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# CALENDAR

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## High-wire opera

'Grendel' takes flight, with 'Lion King's' master and an award-winning composer. But it hasn't been easy.



CHRISTINE COTTER Los Angeles Times

**WORKING HIS WAY BACK:** Goldenthal pressed on with composing "Grendel," even after a fall sent him to the hospital with a serious head injury.

**D**ANCER Salvatore Vassallo is not in this scene. He has come to rehearsal to show his fellow performers the ropes, so to speak.

Vassallo, along with five other male dancers and assorted stage crew members, is taking a flying lesson. On a recent morning in Santa Clarita, the group is gathered in the cavernous, warehouse-like rehearsal facility at Branam West Coast, a company that designs and provides equipment for flying effects in theatrical productions, be they pop music extravaganzas or "Peter Pan."

But this project is neither rock 'n' roll nor a Broadway musical. It's opera. The dancers are learning how to die agonizing deaths while suspended in midair for a grisly massacre scene in "Grendel," a new work by Elliot Goldenthal that will receive its world premiere Saturday -- in a staging by his longtime mate, Julie Taymor -- at Los Angeles Opera.

Co-commissioned by the L.A. company and New York's Lincoln Center Festival, the \$2.8-million production will be seen seven times at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion before its New York premiere July 11 as part of the Lincoln Center event. It stars bass Eric Owens -- who last year appeared in the premiere of John Adams' "Doctor Atomic"



# Heightened risks for a new production

at San Francisco Opera — as the man-eating monster of the title, and features formidable mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves as a dragon.

All the dancers have some flying experience, but the others say Vassallo has the most, so he is in Santa Clarita to give pointers. And, in fact, he looks as comfortable as any Cirque du Soleil acrobat as he slithers headfirst down a rope dangling from the rigging — that is, until rope and dancer take a sudden, precipitous drop.

A collective gasp arises from the onlookers as Vassallo's head misses a mat placed below him and comes dangerously close to the polished concrete floor. Crew members scurry to replace the mat with another that's twice as thick and three times as long.

When asked afterward if the moment scared him as much as his audience, Vassallo shrugs. "I knew it might hurt, but it wasn't going to be fatal," he says.

## Taymor trademarks

**A**LTHOUGH not everyone involved in "Grendel" is required to drop via a rope from the ceiling, Vassallo's plunge seems an apt metaphor for the risks of producing a new opera. In this case, those risks are heightened by the elaborate sets, costumes, puppets and special effects that have been trademarks of Taymor ever since she turned the animated Disney movie "The Lion King" into a colossal stage spectacle and a worldwide phenomenon.

What's more, though Vassallo was lucky enough to miss the floor, Goldenthal wasn't so lucky a few months earlier when he took a fall at home at a crucial point in "Grendel's" development that raised doubts about whether the show would go on at all.

"It's a new opera. I don't know it that well either... We are going to be creating this production from scratch," Taymor cheerfully admitted at an April 10 design presentation for the cast and crew, early in the approximately seven-week rehearsal period. "We haven't even heard it. I find that terrifying and exhilarating."

Although they have had less than two

months to rehearse, "Grendel" — subtitled "The Transcendence of the Great Big Bad" — has been gestating in the minds of Taymor and Goldenthal for more than 20 years. And, as Los Angeles Opera general director Plácido Domingo joked at a March news conference in New York: "Their baby is a monster."

Goldenthal and Taymor have collaborated artistically before, including on the movies "Titus" and "Frida" (for which Goldenthal's score won an Academy Award) and the 1988 musical theater piece "Juan Darién: A Carnival Mass."

Goldenthal, an eclectic composer who studied under Aaron Copland and John Corigliano, has also composed a large-scale piece for the Pacific Symphony, "Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio," and the ballet "Othello," choreographed by Lar Lubovitch, which premiered in 1997 at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House. Critics have described his music, whether for a Shakespeare ballet or a big-budget Hollywood movie such as "Batman Forever," as accessible and emotionally charged.

He and Taymor describe the full-length "Grendel," which will clock in at about three hours with one intermission, as their most intense partnership to date. Domingo calls it the most ambitious undertaking in Los Angeles Opera's 20-year history. Indeed, the celebrated tenor introduces a new monetary unit to the global economy when he says the "Grendel" budget is about "1½ Aidas," — that is, half again the average cost of mounting a new production of Verdi's 19th century monster.

The expenses are being split between the Los Angeles company and Lincoln Center, meaning that, according to Domingo's math, each is shelling out three-quarters of an "Aida." The Walt Disney Foundation and Holland's Joop van den Ende Foundation are the production's lead underwriters, along with a consortium of individual donors and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The opera, with a libretto by Taymor and American poet J.D. McClatchy, was inspired by the 1,000-year-old legend of Beowulf, the mythic Scandinavian hero who ended the terrible reign of the hideous monster Grendel.

Perhaps more important, the libretto also borrows from John Gardner's 1971 novel "Grendel," which tells the story from the monster's point of view. To force the audience to relate to this antihero, Taymor says, Grendel sings in English while his foes sing in Old English. "The audience will have to love the grotesque, they'll have to love the dark side — and it will make them uncomfortable," she says, sounding pleased.

To create a phonetic guide for singers charged with bringing a dead language back to life, McClatchy enlisted the aid of Old English scholars from Yale and UCLA. "No one knows how to pronounce Old English, so it doesn't matter if someone makes a mistake, but everyone has to make the same mistake."

Taymor and Goldenthal fell in love with Grendel before they fell in love with each other. They met in 1980, but both had read Gardner's novel in the 1970s — when Taymor, now 63 and then a mythology major at Oberlin College, even wrote a term paper comparing the epic poem "Beowulf" and the book.

But in bringing the story to the opera stage, Taymor and Goldenthal may have created a monster in more ways than one.

Those in the opera business are fond of saying that the only thing more expensive than opera is war. Even though operas are most often produced by nonprofit organizations, they typically call for a full orchestra, a chorus and elaborate costumes and sets. But "Grendel" is not just opera, it's Taymor opera. In 2004, she dazzled New Yorkers at the Metropolitan Opera with a hyper-inventive "Magic Flute." Among local opera-goers, she may be best known for her 1995 L.A. Opera staging of Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman" — a special effects extravaganza that included flying mermaids and fantastical puppet birds.

"You had ghost sailors, people belaying, naked men sliding on water past women with ships on their heads," she recalls. (She indignantly disowns L.A. Opera's 2003 revival of the production, which cut many of the visual effects for financial reasons. "I was shocked — it's not my production.")

"Grendel" puppet designer Michael Curry — previously Taymor's partner in creating the puppets and masks for "The Lion King" and "The Magic Flute" — says the various entities devised for onstage effects in this new project range from one that is 48 feet long to a fleet of miniature soldier puppets designed to make singer Owens as Grendel seem like a giant in certain scenes.

"My favorite characters are the Forlorn Beasts, the horrific mutants," Curry says of some 3-foot puppet creatures operated by dancers. "Our costume designer, Constance Hoffman" — also the costume designer for Taymor's "Flying Dutchman" as well as last year's L.A. Opera production of "The Grand Duchess" — "calls them 'the mascots from



In addition, mezzo Graves, who might more properly be described as the essence of the character dubbed the Dragon, emerges from a 10-by-12-foot dragon's head — a bored, debauched diva reclining on a chaise longue placed on the dragon's tongue. Then there's the "ice wall" central to the action — a pivoting platform that becomes the main playing area, with one side representing a white winter world aboveground and the other the earthy, root-tangled underground from which Grendel hails. Another "Flying Dutchman" veteran, George Tsylin, is designing the sets.

Amid all this, and unlike in traditional opera, where the choreography usually consists of an isolated bacchanal or waltz, "Grendel" calls for 20 dancers who are integrated into the story, with choreography by Angelin Preljocaj, director of the edgy Ballet Preljocaj of France. In fact, one of the major characters in the story, Beowulf, is a dance role, performed by Desmond Richardson, Tony-nominated for his role in Broadway's "Fosse" and the originator of the title role in the Goldenthal-Lubovitch "Othello."

Moreover, this is not the world of commercial theater. In opera, there are no previews or out-of-town tryouts — although Curry cracks that Lincoln Center may view the Los Angeles production as a tryout of sorts before the opera comes east.

Says Taymor, fretting during a rehearsal break about three weeks before the "Grendel" premiere: "What I like about previews in commercial theater is, the mistakes are accepted. Even in 'Lion King' or any of those shows, the mountain doesn't come up, or whatever, and it's fun — because it's a preview. But on the opening night of opera, you are expected to have it worked out; there are critics there. Frankly, it's not possible. You don't have time. I'm just hoping and praying that we don't get bogged down with a set or a technical problem. The singers and the chorus — if we were on a flat stage, they could do it. It's all those other elements.

"Obviously I'm in the director's nervous moment at this time. I'm hoping we can pull all the elements together because they're coming in late. They're just late."

### A scary accident

ONE reason for a sort of domino effect of tardiness pervading this production was a freak accident last fall that left Goldenthal with a serious head injury just when his composing talents were most in demand.

He says his traditional working hours are "9 to 5 — that's 9 p.m. to 5 a.m." So it was not unusual that he was awake in the wee hours one December night in the couple's New York home. "I was sitting at my table in the kitchen after work. I couldn't fall asleep. I was leaning back in my chair, and the chair tipped over," he says quietly. "And that was it."

When Taymor talks about the incident, tears still pop into her eyes. "It was the most terrible, horrifying thing I've ever been through," she says in a separate conversation. "It was Dec. 13, the day before my birthday. He fell, and he got a double hematoma — we have hard ceramic floors. He couldn't speak for a while, but he had to keep composing.

"The funny thing was, when I went to the hospital, the speech therapist would have him write things down. She'd ask: 'What's your name?' and he'd write: 'Elliot.' And then she'd ask: 'Who is the president of the United States?' and he'd write: 'C-H-E-N-E-Y.' That's when I knew I still had him. He still had his humor and quick wit."

The accident slowed the 52-year-old Goldenthal down by a month or so — and, unlike Taymor, he believes the trauma left him temporarily humor-impaired. "When I am at my best, I communicate with a lot of irony and wit and that stuff, and I can't communicate that because it relies on rhythm and cadence, which I can't do right now," he complains. "I miss it."

But although the injury continues to trouble his speech, Goldenthal says it never affected his ability to compose. "I didn't lose that capacity in my brain, and the motor skills were there in my hands," he says. "But it was just the luck I had that I was writing an opera, and I prefer to sing through everything, so I can get a sense of how much the voice can sustain, just the human physicality and the endurance." Ironically, though, singing turned out to be his best speech therapy. "I had to wrap my tongue around difficult language, Old English," he says.

In early May, singers Graves and Owens confirmed that Goldenthal was still introduc-

ing new music — though luckily major changes were occurring in transitional, or "bridge," music rather than the meat of their roles. But Graves noted that the sense of work-in-progress remained palpable. "Last night, we were in rehearsal, and Julie was talking about the 'vortex music,' and the conductor said, 'What vortex music?' Graves said. "Then it was 10 minutes of 'Do you know the music?' and 'Can we call Elliot?'"

In any case, Graves — who last year created the title role in the Richard Danielpour opera "Margaret Garner," based on Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved" — says Goldenthal has provided her with her most vocally challenging role, one whose range extends from the equivalent of a male baritone to high soprano.

"I have never, ever, and I'm not sure I will again, sung anything like this — it's so extreme in both directions," says the singer, who is juggling her L.A. rehearsal schedule with educational activities for her 22-month-old daughter, Ella Tha's Thomas, named by Graves and her husband, French clarinetist, composer and conductor Vincent Thomas, after Ella Fitzgerald (Tha's is a favorite character from French opera). Goldenthal, she says, is "putting me in a place where I have no choice but to grow."

Graves' *Dragon* will be accompanied by the *Dragonettes*, a sort of hybrid of the *Weird Sisters* from "Macbeth" and Motown's *Supremes*. The three singing harpies, connected in one costume, wear long red nails on three-fingered gloves that make their hands appear webby, as if they were a Darwin-esque adaptation for crawling out of the primordial ooze, as well as uncannily like the salute that Leonard Nimoy routinely gave on "Star Trek." Graves will get a pair of the gloves too.

"The Mr. Spock thing, and the nails out to Sacramento? Oh, *yeah*," she says appreciatively.

Taymor is the first to admit it: There will be a lot happening on the "Grendel" stage. "It may be *too* much. My eyes are bigger than my ... what's that expression?" she says.

But even with all the eye candy she will provide, Taymor hopes the audience focus will be on Goldenthal's music. She believes that unlike musical theater, in which songs can be merely upbeat accompaniment to the staging, opera ultimately belongs to the composer.

"I am more excited about him than I am about me," she says. "That's kind of weird. I don't want to sound like I'm forcing down humble pie or anything, but I mean it. It is exciting because it is Elliot's opera. Even though I am co-writing the libretto and directing it, I have wanted to see him do a full work, where if there's a 20-minute piece or an aria that lasts 10 minutes — well, so be it. It's not the decision of the playwright or the film editor.

"We have worked together for more than 20 years, and we support each other," Taymor adds. (The two also teamed up on "Across the Universe," a Beatles-inflected film musical due this year.) "But if the other one doesn't really like something at all, it does affect us. We have similar taste and aesthetics, so we are always trying to listen to the other collaborator.

"But I really want to support his work here. If Elliot believes in what he's doing and I have my doubts, my doubts will go out the window."