

An interview with Tobias Picker and a look at his "Dolores Claiborne" opera

I was lucky enough recently to be given an opportunity to interview Tobias Picker, who composed the *Dolores Claiborne* opera. As if that wasn't cool enough, I got to see a recording of the chamber version of the opera that was staged in 2017 by the New York City Opera. I thought the opera was fascinating, and am very happy to have been able to see and hear it for myself. We'll talk about that more after the interview, but first, with no further ado, here's my chat with Tobias Picker.



Bryant Burnette: What interested you in composing an opera based on *Dolores Claiborne*?

Tobias Picker: It is an irresistible operatic plot. It has the kind of characters

I always put in my operas. Ordinary people with universal problems. I saw Dolores as a kind of American *Tosca*. I felt impelled to tell Dolores' story as an opera.

BB: Have you read other books by King? If so, are there any others you think might be well-suited to an operatic setting?

TP: I have. At the time I acquired rights to *Dolores Claiborne*, I also had the rights to *Misery*. But, I decided that *Dolores* was enough and I decided to leave *Misery* on the shelf.

BB: One of the things that interests me most about the existence of your *Dolores Claiborne* opera is the perceived gulf between the medium and the source material. What I mean by that is, King's novels (as with those of most popular authors) have at times been considered among the lower arts, whereas I think most people would think of opera as being among the highest. I sort of mentally envision a street, with King fans on one side and opera fans on the other, both camps gazing across the street at the other skeptically and mostly disinterested in one another. Do you think that gulf actually exists, or is it a misperception?

TP: There should not be a gulf. To the extent that there is one, it has to be eliminated. Stephen King is one of the greatest storytellers of our time. For the fans on both sides of the street you imagine, a great story is key to enjoying the art form. I always look for great stories for my operas. Composing the opera is the process of figuring out how to tell a great story.

BB: When you compose an opera, do you have a hypothetical ideal audience in mind? What I mean is, are you writing for opera-savvy

audiences, or for everyone? Or perhaps even primarily for your own enjoyment? I don't take any of those as givens, but I am curious as to how you yourself look at that aspect of your work.

TP: I write for any and all who are willing to listen to music they have never heard before. The war horses are familiar to opera-goers and familiarity is comforting. The challenge of the new consists of opening one's minds and ears to a journey of discovery. If the new opera is good, the journey is very exciting, no matter what your background is. Of course I have to enjoy the journey myself. But, I do not put myself above anyone else when I compose an opera. If I am not entertained and nourished by what I compose, I cannot expect anyone else to be.

BB: You are not solely a composer of operas, of course. How does the process of composing an opera differ from composing, say, a concerto?

TP: With an opera I am telling a specific story or stories. With a piano concerto or a string quartet or a symphony I am telling stories that live in the world of the fantastic, the imaginary and the abstract.

BB: Is there a single type of composition (opera, concerto, tone-poem, etc.) that you prefer to the others?

TP: I love all musical genres. Operas take the most time and the most out of me. The more I put into something—the more I get out of it. I hope the same is true for the audiences who hear and see my work. All genres of music are intended to be experienced live—not on recording. With opera, there is more to hear and see and experience. It is the king of all musical genres.

BB: What operas would you name as being your favorites? Also, are there any that you might recommend to King fans as primers of a sort to help them enjoy *Dolores Claiborne*?

TP: To appreciate my opera *Dolores Claiborne*, I recommend first becoming

familiar with some of my other operas like *Emmeline* and *Therese Raquin*. I do not have a favorite opera from the history of opera. But, among my favorites are *Dialogues of the Carmelites* and *Tosca*.



Tosca (by Puccini) is best known to me as the opera all the villains go to see in *Quantum of Solace*. I thought it looked pretty cool in that movie; I need to check it out.

BB: Stephen King has compared his creative process to excavating a fossil that is buried in the earth. The entire fossil exists; it is his job to uncover as much of it as he can, and the process of doing so is mostly intuitive for him in that he experiences the story as he is writing it, with no clear understanding of how it is supposed to end. It is, for him, a process of discovery. Does your own creative process bear any similarity to that?

TP: This was Michelangelo's idea. I first encountered this notion as a child when I discovered Michelangelo's prisoners in Florence. Seeing them in person and in 3D drove home the profound idea that Michelangelo himself expressed—that he was freeing his statues as if they were prisoners inside blocks of marble. He was removing everything around them to reveal them. I experience each story as I am composing it. However, I have a pretty good idea of how the story will end.



image borrowed from <https://www.teggelaar.com/en/florence-day-4-continuation-6/>

BB: What is the collaboration between composer and librettist like? For example, did librettist J.D. McClatchy write the dialogue (if "dialogue" is even the correct word for an opera!) and you set them to music? Or is it more involved than that?

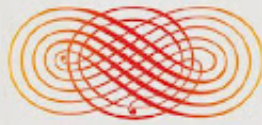
TP: Librettos consist of "dialogue" and "conversations" that can be made into arias and ensembles. So, the words have to have a reason to be put to music. The libretto is usually written first and then as I compose the opera—putting the words to music—it goes back and forth between myself and the librettist many, many times because things change as it becomes a piece of music theater—which is really what an opera is.

BB: In the process of getting an opera onto the stage and in front of an audience, what role does a composer generally play beyond writing the music? Are you involved in casting? Do you choose the director? I'm mildly

knowledgeable as to how a film adaptation works in regards to things like that, but my knowledge of stage productions (operatic and otherwise) is much more limited.

TP: I can't speak for other composers as we all approach things with varying degrees of control. If an opera company wants to commission me, I always find my own subject and if the company finds it as compelling as I do, then that is the opera I write. I always have casting consultation and director and conductor approval in my contracts.

BB: You've based an opera on a book by the favorite author of my adulthood, but you've also based one on the favorite author of my childhood: Roald Dahl. I have not yet heard or seen your version of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, but I love that story.



OPERA
SAN ANTONIO

FANTASTIC Mr. Fox

An opera by Tobias Picker
Libretto by Donald Sturrock
Based on the book by Roald Dahl



How would you compare that opera with *Dolores Claiborne*?

TP: The entire *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is on YouTube so you can see and hear it there. Also, the recording of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* won the 2020 Grammy for Best Opera Recording so you can also hear it and judge for yourself. But, I would say *Fox* is very playful whereas *Dolores* is more severe and darker.

Fantastic Mr. Fox by Tobias Picker

BB: I also can't resist asking about your piece "Old and Lost Rivers," which I know via its having been conducted by John Williams for his album *The Five Sacred Trees*. That's a marvelous album in general, and "Old and Lost Rivers" seems a fitting closing track for it in a way I do not know how to verbalize. What can you tell me about that piece and/or album?

TP: I wrote the piece for the Houston Symphony Texas Sesquicentennial Fanfare Project in 1986 along with 20 other composers I commissioned to write short pieces for each concert in that season. I was Composer in Residence of the Houston Symphony at the time. I discovered Old and Lost Rivers on a road sign as I was driving to Louisiana on I-10 and made a mental note of it as I thought it was an oasis of poetry in an otherwise flat and non-verbal landscape.

BB: Returning to *Dolores Claiborne*, what are your feelings about Dolores as

a character?

TP: She is an archetype of the American woman as is Emmeline. They are strong and stand up for what they believe and for their rights. Dolores was right to kill Joe. For me she is a very sympathetic character—a loving mother and an honest, hardworking person.

BB: From a vocal standpoint, how challenging is the role of Dolores?

TP: It is one of the most demanding roles in the operatic repertoire. It requires an enormous range, enormous control and enormous stamina. It is not a role to be tackled by anyone who does not have the kind of strength inside them that Dolores had in her.

BB: It seems to me that it must require a certain level of virtuosity even to be able to do it at all, much less do it well! How does a performer learn a role like that? Is it a process of memorization first, then rehearsal, or do those things kind of blend into one another?

TP: First it is memorized. Then it is rehearsed—a lot!

BB: When you are composing a role, how conscious are you of the demands it will place upon a performer vocally/physically? Is that a consideration for you in writing, or do you instead write what seems best for the character and worry about finding someone capable of performing it later?

TP: A little of both...

BB: One of the aspects of the opera that interested me most is how much more forcefully vocal Joe is than the character in the novel (or movie). There, he tends to be more internalized; but in the opera, he is more boastful, more braggadocious. Was this a story decision or one led by the needs of the music?

TP: We didn't want Joe to be two dimensional. King used him as a foil but

gave us little reason to care about him. We wanted to portray him as part human / part animal—not 100% animal.

BB: I think it works quite well; it brings out an aspect of the story that takes advantage of the medium in which it is being told. What was the process of adapting the opera to a chamber setting like? Was it difficult to scale it back from the more expansive original version, or was it an opportunity to enhance the focus upon some aspects of the work?

TP: With a few years to get some perspective on a piece, I can reduce it to its essential elements and that is a process I enjoy very much. The smaller version of *Dolores* is no less powerful than the enormous one—perhaps more so.

BB: Your use of the well as a symbol for Joe's depravity is one of the standout elements of the opera for me. Joe's lullaby to Selena is just nauseating. And I mean that, obviously, as a compliment! (Dolores's singing it to him while he is dying—as a sort of final "no, fuck YOU"—is an especially satisfying moment, as well.) What can you tell me about the development of that symbolism within the opera?

TP: King gave us all of that I think—if not in the actual writing, then between the lines. I wanted a lullaby that would get stuck in people's heads so that they would be uncomfortable afterwards—the next day, for instance—suddenly finding themselves humming it and then catching themselves and taking a moment to think about themselves and their own morals.

BB: The way Vera intones the word "bitch" when giving Dolores advice is very interesting to me. That's one of the best-known lines from both the book and the movie, so it makes sense that you and McClatchy give it emphasis. The way it is sung really draws attention to itself, and suggest almost that this word has more power than other words. What can you tell me about the decision to give it that specific sound?

TP: Since the word occurred so many times in the book it naturally ended up in the opera a lot. We found in rehearsal that we were looking for opportunities to reduce the number of times the word was used as it seemed almost too much at times. Naturally in finding the right sound for any word, I put all of my experience and creativity to work.

BB: Your adaptation includes one of my favorite scenes from the book, in which Dolores recalls how her father told her stories about mermaids in the ocean using rays of light to build their castles beneath the ocean. When you read that, did you find yourself thinking, "Now, *there's* something worthy of being sung!"?

TP: Yes. Like much of King's imagery in the book, I was knocked over by his genius as a writer. I underlined the most arresting passages when I read the book for the second time before composing a note.

BB: How does the design of the stage work in conjunction with your and the librettist's staging of scenes? Do you work this out on your own beforehand and then dictate your needs to the stage designer, or is it a more collaborative process than that?

TP: We imagine our own staging and then the director will typically ignore most of it but use whatever he or she deems to work. And, the librettist and I keep as much distance as we can out of respect for the director's art.

BB: Were there any scenes from the novel or movie that you would have liked to include in the opera but could not for one reason or another?

TP: No. I felt I had everything I needed from the novel when I wrote the opera.

BB: Were you able to attend a performance of the production staged by Boston University? I saw two short videos of cast members performing scenes of it, and they seemed quite good.

TP: I did attend and was able to coach some rehearsals. They did a great job and recorded the opera for Albany Records after the run of performances was over. The release of the CD has been delayed due to Covid.

BB: As I am coming to this opera by way of being a Stephen King fan, my tendency is to focus on the story more than anything else. But it occurs to me that that is perhaps not the most effective way in which to appreciate opera. What should I be noticing in the vocal performances that I might perhaps overlook thanks to my relative lack of familiarity with opera?

TP: Ultimately an opera will survive only if the music itself is great and carries the story through its every moment. The music in opera should tell a story but give it a multidimensionality no other art form can. The human voice is the first musical instrument. You might say the only musical instrument created by God. It is the only musical instrument that is born, lives, walks and talks, breathes and sleeps and eats and laughs and dies. Everything is expressed by the human voice. A trained operatic voice is one of the wonders of life.

BB: Thank you very much for answering my questions! It was an honor to be able to ask them.

TP: You're very welcome!

Now, let us turn our attentions to a lengthy look at the chamber version of the opera. I had an absolutely fascinating time familiarizing myself with it over the course of a few weeks during this past summer thanks to being able

to see a recording of one of the performances, and am here now to report on the experience.

I wrote at length (meaning that I transcribed a bunch of stuff from articles and interviews and reviews) about the history of the opera in 2018; you can read that [here](#), if you are inclined to do so. In brief, what happened was this: the opera was debuted to strong reviews in San Francisco in 2013, and was then revised into a chamber production (shorter runtime, smaller cast, less elaborate stage production, and an orchestra reduced by about two thirds) which was performed in New York in 2013. It was also staged by Boston University in 2019.

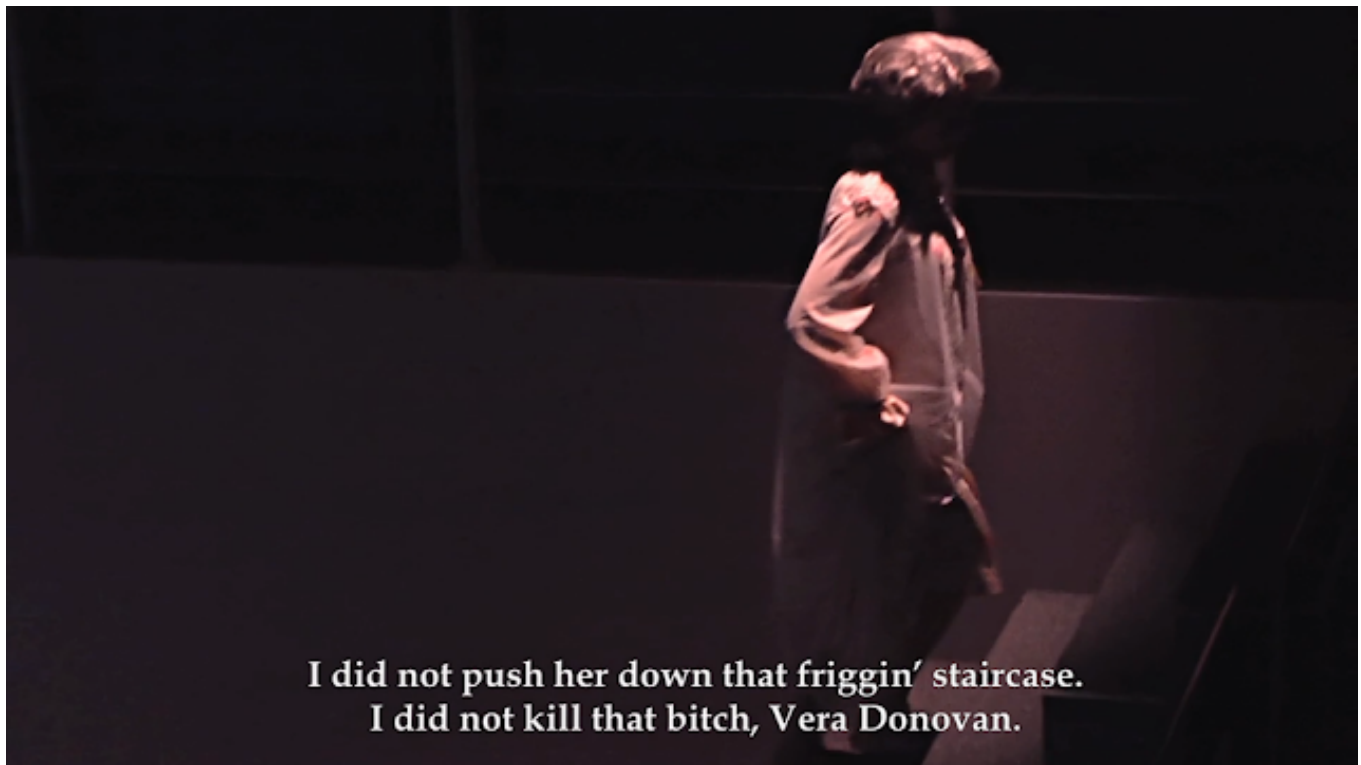
It's the New York Opera production that I was able to see. I return with copious screencaps, which I was tempted to share in their entirety. Thing is, I've got over four hundred of them, and that seems excessive even for this blog. So we won't do that. We'll instead check out a selection of some that stood out to me, and which loosely summarize the opera. I suggest reading this section of the post on a PC so that the subtitles of the dialogue are visible; I'm not sure, they might be legible on a phone as well. I confess: I am a PC-centric blogger.

Anyways, here goes!

DOLORES CLAIBORNE



We open with Dolores standing over the dead (or, perhaps, dying) body of Vera. We have no context for this, unless we know the novel or the movie.



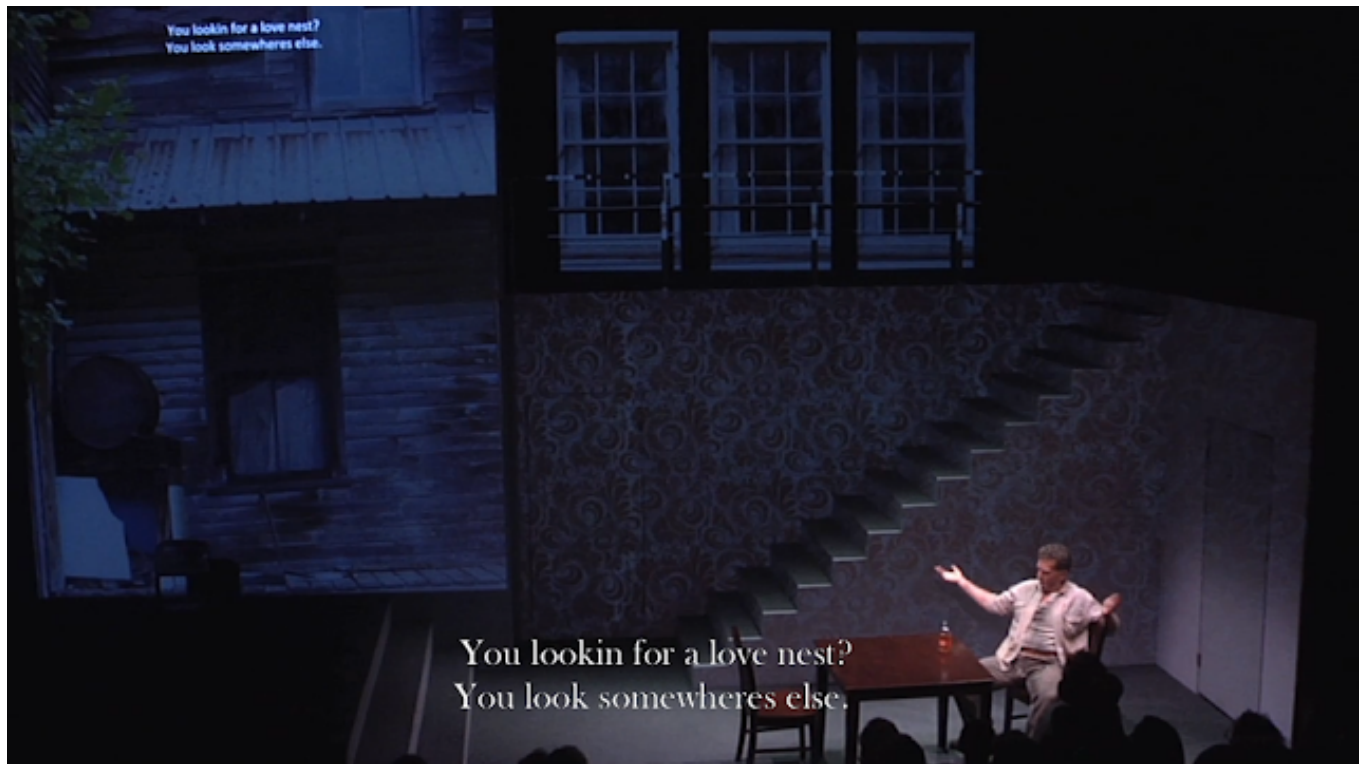
I did not push her down that friggin' staircase.
I did not kill that bitch, Vera Donovan.

In a nod toward the structure of the novel, Dolores is questioned by a police investigator named Andy. This is in 1992. (1990? I think '92. The nineties, at any rate.)

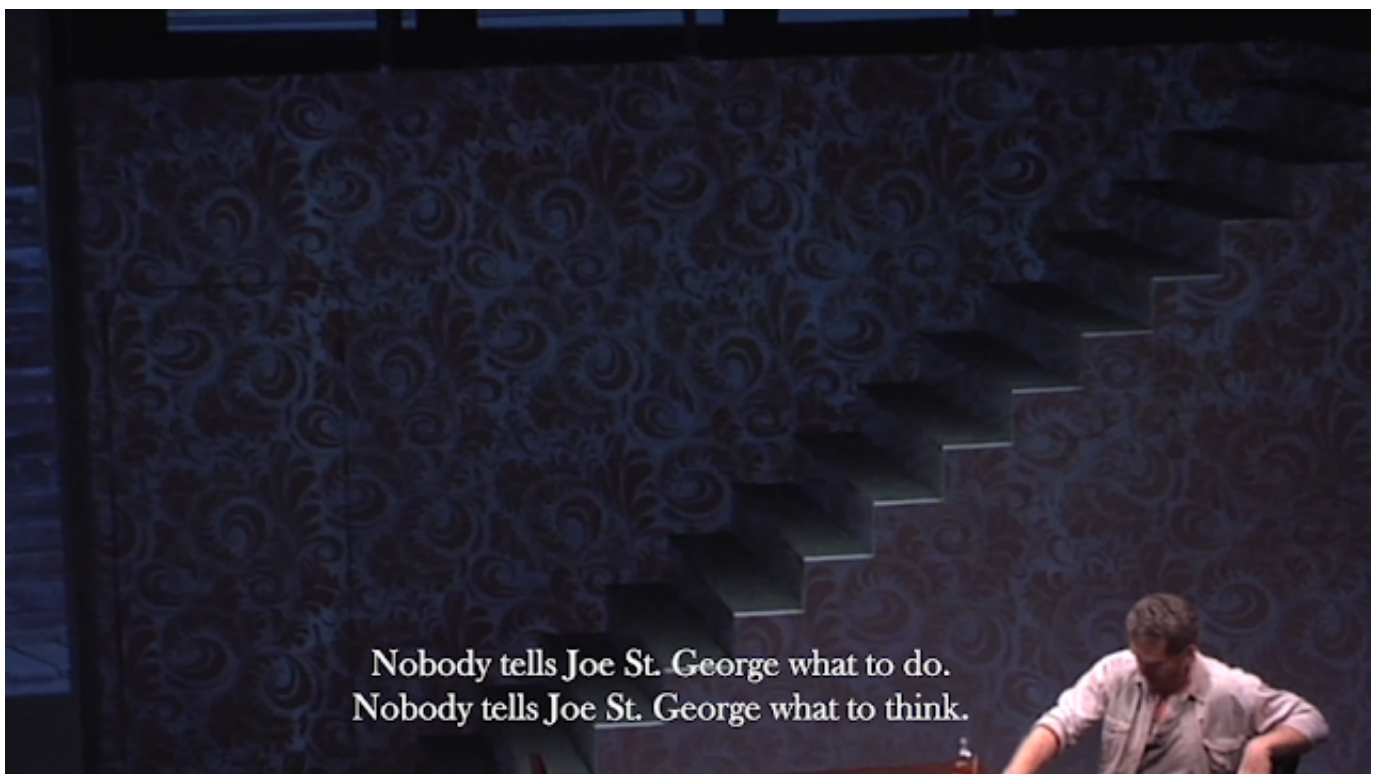


Old bats get used to hangin upside down
next to each other in the same cave.

I like this line; it's in the Kingian mode, but is not King's. (At least I don't think it is; if I misremember that, somebody correct me.)



Soon, we flash back to a scene in 1961. Joe is sitting at home alone, drinking, perhaps steeling himself to do ... something.





Joe's abuse of Selena has been shifted forward in the narrative. I didn't mind this; it seems like a good way to compress things for the operatic medium.



Creepy AF, as they might say on TikTok or the Insta or whatever the kids are on these days. I just hope they're not on their daddys' laps, which is where Selena is about to be. Yuck.

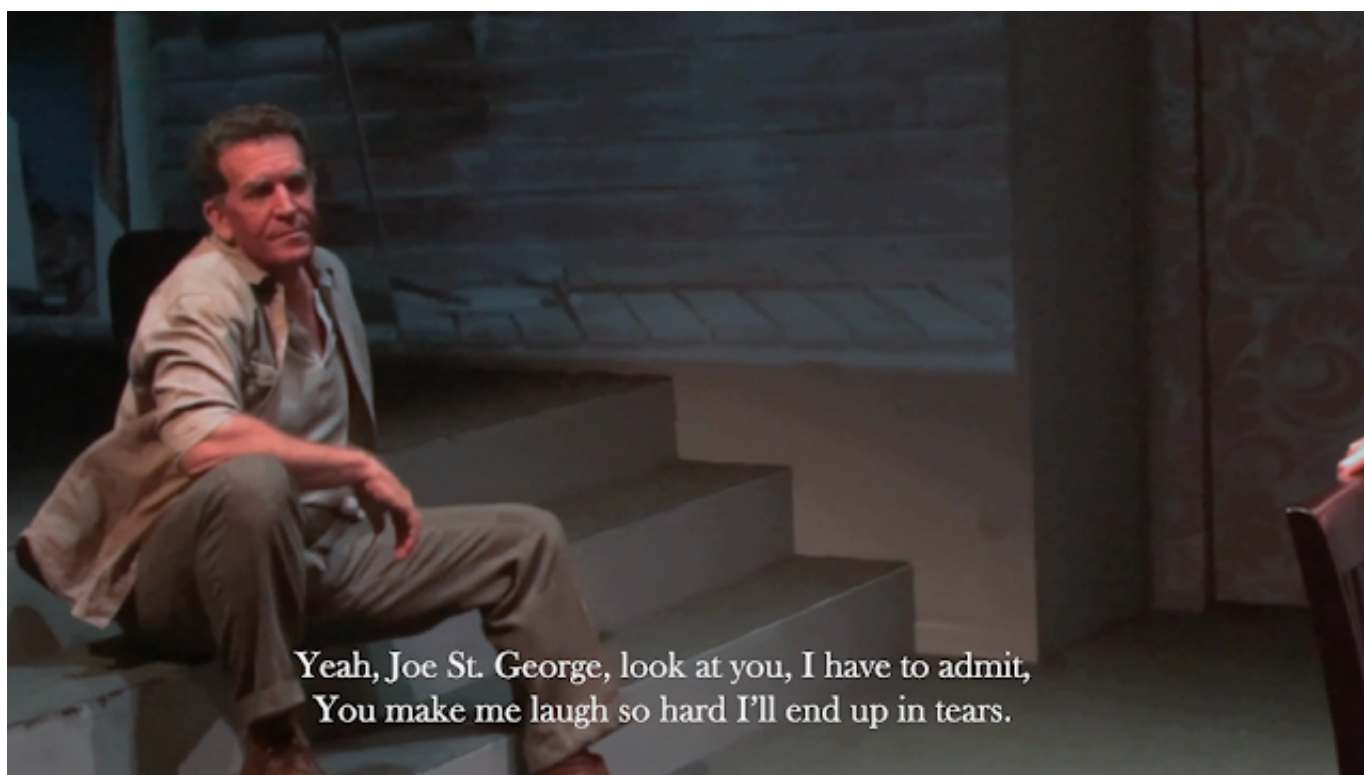
One thing you need to know that you might conceivably not know is that everything in this version of *Dolores Claiborne* is sung. I don't mean sung in the sense of *Hamilton* or *Frozen* or whatever, either; this is something very different than Broadway-style musical. This is opera. You probably know that without me telling you, but then again, my brain initially insisted upon expecting Broadway-style singing, which is silly and wrongheaded as far as expectations go; so I reckon it's worth emphasizing that this is not that.

Even so, melody creeps into the production on occasion, and one such example comes during this scene. Selena sits on Joe's lap, and he sings a song to her:

"Daddy go up,
Daddy go down,
Daddy go into the well.

Daddy be good,
Daddy be gone,
Daddy go into the well.
Down and down and never tell,
down and down and ring the bell.
Daddy go into the well."

I will leave it to you to work out the symbolism here. It's pretty sickening, obviously. This little bit is sung as a lullaby, and the melody is likely to get stuck in your head and recur at odd moments, and if it doesn't make you uneasy every time it does, I'd be surprised. Picker has done a strong job here of rendering one of the novel's (and movie's) central concerns in a specifically musical manner. Joe's lullaby is childlike, clearly designed to be appealing enough to have attracted Selena to the "game" whenever they first "played" it. Worse, Joe's crude and obvious metaphor is one born out of necessity. Do I need to spell out the reason why he'd need the song (and game) to contain a well for Daddy to enter? Well, I'm not gonna, so there.



One of the opera's best moments for me comes after Dolores has sent Selena out of the kitchen. Joe, who is reclining on some steps, begins humming the melody of his lullaby about the well, and Dolores crosses the room while he is doing so. This hangs over the scene like a shroud; Dolores (whom Joe slapped earlier) is furious with Joe, but has no idea how furious she really ought to be. Joe is not only basking in his enjoyment of having defiled his own daughter, he is using it as a sort of secret to further his enjoyment of what he believes to be his domination of Dolores. It is a marvelously sickening moment.





After Dolores challenges Joe to go ahead and kill her and says that if he doesn't, he'll never hit her again, Joe sings "Fuck you" at her in a very low voice. Here's another area where I lack the skill to properly analyze what I'm

hearing, but there's something interesting here in the relationship between the deepness of Joe's voice and ... what? The level of his depravity? The mood his having been bested by Dolores puts him in? Could you call it a foreshadowing of him ending up in the well? (The literal one, not the metaphorical one.) I'm not sure, but there's something going on here.



I particularly like the music that plays underneath the scene on the ferry in which Dolores learns from Selena -- not via words, but seemingly via some sort of innate understanding, almost like telepathy -- what her father has been doing to her.

As she is cradling Selena, devastated by what she has learned, Dolores sings the word "Joe" in a low and ominous tone, suggesting that this might be the moment in which she decides to kill him. It might not even be a conscious decision; perhaps this is simply where the seed is sown that will eventually blossom into murder. The music itself is effective; the word "dirge" comes

to mind, and I think that might actually be accurate, but let's leave some room for that to not be the case. Whatever it is, I like it.





After Vera discovers Dolores weeping, they have a conversation about husbands having accidents. This scene will be familiar to anyone who knows the novel or the movie, and naturally, the line "Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hold onto" is a key component.

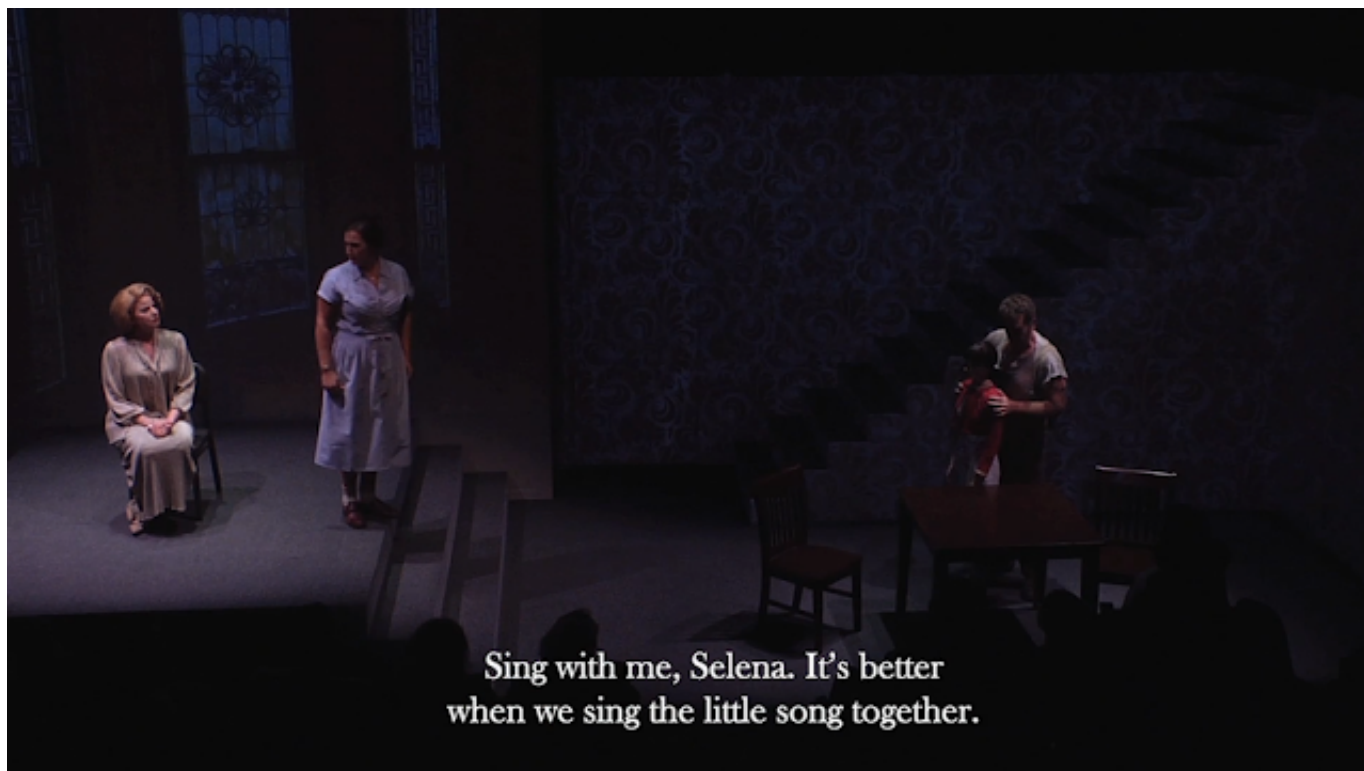
Vera delivers the word "bitch" in an interesting manner. Played in the New York production by soprano Jessica Tyler Wright, Vera in this moment drops her voice into a lower register, and more or less speaks the word "bitch." Every time the line recurs throughout, it is voiced that way, very much calling attention to the word. This fascinates me. I'm reluctant to impose any meaning upon it, because ... I don't even know why, I just am.

And, by the way, I noticed on second viewing that in the beginning, when Dolores tells Andy, "I did not kill that bitch Vera Donovan," she says the word "bitch" in precisely the same manner. Even more interesting! That's the first time we hear it in the opera, and it's a callback on Dolores's part to the way

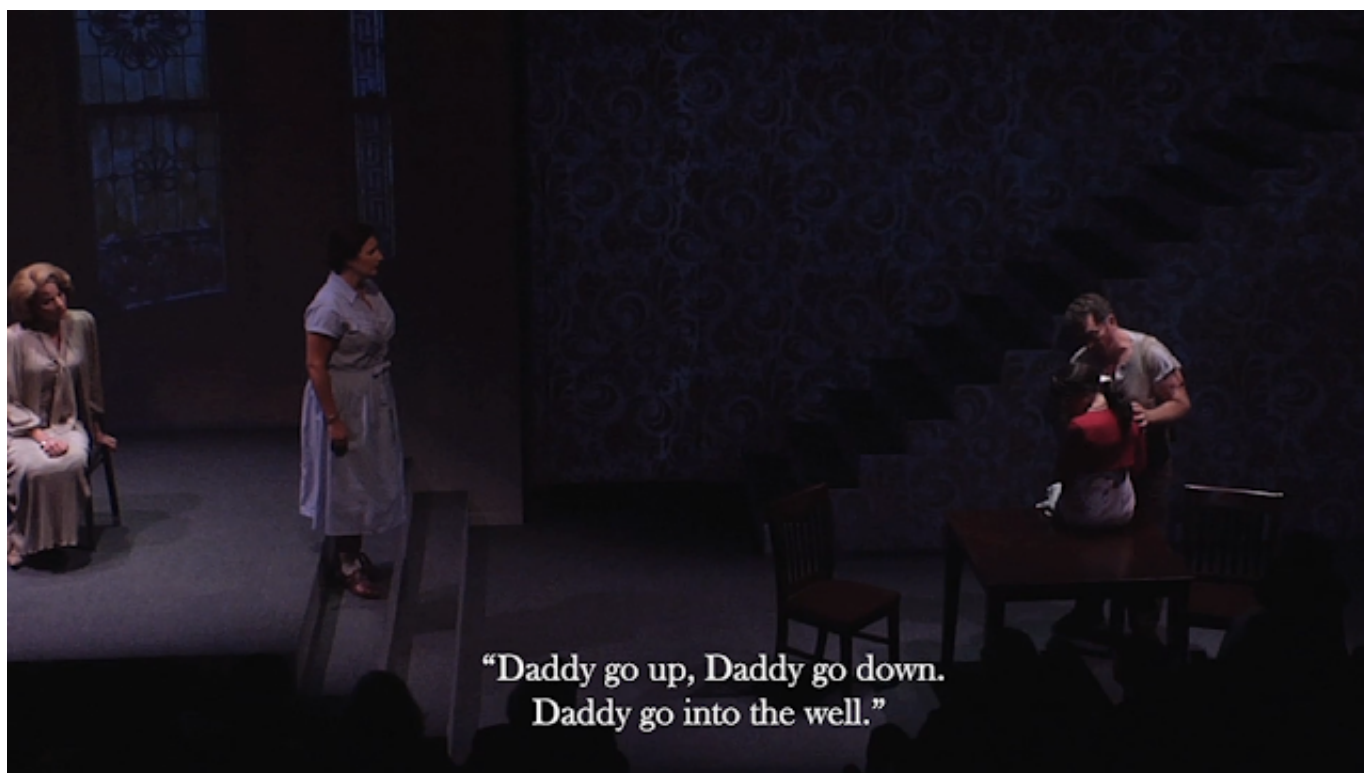
Vera said it to her years before. Is she mocking Vera? Memorializing her? Is she mocking Andy in some obscure way? Any of these seem valid.

Anyways, this scene also involves Dolores telling Vera about Joe's misdeeds with Selena. This is marvelously accomplished via having father and daughter in their 1961 costumes come out and reprise the well lullaby. Dolores and Vera look on, sickened.

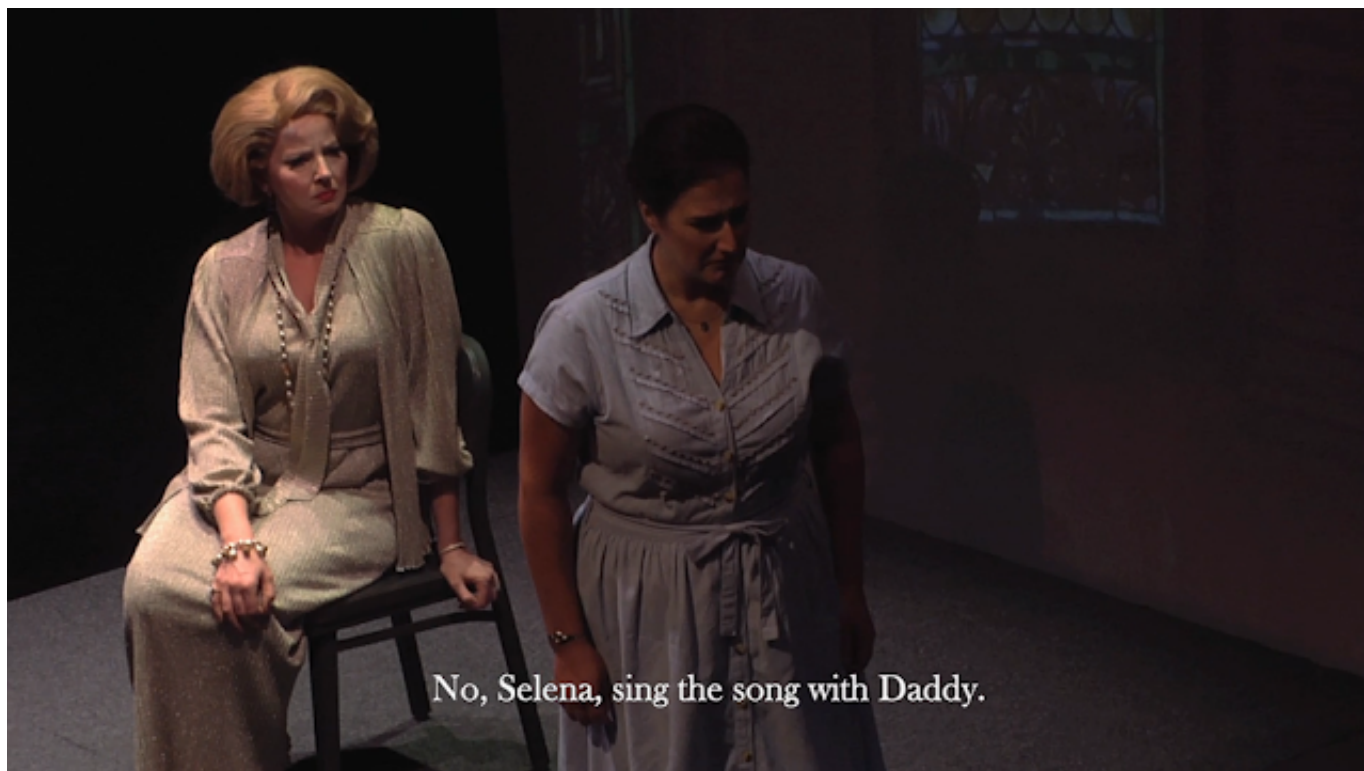




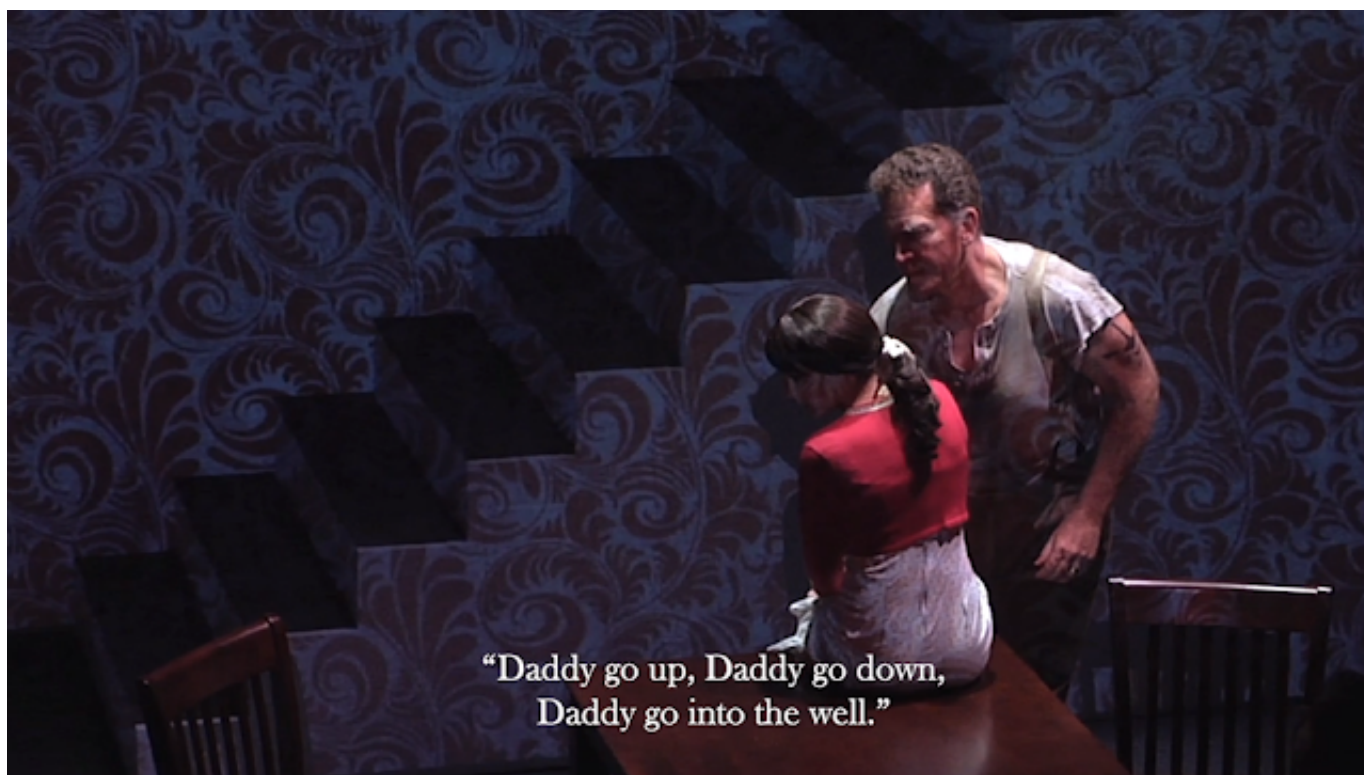
Sing with me, Selena. It's better
when we sing the little song together.



"Daddy go up, Daddy go down.
Daddy go into the well."



No, Selena, sing the song with Daddy.



“Daddy go up, Daddy go down,
Daddy go into the well.”





"Daddy be good, Daddy be gone,
Daddy go into the well."



Down and down and never tell.



Allow me to go wash my brain for a moment.



Dolores singing "Enjoy it, Joe; enjoy yourself" is haunting. You wouldn't think that from just looking at that screencap, probably, but it is. It's sung melodically. Many of the most melodic bits of the opera seem to represent the darkest emotional states: Joe's lullaby, for example. Here, Dolores is telling Joe to drink up because she wants him to be as drunk as possible; she needs him to be in order for her plan to work. This point might theoretically be lost upon people who have come to the opera without a familiarity of the novel or movie, but even so, that's how it's functioning. And Dolores rarely sounds happier than she sounds in that moment. It's chilling.



Expanding upon something Dolores has said to him about the eclipse viewer allowing them Joe to look at things he's not supposed to see, Joe sings, "I can look up the sky's skirt." It is telling that Joe connects seeing something he's not supposed to see with looking up someone's skirt.



The stage where this production took place is quite small, but it's more effective than I would have expected. There's no need for any of this to feel particularly realistic (opera is inherently fanciful, as is all theater), so the production can get away with what we're seeing here: the well is represented by a trapdoor on the stage that just stays open until such time as Joe goes into it.



The projections of the eclipse and a night sky are effective.



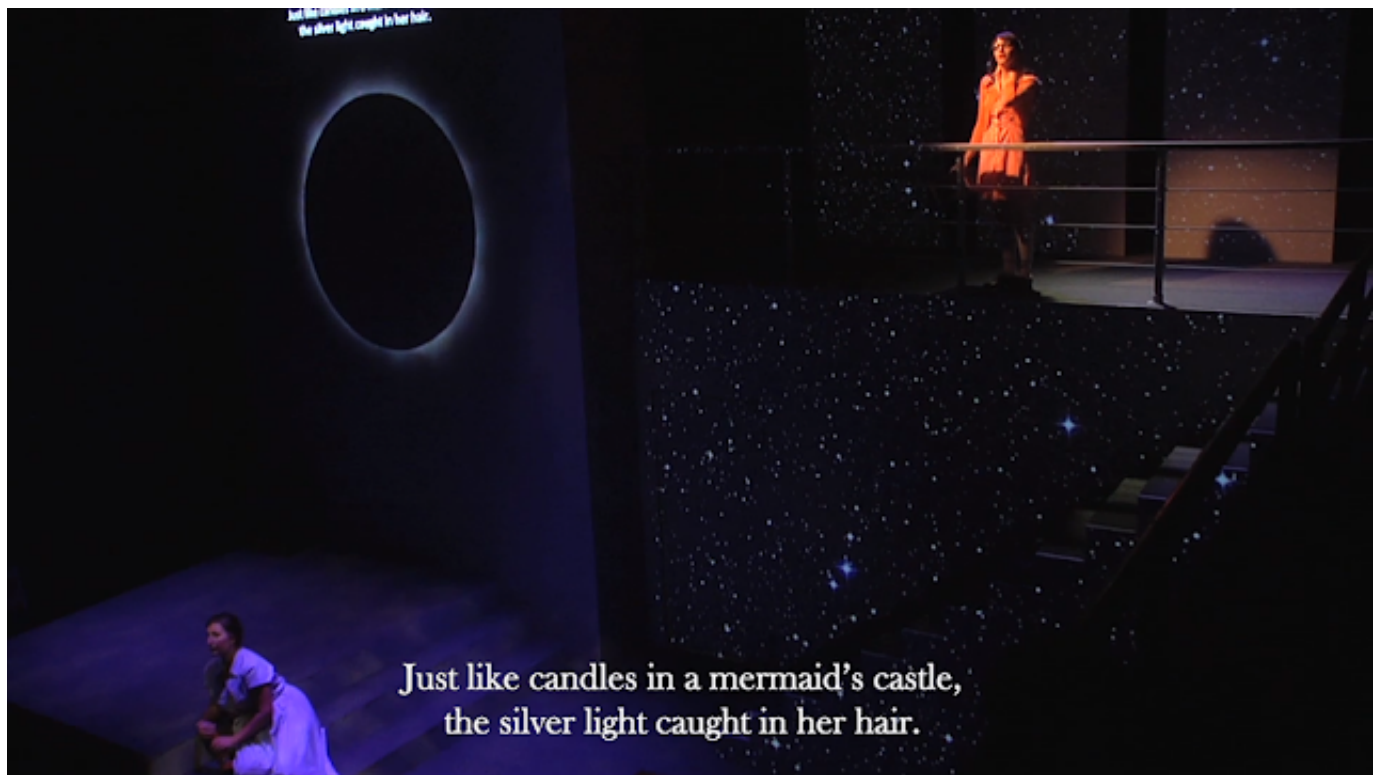
After Dolores pushes Joe into the well, she spitefully sings his perverted song to him. It's a very fine fuck-you moment.







"Something's not right," sings Selena. "Why is today tonight?" This linking of the seemingly unnaturalness of the eclipse with what has happened to Selena is effective. It also calls back thematically to the ferry scene, in which Dolores tells Selena about her father's myth of mermaids using reflected sunlight to build their castles. This aria of Selena's during the eclipse shows that she has remembered her mother's story, and that the magic of it is taking place in a different way right here in the real world as the stars come out during the day.



Just like candles in a mermaid's castle,
the silver light caught in her hair.

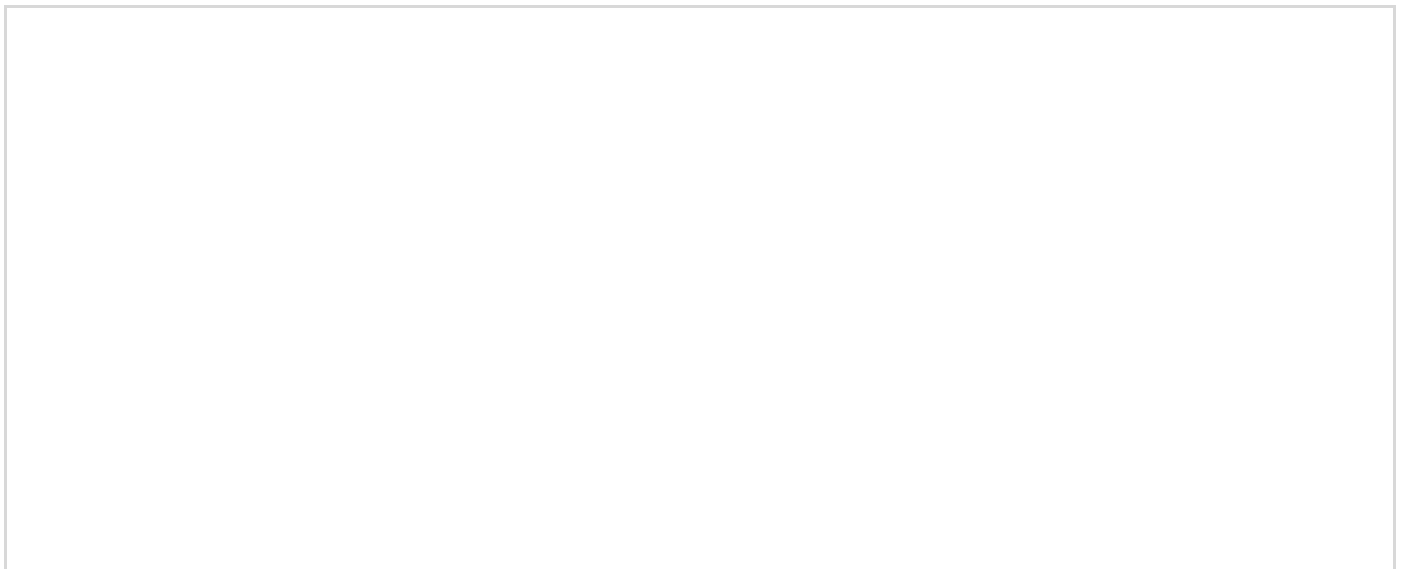


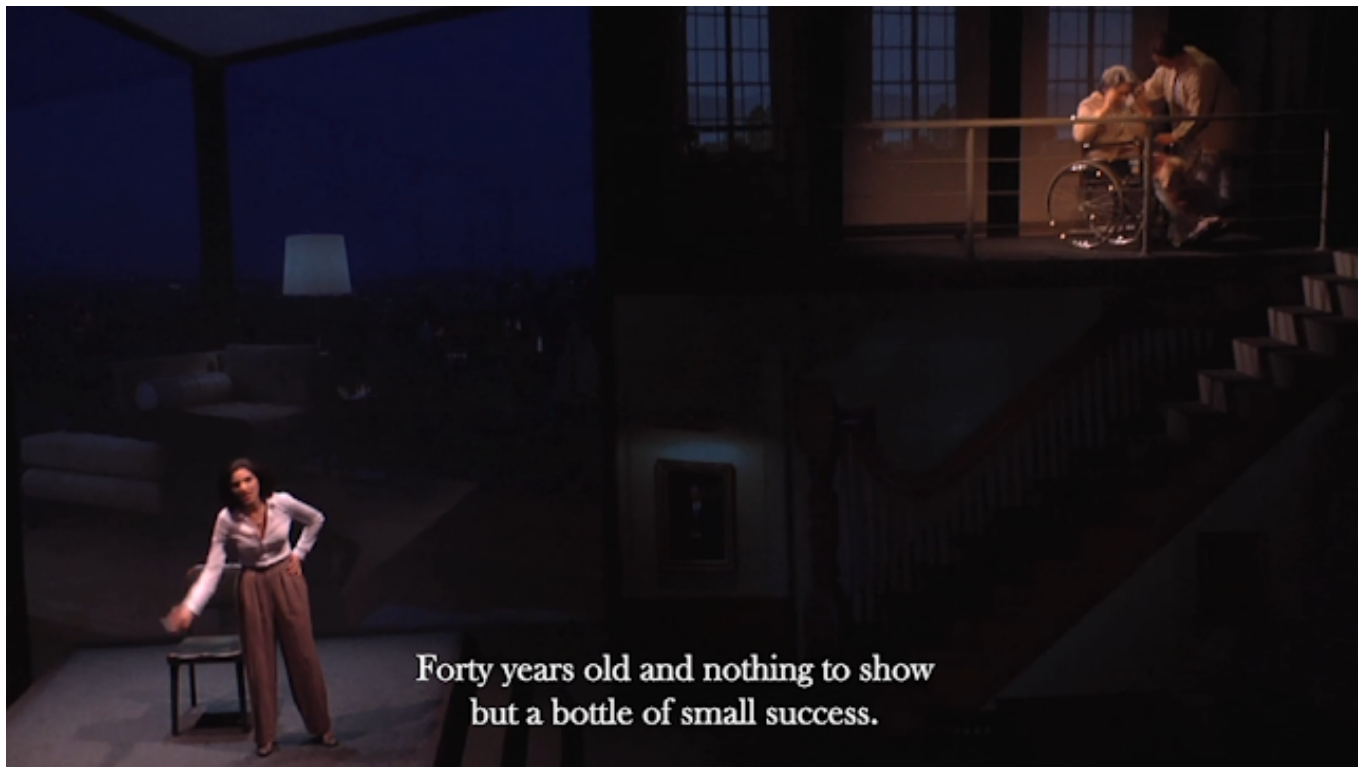
I have no future, only a past.
The years slip by, each one like the last.

This, obviously, is Vera in the nineties.



"I have no future, only a past," sings Vera. "The years slip by, each one like the last." This is one of the most melodic bits in the opera; rough, beautiful stuff. The musical theme these lines are set to will recur throughout the rest of the opera, and might be considered the major theme of the work. (You can hear that melody in [the trailer for the San Francisco production](#); that's it at the beginning, and until nearly the end.)





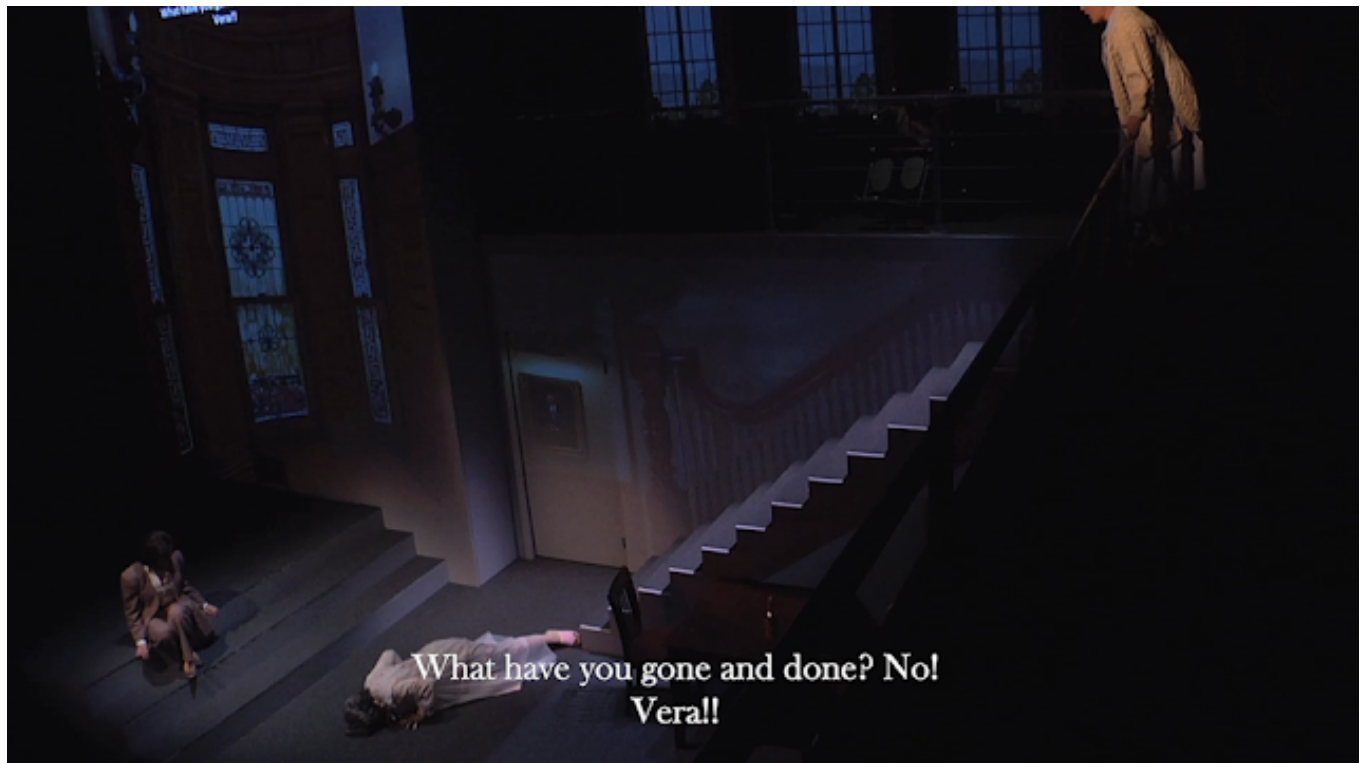
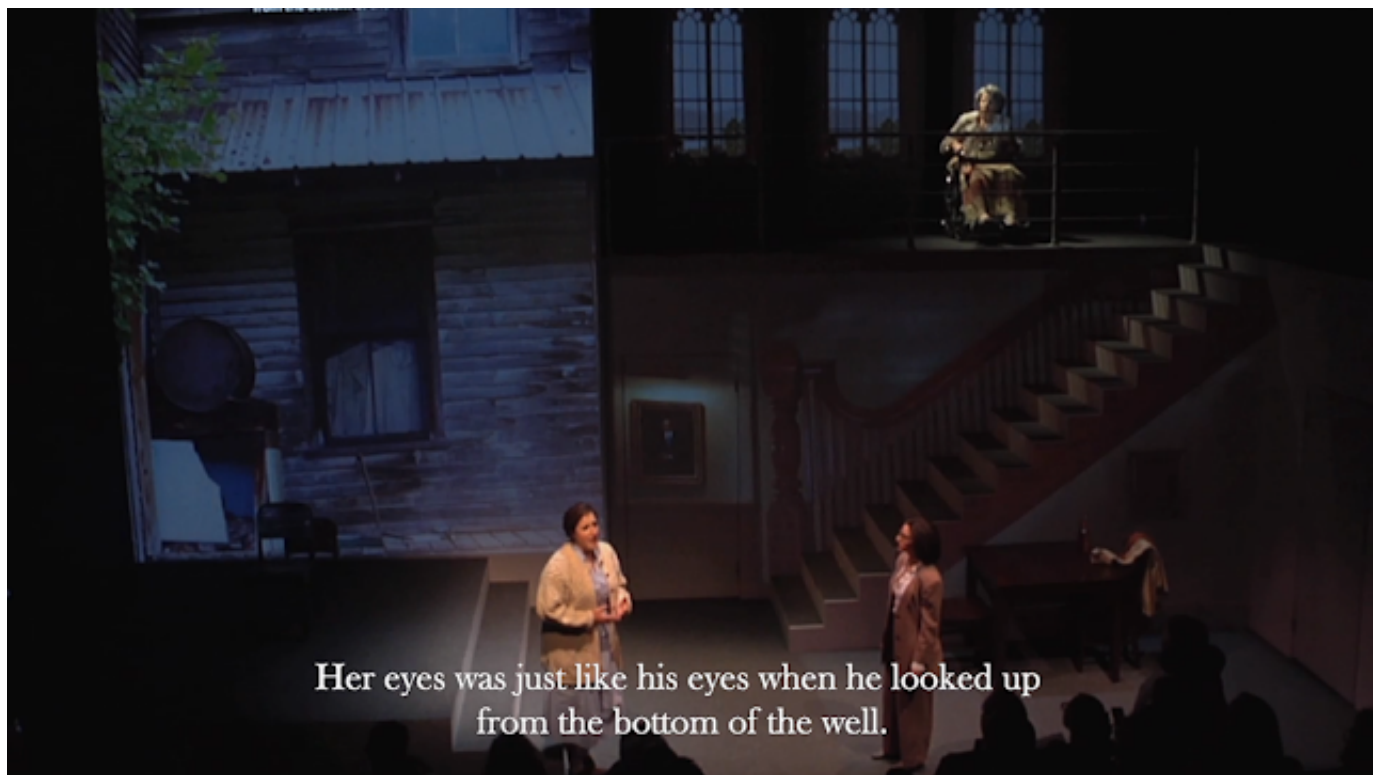
Honestly, same. Add six in my case.



Dolores was played (sung?) in this production by Lisa Chavez; Selena by Lianne Gennaco.



This screencap turned out rather well.



Vera's plunge down the stairs is accomplished by having the performer walk down the stairs. As staged here, it seems more as if she has had a heart attack than that she's fallen. Which arguably works, I guess! But certainly you can't inject a big stunt scene into a chamber opera, so this scene was always going to be a challenge.



The opera ends with Selena leaving, having told her mother off one final time. Dolores is alone, unsure as to whether anything she has done in her life has made much of a difference. "I did the best I could," she sings.

It's a subdued closing, but it's seemed stronger to me each time I've seen/heard it. What I take away from it is that the opera can be viewed as a collection of the most intense moments in these peoples' lives, and that even with high drama like this, a life is over so incredibly fast that it might make one's head spin. And yet, in contemplation of it, we sit alone on our own stage.

I'd argue that the opera veers into tragedy for its ultimate impact more than either the novel or the movie do. But this is a perfectly valid direction to go in adapting *Dolores Claiborne*, and I think this is a very good adaptation indeed. I only wish it were available for more people to see and hear!

For MY part, I found it to be quite enjoyable. I struggled with it at first,

partially because I was coming to a new medium, but also because my brain tends to just take a while processing music sometimes. I watched the video twice, and then listened to it without watching it another two times; then watched it a third while I took screencaps and notes. Each time I felt it sink in more; the effort I put in paid off at an increasing level with each pass I took.

That was in July; it's December now, and reading my way back through this to prepare it for publication, I found that the opera was still stuck right there in my brain. I can't remember what I had for lunch the day before, more often than not, so the fact that Picker's opera seems to have gotten embedded in there to some extent speaks pretty well for it.

I feel very, very lucky to have been given an opportunity to make that happen.

Anybody out there who's been lucky enough to see it in person? I'd love to hear your impressions of it, if you happen to be reading this. The existence of the opera is woefully underdiscussed within King-fandom circles. Let's see if we can do a bit to balance those scales!