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'Love / Hate' brings same sex relationships to the opera stage

by Lewis Whittington
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(top) Composer Jack Perla; (bottom) librettist Rob Bailis. Their opera Love / Hate premieres this weekend in Philadelphia.

Despite legendary divas and drama queens, opera is still in the closet in a lot of ways.

Not so with **Love / Hate**, a new chamber work by composer Jack Perla and librettist Rob Bailis. It is a contemporary romp that reflects the current state of relationship affairs: gay, bi & definitely curious.

The piece, a co-commission with the American Opera Projects, is being developed in various versions - one for a smaller ensemble (four singers playing multiple roles and five musicians) and another for a slightly larger grouping (eight singers and a sixteen member chamber ensemble). This approach is aimed to help insure the work will get as a wide a possible airing from small opera and musical theater groups.

This weekend it will be performed as part of the Philly Fringe/Live Arts Festival with Center City Opera's artistic director Andrew Kurtz conducting. The production is directed by Albert Innaurato, the Artistic Director of ConNEXTions: The Next Generation of Opera Project and renowned playwright (Gemini) and journalist.

Bailis and Perla, colleagues since their days at Yale have collaborated on many out of mainstream projects. Bailis is currently artistic director of San Francisco's ODC Theatre which is known for its artistic adventurousness. Speaking by phone this week, he noted the project was started two years ago

"Jack was working with American Opera Projects and he called me up for ideas." Bailis came up with the story about a romance between a man and woman who both have had same sex relationships in the past.

"Love/Hate," according the Center City Opera Theater's website, "traces the arc of the blossoming love

between a chilly college professor and her tech-geek, sexually confused new boyfriend. Their affair triggers a quixotic romp through the characters' personal histories, dropping in on pivotal moments in time that have shaped for each their views on love: from clumsy sexual experimentation to full blown commitment, bloodthirsty fights to tender acknowledgements."

"Basically it's about the anxieties that people go through leading up to a love affair," Bailis elaborated. "The characters have both had same-sex relationship prior to having a heterosexual relationship. They are confirmed bisexuals. So questions about sexual identity is a main theme."

There are four main characters and a host of "magic-realism characters who pop in and out and in the imagination of the lead characters. Cupid, Death, Casanova, sex-therapist, tarot card reader - in their minds." Bailis explained. "The funny thing about opera is that it is so populated with the LBGT community, yet that reality goes unsung in the material."

Bailis said despite sexual frankness in the piece "This has been interesting process developing this, because it is overtly clear about the sexual nature of the content. There is gay sex onstage, for instance, yet there has been no resistance to this work."

Perla also thinks it's about time opera reflected gay culture. "So apropos to the opera world. What Rob has done, from a classical standpoint, it is much like the Marriage of Figaro. They function the same way in reflecting people we know." Perla said by cell phone from San Francisco, where he was on the street having a froyo with his three-year-old daughter. "There is so much humor and humanity in this, so that was the musical challenge for me and the pleasure of how far I could take it."

Perla divides his time between contemporary classical music world and the jazz world as both a composer and pianist. "Musically I feel like opera and jazz are completely connected. Whatever the style, for me, it is just a means to what I am trying to express emotionally," he said.

Love / Hate will be performed on Sunday, September 12, 2010 at Ethical Society of Philadelphia, 1906 S. Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA. For more information, visit [the Center City Opera Theater website](#).

Lewis Whittington writes about the performing arts and gay politics for several publications.