAN, WONDERFULLY HUMAN'

"The musical styles in the opera are eclectic and reflect

my process and sense of having been a conduit for this music," Thigpen says. "Early on, I especially felt I was working as a scribe rather than a composer. If this were a textile, it could be a crazy quilt. The various characters and their primitive energies created their patches. I sewed them together."

Wayte adds: "Some of it is very approachable and tuneful, and some of it is quite dissonant and jarring."

Haunting melodies course through "Who Among Us" as voices and cello debate whether to look back. And in "Dilemma," sung by Larry Wayte's wife, soprano Laura Decher Wayte, we hear Lot's wife and begin to see into a world where she makes what choices she can within punishing limitations.

Laura Wayte's singing influenced Thigpen to try her hand at writing an opera in the first place. Thigpen saw the soprano perform as Madam Mao in Eugene Opera's 2012 production of *Nixon in China*.

"Experiencing that opera suggested to me for the first time that perhaps I should think about studying music composition," Thigpen says.

"I have looked at many creative fields in science, music and literature and usually see densely packed spaces with very little to no room for innovation or expansion. The creative pie has been sliced to pieces and is now divided into the finest of threads. After hearing John Adams' *Nixon in China*, I saw a galaxy of empty space crying out to be filled by English-speaking opera."

Flash forward five years, and Thigpen has written *The Woman of Salt* around Wayte's voice.

"I work in a field that can seem old and irrelevant to our time. But I keep at it," Laura Wayte says. "And to find that my singing of music — both old and new — has inspired this creative endeavor is overwhelming."

*The Woman of Salt* also features Thigpen's daughter, Paige Carpenter, playing one of the opera's "Creatures from Another Realm."

"My mom describes us as cosmic philosophers — transcendent beings," Carpenter says. "What makes the role difficult is that the two of us are really one being that can sing with two voices. Whatever we do, we must do together because we are in a constant duet."

With a projected run time of 90 minutes, the music is complex, relevant and charged — these aren't mere narcissistic ramblings. This isn't someone's amateur night. At 60, and in composing her first opera ever, Thigpen has discovered a taproot of genuine musical power.

## 'WHAT IS THIS MUSIC THAT ONLY I CAN HEAR?'

When she began writing *The Woman of Salt* five years ago, Thigpen was in a dark place. Triggered to examine an intensely painful span of time in her life, she knew she had to bring those feelings in closer — or she might leave this life altogether.

Thigpen paces the room, recalling her spouse, Halliday, being sick with worry.

"She's walking here, back and forth, late at night," Thigpen says. "And she's holding her head and she's saying, 'It didn't have to be this way. It didn't have to be this way.' And I thought, 'Yes! That's what the chorus will say.'"

Though Thigpen had cared for her girls in the best way that she could, the trauma had always simmered just below the surface, Halliday says.

"It didn't have to be that way," she says. "He didn't have to deprive them of their mother."

Halliday recalls the time, five years ago, when her partner of 20-plus years suddenly broke from reality, falling headlong into rage and depression.

As Thigpen wrestled with her inner terrors, Halliday's fears mounted. "Was I making the right decision, leaving her alone during the day?" Halliday asks. "And would she come out of it?"

But Halliday never feared for her spouse's physical safety.

Thigpen insisted she'd be okay. She told Halliday: "Just let me be in my sanctuary": the wind in the trees, the light on the distant mountains, her piano.

"The music felt like it was crying out from a place of tremendous pain," Halliday says.

In addition to music, Thigpen began working with a licensed therapist.

Notes in the air and, eventually, on the page. A score, a cast, direction — an audience. And in that process, Halliday says she's seen her loved one heal.

"So many people are in spots like this," she says. "But if they can tap into their creativity — which is available to all of us — art is a way to help them through."

This is a mother's story, and like so many mothers' stories — stretching back to the nameless Lot's wife — it was nearly buried by time and circumstance.

"The characters have showed up," Thigpen says. "And here's the contract in my mind — it's my job to tell this story, and to give her a name." ■

*The Woman of Salt premieres 7 pm Friday, June 23, at the Wildish Community Theater, 630 Main Street, Springfield. Tickets are available at wildishtheater.com. The production is directed by Sara E. Widzer and conducted by Michael Sakir (who recently conducted The Turn of the Screw for Eugene Opera), with scenic design by Grant Preisser and costumes by Jonna Hayden.*

*The cast includes Laura Wayte, Brooke Cagno, Shannon McCaleb, Bill Hulings, Emma Lynn, Raphaella Medina, Evan Mitchell and Paige Carpenter, as well as a chorus. The chamber orchestra includes Kathryn Brunhaver, Daniel Yim, Chrystal Chu and Nathalie Fortin.*

*The subject headers in this story are lyrics from The Woman of Salt.*



THE PERFORMANCE OF *THE WOMAN OF SALT* WILL INCLUDE LIVE MUSIC FROM A CHAMBER ORCHESTRA.

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