

CULTUREBOX

The Singing

Behind the scenes as one of America's most innovative opera companies adapts a Stephen King (and Stanley Kubrick) classic.

By JAMES HUGHES

MAY 19, 2016 • 5:51 AM

 TWEET SHARE COMMENT



Stephen King at a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and New York Mets on June 28, 2006, at Fenway Park in Boston.

Jim Mclsaac/Getty Images

In April, Stephen King wrote an editorial for the *Boston Globe* lamenting the installation of safety netting at Fenway Park. A season-ticket holder since the days of Boggs, King has enjoyed his seats near the dugout without incident and isn't thrilled about the change. Although injuries are unfortunate, he acknowledged, it's the responsibility of the Fenway Faithful to protect themselves from foul balls slicing into the stands. Besides, that flicker of risk is something of a luxury in our "increasingly cosseted society." Even less likely, he wrote, is the chance of being struck by a baseball bat.

King is a master of makeshift weaponry, be it a possessed Plymouth in *Christine* or a novelist crushing a clinger with a Royal typewriter in *Misery*. A flying baseball bat, however, has a unique appeal. Cujo, for one, was tamed with a few swings. But perhaps the most memorable at-bat in King's canon remains the image of Wendy Torrance swatting back her crazed husband, Jack, in *The Shining*. When Wendy cracks his forehead, Jack tumbles down the stairs of the sinister Overlook Hotel, dropped by a signature Carl Yastrzemski.

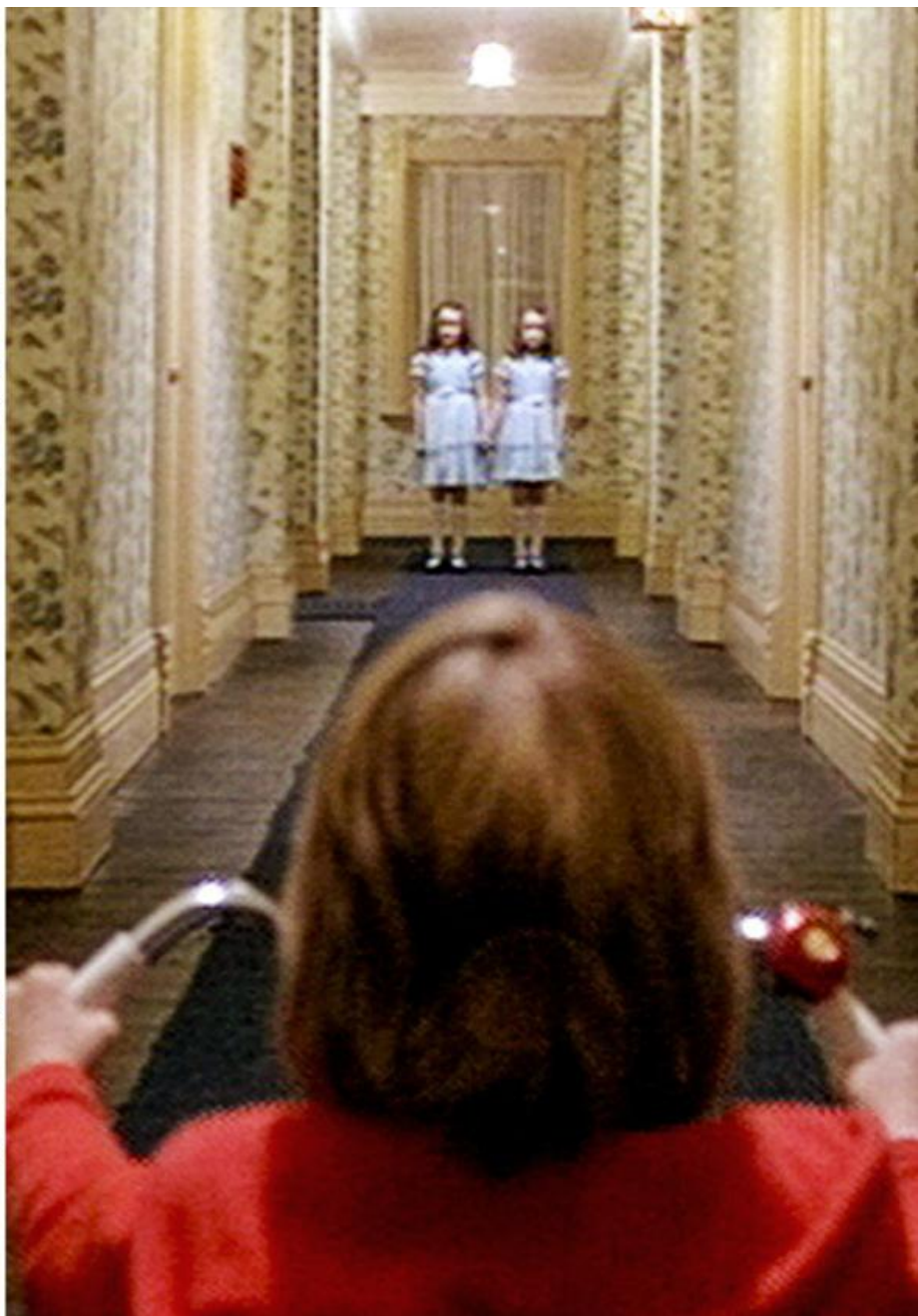
And yet, King never wrote this scene. In the novel, Wendy wields a wine bottle to protect herself, not a Yaz bat. King has long protested the alterations to his story in Stanley Kubrick's haunting adaptation, released to mixed reviews in 1980 (and rightfully gaining in stature ever since).

Decades after creating the Overlook, King is still reclaiming its occupants, whether through a 1997 television miniseries; a sequel, *Doctor Sleep*, published in 2013; and ample, and often amusing, public comments kicking sand at Kubrickphiles.

Theories and marginalia related to *The Shining* have become something of a cottage industry, as evidenced by *Room 237*, the 2012 documentary that plays more like a cry for help, in which fans analyze Kubrick's compositions down to the carpet fibers. The cult surrounding King's book remains equally secure. As recently as April, guests were spotting ghosts at the Stanley Hotel, the same Colorado complex where King was inspired to write the novel, the night he dreamt a fire hose was chasing his 3-year-old son through its hallways.

It's against this backdrop that the Minnesota Opera boldly enters the fray, having produced the first-ever opera based on *The Shining*, which had its world premiere on Saturday, May 7 at the Ordway Center for Performing Arts in St. Paul.* The production boasts two Pulitzer Prize-winners, librettist Mark Campbell and composer Paul Moravec, working in collaboration with stage director Eric Simonson at one of the country's most innovative opera companies. (*The Shining* concluded its successful run at the Ordway on Sunday night, with all five performances playing to

sold-out crowds.)



During conversations with the creative team throughout the year, leading up to the premiere, King loomed large. Speaking from his home in New York City last May, librettist Mark Campbell detailed the challenges of distilling King's 600-page novel down to a two-hour performance. Crucial elements abandoned in the film—the spectral presence of Jack's alcoholic father, for example—were restored. But some sequences, like the Torrances fending off a swarm of wasps, simply wouldn't translate to the stage. How would the author respond to omissions? The libretto was submitted to King's camp over a Thanksgiving break and, to Campbell's astonishment, approval arrived 24 hours later. King's quickness was invaluable. ("I would have rewritten a dozen times to make it work," Campbell said.) Conversely, securing the rights to the book had been so complicated that a joke began circulating to rename the production *The Signing*.

In April 2015, speaking from his home on the Upper West Side, composer Paul Moravec praised the operatic possibilities of King's novel. "One archetype I see in this story is a kind of Abraham and Isaac situation," he said. "Jack Torrance has two sets of instructions. One is to be a good father

and loving husband. The other is to obey orders from a higher authority to kill his son. That is an amazing situation to work with, thematically.”

Jack’s weapon of choice is a crucial component of the production. Days before the premiere, the prop master, Jenn Maatman, spoke about assembling his arsenal. “One of the big things about the movie that was wrong, as far as King is concerned, is that Jack used an ax,” she said. “In the book it was a croquet mallet. I think that’s really fabulous. You take this piece that’s a game, a toy, and it becomes a horrifically violent weapon.” Due to the sheer force applied by Brian Mulligan, the baritone who embodies Jack, mallets kept shattering throughout rehearsals, prompting Maatman to fortify them with steel pipes. Likewise, when Jack attacks a CB radio after the evil voice of his father hijacks the airwaves, the breakaway plastic radios Maatman had fashioned were obliterated. She quickly produced a stockpile of sturdier plastic molds for Mulligan to waste. “I like figuring out how to break things,” she laughed.





The movie's famous ax scene, below, as translated by the opera.

Ken Howard/Minnesota Opera and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

With less than six months before the premiere, a full-orchestra workshop was held in November at the Minnesota Opera Center, a former flour factory in the North Loop neighborhood of Minneapolis. During a tour of

the building, it was hard not to feel like Watson, the Overlook staffer who shadows Jack's initial survey of the hotel grounds. Even the Tupperware containers of wine corks and sealed boxes of confetti in the prop room looked ominous. While inspecting a room on the top floor lined with mannequins, which evoked the climax of Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss*, echoes of vocal warmups carried through the elevator shaft.

Down in the orchestra room, the actors and nearly 20 musicians settled into their seats. Alejandro Vega, the 10-year-old actor portraying Danny Torrance, was sitting on his hands, his black Chuck Taylors swaying without touching the floor. In the original libretto, Danny only spoke about 10 words, Campbell explained, though this had expanded considerably as the principles realized Vega's range. (They initially feared the opera singers would overpower him.) However, one crucial cut remained. The character of Tony, the imaginary boy who lives in Danny's mouth, was gone. The warnings, or "shines," Tony zaps Danny with would instead be performed by an all-female chorus, which explained the building's haunted elevator music.

Later that evening, Moravec addressed the assembled crowd. "Opera, for me, is about three things: love, death, and power," he said. "This story has all of those elements in spades. For all of its sophistication, in my view,

opera is really very simple, very primordial. I think the reason it speaks to us so deeply is that it deals with who we are on the most fundamental level. That's certainly what [King does]. He's dealing with rock-bottom, fundamental issues in a very high-voltage way."

Once the rehearsal began, it took a few minutes to settle into hearing King's dialogue converted into arias (and lines like "Did you remember the parking brake?" sung in recitative). However, with the arrival of bass Arthur Woodley as Dick Hallorann, the Overlook's cook—the character blanches when introduced as a chef—things began to fall into place. In one early scene, Hallorann, who shares Danny's gift of second sight, recognizes the need for a private tutorial, one that's decidedly low-key. "When the focus is on Danny, it makes sense, occasionally, to have the adults drop their stentorian, operatic voices and just talk to him," Moravec later recalled by phone. "It seems more natural."

The relative calm of the conversation between Dick and Danny lays the groundwork for a particularly powerful moment. To gauge his powers, Dick asks, "How hard can you hit? Give me a blast." In the novel, King likens the brain-bolt to a Nolan Ryan fastball; the opera goes even further. As Danny concentrates, the orchestra swirls into a shattering crescendo. The brass and strings play tremolo, the winds flutter-tongue. Hallorann

stumbles back, dodging the fastball. The chorus, which to that point had been hidden behind the orchestra, rises to their feet. Chaos ensues. King's inspiration for the term "shining"—John Lennon wailing "*We all shine on!*" at full volume in "Instant Karma!"—is eclipsed. For a moment, this converted flour mill was dredged in fear.

The bathtub scenes in opera and movie.

Ken Howard/Minnesota Opera and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

Months later, several ticketholders at the theater were on their feet, as well, as the premiere was a standing-room-only affair. During opening remarks, the president of the Minnesota Opera, Ryan Taylor, paused to acknowledge the passing of Prince, noting the global importance of the state's musical heritage. While the vault at Paisley Park remains a mystery, the haunted hallways of the Overlook were soon on full display, as a massive staircase and chandeliered lobby, designed in the neocolonial style of the Stanley Hotel, were rolled out on wagon platforms. The walls of the hotel were enhanced by elaborate digital projections, courtesy of 59 Productions, that sometimes suggested endless expanse, other times rot.

In stark contrast to the film, the opera focuses heavily on Jack's fascination with a scrapbook that chronicles the hotel's lurid, crime-ridden past, which he chances upon in the boiler room. Speaking by phone from Paris, novelist Diane Johnson, whom Kubrick hired to co-write the screenplay, recalled that Jack's discovery of the scrapbook was filmed, but

subsequently cut. “I thought it was an important scene,” she said. “There’s a point in the narrative where the hero does the wrong thing, and trouble ensues. In other words, he sells his soul for things to write about. He finds the scrapbook and agrees to its terms, as it were. He becomes the creature of the hotel from then on.” Johnson noted that the earliest stages of the screenwriting process consisted of cutting pages from a *Shining* paperback and filing usable scraps into envelopes divided by theme. She still uses the same scissors, ostensibly to King’s chagrin. First the shears, then the ax.

The opera goes to great lengths to visualize Jack’s scrapbooking habit. As he rattles off headlines documenting past indiscretions at the Overlook, silhouetted projections illustrate the gangland murders and sex scandals that now consume his thoughts. The effect is inventive, but somewhat sketchlike. The true payoff comes when the apparitions begin physically inhabiting the stage, converting Jack’s surroundings into a grotesque menagerie where even a cousin of the blowjob bear from the film is welcome. Great party, isn’t it?

While the production delivers on the “simulated nudity, gunshots, theatrical haze, and strobe effects” the placards throughout the lobby of the Ordway warned about, the most chilling moments are left to the

imagination, particularly when characters are dwarfed by nature. When the Torrance family first arrives, overlapping images of the Rocky Mountains are projected onto a spectacular 70-by-32-foot scrim at the front of the stage. The scrim returns for the epilogue, faithful to King's original ending, in which Wendy, Danny, and Dick recuperate at a lake in Maine. It's odd how these moments of tranquility inspire a certain bloodlust in the viewer. The audience is anticipating destruction from the start, but must first venture through a series of scenic postcards. Danny peacefully fishing on a dock inspires thoughts of one final splash, one final freakout, but it never arrives.

In Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows*, the 1974 novel that prompted Kubrick to hire her to adapt *The Shining*, Johnson writes of the shame of the "wayward human brain" when contemplating such "unbidden notions." In one scene, a wife watches her husband fishing along a Colorado riverbank and wonders what it'd be like to drown him in the turbulent stream. This "double-edged quality" to the outdoors, Johnson explained by phone from Paris, is perhaps why so many stories involve violence in the wilderness. Stuck in the middle of isolated natural beauty, city-dwellers can't shake a sense of menace.

As the premiere was drawing to a close, Danny remains seated on the

dock, staring down into an imaginary lake, his feet once again barely skimming the stage floor. After receiving reassurances from his telepathic friend that everything will be OK, the nightmares will stop, the lights dim, and the applause boomed.

Outside, young operagoers shared a cigarette and wondered if Stephen King had been in attendance. Officials at the Minnesota Opera insisted his appearance would have been stealth. Maybe a night at the opera isn't his kind of thing. Maybe all those scrimms with Maine landscapes projected onto them are like a ballgame behind a net. And besides, he'd already provided his blessing and encouraged an ambitious team to do their best work. Only time will tell. After this brief run, the company's hope is that the opera will travel to other cities, other shores. The sets and simulacrum of natural beauty that fit so well in St. Paul will soon be broken down and cataloged, ready to be transferred to the next caretaker.

***Correction, May 19, 2016:** *This article originally misidentified the Ordway Center for Performing Arts as the Ordway Theatre. ([Return.](#))*



Horror

Movies

Music

Opera