

## Word processors

A creative duo turns Salman Rushdie's *Haroun...* into a manageable opera

By Susan Jackson

What's poor Haroun to do? His mother has left home because his father, a champion storyteller, isn't very practical. "What's the use of stories that aren't even true?" the furious 11-year-old asks his father, Rashid. Although Haroun immediately regrets the question, it's too late: Rashid's "ocean of notions," his "sea of stories," dries up, and it's not just his livelihood that suffers. Rashid's stories had given the country a buffer from its evil ruler. Without them, life grows miserable. It's up to Haroun to come to the rescue, which, after lots of adventures, he eventually does.

That is the premise of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the first book Salman Rushdie wrote after being forced into hiding in 1989 because of a fatwah issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Rushdie wanted to explain to his son the reason he was splitting up the family; he also wrote the book as a battle cry for free expression.

When composer Charles Wuorinen read *Haroun*, he thought it could be adapted

into a good opera. "All the things that make [*Haroun*] charming—wonderful fantasy, rapid-fire action, a lot of short scenes—would make it work as opera," he says. The same is true, he adds, for the serious political issues the story explores. "But the book isn't preachy, and neither is the opera."

Wuorinen approached Rushdie (who had been easing out of hiding), and the author requested that British poet James Fenton write the libretto. The result, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, will have its world premiere in October at New York City Opera.

"It's essentially a father who's trying to explain to his son why he's had to go away—then the son is able to save the day and make everything come out right," Fenton says. "I think a lot of kids will be able to identify with that."

Fenton's task was daunting. "Salman never uses one word when he could use ten," offers the poet, extolling the "lashings and lashings" of lush words that are the hallmark of Rushdie's work—

and are rather antithetical to opera. "You have to be austere with a libretto and just capture the essence of the work," Fenton says. He has done that splendidly, keeping Rushdie's witty turns of phrase and quirky character names. There's the Shah of Blah, Mr. Iff and Mr. Butt, and the evil Khatam-Shud (which means "completely finished" in Hindustani), who is the "Arch-enemy of all stories / Even of language itself / He is the Prince of Silence / And the Foe of Speech."

The story might engage kids, but will the music? Wuorinen is an abashed modernist—his work isn't exactly hummable.

"I tried to make the opera do double duty as an adult piece that could also be enjoyed by children," Wuorinen says. "Rather sophisticated, new-music-savvy children," Fenton clarifies.

In fact, Wuorinen's music does capture the whimsy and enchantment of both Rushdie's story and Fenton's libretto. And if some kids don't have ears tuned to the nonmelodic strains of new music (or aren't accustomed to supertitles, which tend to be a part of operagoing), not to worry, says Wuorinen. "Just relax and enjoy it. If kids aren't told there's a problem, there won't be a problem."

***Haroun and the Sea of Stories* opens October 31 at the New York State Theater (tickets go on sale August 9). See listings for venue information.**



Character sketches for *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, rendered by costume designer Candice Donnelly.