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## The Fatwa That Begat an Opera

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EVER since 9/11, I feel as if we are all in the same boat that used to be occupied only by Salman Rushdie," said the composer Charles Wuorinen. Mr. Wuorinen's opera "Haroun and the Sea of Stories," based on Mr. Rushdie's 1990 novel of that name, will receive its premiere today at the New York City Opera.

"He used to just be someone living under a threat," Mr. Wuorinen said of Mr. Rushdie. "But now we all are, because of this Islamic fascism that doesn't want to negotiate but instead wants to kill us all. People who don't see that are just whistling in the dark."

The novel's intricate plot and memorable characters attracted Mr. Wuorinen, but he was as much moved, he says, by the circumstances of the novel's composition. Mr. Rushdie wrote it while under the shadow of a 1989 fatwa that called for his assassination as punishment for writing the novel "The Satanic Verses." (The fatwa was officially rescinded in 1998.)

"Given Rushdie's circumstances during that terrible time," Mr. Wuorinen said recently at his home on the Upper West Side, "there is an admirable absence of self-pity and bitterness in 'Haroun.' The book goes under the guise of a lighthearted tale written for children, but there is a social and political message against people who want to shut everyone up and strangle the imagination."

The plot involves a boy, Haroun, whose parents have separated and whose father, Rashid, has lost his gift of storytelling. Haroun embarks on a fairy-tale adventure to reunite his parents and restore his father's Gift of Gab. He enters a fabulist world and encounters a host of magical creatures, including Chupwalas and Guppees and the archvillain Khattam-shud.

"When something bad happens - like a divorce, for example - children think it's their own fault," Mr. Rushdie said recently in New York, where he has lived since 2000. "I wrote 'Haroun' as a kind of message in a bottle for my first son, Zafar, who was 11 at the time. I hoped he would enjoy the story as a child and then appreciate it differently as an adult. During that awful time, I thought if I could turn the situation on its head and have the son save the father, it would be something I could give Zafar, a story that would help get us through. My second son, Milan, is 7 and is beginning to ask when I am writing a story for him."

As a children's book, "Haroun" is the shortest and perhaps the most straightforward of Mr. Rushdie's eight novels to date. (He recently delivered the manuscript of the next one, "Shalimar the Clown," to his publisher.) In "Haroun," the prose is packed with puns, lightning-fast allusions to James Bond, Italo Calvino, Satyajit Ray and "Alice in Wonderland," and fancifully named characters like Snooty Buttoo and the Plentimaw Fish.

The many miracles that happen involve P2C2E: Processes Too Complicated to Explain.

Beneath its fairy-tale surface, "Haroun" is an allegory peppered with references to Mr. Rushdie's life: Rashid is a near-anagram for Rushdie, Haroun is Zafar's middle name, and Khattam-shud (which means, in idiomatic Urdu, "it's over") sounds as if it could be the name of an Islamic cleric.

The question repeated throughout the novel is, What's the use of stories that aren't even true? By inquiring into the nature and value of narrative, Mr. Rushdie wrote a fable that more poignantly than any of his other books, gets at the heart of what happened to him and, in a time of increasing religious fundamentalism, what is happening to us all.

The climax of the novel comes when Khattam-shud, the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech, explains why he is the enemy of stories: inside each story is a world he can't control.

"What happened to 'The Satanic Verses,' " Mr. Rushdie said, "was that it was a battle about who gets to tell the story. I was saying that we all should be able to tell the stories of our lives and retell the great stories, such as those in religion. But there are those who say, We tell these stories, and what is more, this is what they mean. You will understand them in the following way, and if not, we will kill you."

The novel "Haroun" has been widely adapted, with stage versions in Sweden and Britain and a puppet play in France; a cartoon is in the works. Looking for someone to turn the novel into an opera libretto, Mr. Wuorinen consulted with Mark Lamos, who is directing the City Opera production. Mr. Lamos recommended James Fenton, not knowing that he was, serendipitously, a friend of Mr. Rushdie

In addition to being a leading British poet of his generation, Mr. Fenton is a writer of playfully rhyming and witty verse, and has been a theater and art critic and a foreign correspondent. His stage experience includes writing an English version of Verdi's "Rigoletto" for the director Jonathan Miller as well as contributing lyrics to the hit musical "Les Misérables."

Mr. Wuorinen and Mr. Fenton began work by cutting characters from the novel to simplify the dramatic action. Mr. Wuorinen requested a "numbers opera," a libretto composed of brief and clearly defined numbers (songs and choruses).

"The novel was mostly dialogue, so it was easy to adapt," Mr. Fenton said from his home in Britain. "And you don't have to give a lot of words to the composer. There are terrific moments in Puccini when there is not much text. But what there is has to be singable. A conductor once told me that something will sing well if you can shout it. It's a very good test, that."

The libretto for "Haroun," published in the book "The Love Bomb" in 2003, is far more than a mere reduction of the novel. Mr. Fenton added incidents and highlighted sections that amplify the novel's political stance - for example, the excision of the tongue of the princess, a minor occurrence in the novel.

And how would all this fit with Mr. Wuorinen's aesthetic? His 12-tone music, influenced by Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt, is often considered difficult. Yet even Mr. Wuorinen's most abstract instrumental works, for which he is best known, have a surface of attractively familiar musical idioms and a comforting sense of structure. What's more, of his two stage works, "The Politics of Harmony," from 1967, has rarely been performed, and the 1975 burlesque, "The W. of Babylon," has been done only in concert. So hearing his rigorous music combined with a fairy-tale numbers opera dense with ludic rhymes is a tantalizing prospect.

A preview of the opera is available on a CD, "The Haroun Songbook," released by Albany Records this year. Excerpts from the opera, arranged for four singers and piano, give a sense of a score whose rhythms energize the rhymes. At times, the ensemble numbers even call to mind the music of Stephen Sondheim. There are also musical nods to Gershwin, Tin Pan Alley and other vernacular music, including the occasional snippet from India.

"Because of the nature of the piece," Mr. Wuorinen said, "I had a lot of fun putting in some quotes from some of my other works as well as musical puns, as a response to the wordplay in Rushdie's novel."

Far from atonal, the opera is in D, or "on D," as Mr. Wuorinen said. "There is a set underneath," he added, referring to a pattern of tones that shifts gradually during the opera to create the macrostructure, "though if anyone can find it, I'll give them a cigar. The overarching shape ultimately was given to me by the drama."

That drama wasn't just Mr. Rushdie's. At the time of the fatwa, Mr. Rushdie said, there was a tendency among his supporters and his detractors to view his as a unique case.

"Actually, there are many writers across the Islamic world accused of apostasy, heresy, blasphemy and so forth," he said. "But unlike me, they are in the clutches of the people attacking them."

In recognition of that fact, he is putting his fame to use, serving as the president of PEN, the writers' organization that campaigns for freedom of expression. And he has written essays about his experiences of living in a state of fear.

"On 9/11, I happened to be in Houston," he said. "And like most misplaced New Yorkers that day, my primary thought was getting home as soon as I could. When I returned, it seemed for a moment that the city had lost itself and was afraid. But then came that scare about the Brooklyn Bridge and people's response was: 'Hey, what are you doing closing my bridge? That's my bridge!' I knew that New York had found itself again. Yes, perhaps that happened by P2C2E, Processes Too Complicated to Explain."

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