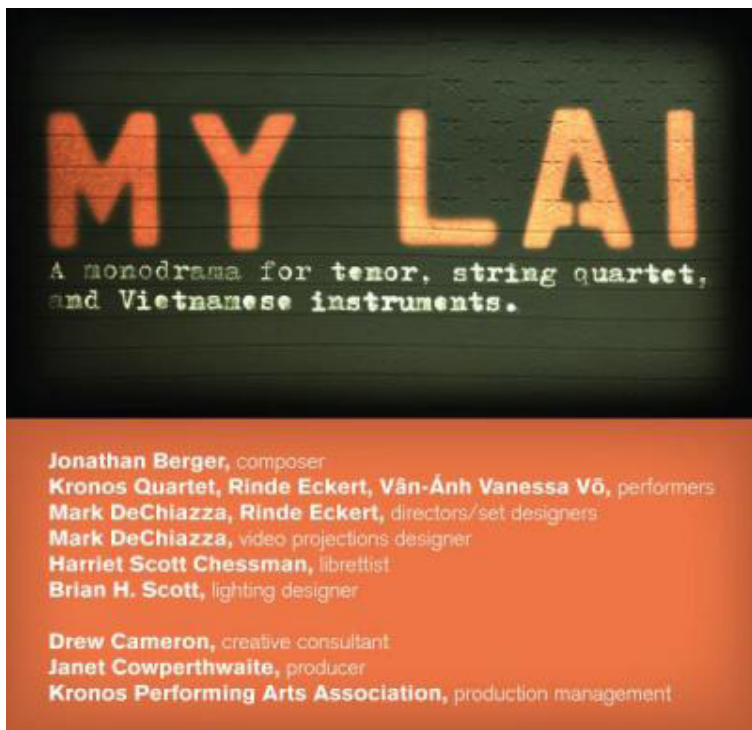


JONATHAN BERGER

## Excuse



**E**L *NORA ALILA*, a twelfth-century acrostic *piyut* by Moshe ibn Ezra, is recited at the start of the powerfully evocative *neila* service which closes Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. *Neila* (literally ‘the locking’ in Hebrew) affords the congregant and the congregation a final opportunity to own up to transgressions and seek repentance as the doors of heaven are closing and soon to be locked. In a vain attempt to resist the inevitable closing of the doors, the cantor begins the *neila* service, incanting:

Open the gates for us, as the gates are being closed.  
The day is passing.  
The day is setting.  
The sun will descend and set.  
Let us enter Your gates!

Hungry, thirsty, and weary from a full day at *shul*, the congregation rises and gathers a last collective burst of energy for one final, extended bout with our sins. It is a deeply spiritual experience. It's also great theater.

This coming Yom Kippur may be the first time in my recollection that I might miss the *neila* service. I've got an excuse. I think. Maybe. I'm debating with myself.

Should I indeed convince myself to miss it—which I will attempt to do in this blog—I will be forgoing the theater of *neila*, and instead be at BAM's Harvey Theater. What's worse, it will be to see a performance of my own opera, *My Lai*.

Here's the excuse I'm developing in a nutshell: Skipping out on services this year is okay because the show is a sort of *neila* service in its own right.

Set in a hospital room in which Hugh Thompson, a Vietnam veteran is surrendering to cancer in his final days, *My Lai* is the agonized and impassioned confessions of the one person who need not confess to the sins perpetrated on March 16, 1968, when Thompson—then a young Army reconnaissance helicopter pilot—witnessed the massacre of hundreds of innocent civilians at the hands of American soldiers in the village of My Lai.

Appalled by what he saw, Warrant Officer Thompson thrice lands his helicopter in vain attempts to stop the carnage. In a moment of blind rage, he ordered his crew to aim their machine guns at their own troops, and be ready to fire on them. Ultimately, he was able to pull a wounded child from his dead mother's grasp and flew him to safety. To save one life, the Talmud says, is to save the world. But Thompson doesn't buy it.

Following the massacre Thompson refused to remain silent. His accusations forced the military to conduct an inquiry. The subsequent trial turned out to be a mockery with only the lowest ranking officer involved receiving a minimal sentence. However, it shook the national conscience and the detailed reports and horrific photographs that emerged turned public opinion against the war.

Thompson was vilified as a disloyal outcast for much of his life. He never sought recognition for his deeds, and was only recognized with a medal of honor toward the end of his life. Thompson suffered a life of isolation and depression.

Rather than dwelling upon the unfathomable atrocities perpetrated

in *My Lai*, Harriet Chessman's beautiful and powerful libretto portrays a haunted and broken Hugh Thompson piecing together his fragmentary recollections of each of the three landings. He struggles with incomprehensibly brutal memories. He feels no pride, no heroism for interceding. Instead he is torn by a sense of loss. He feels guilt. Guilt at his failure to stop the killing. Guilt for forcing his teenage crew, Lawrence Colburn and Glenn Andreotta, into facing treason in a hellish bind. Guilt for not being able to do more than he did to stop the madness.

The hospital room becomes a sacred space in which Thompson confronts sins. Sins that he did not commit. Sins that he tried but failed to prevent. The room is not a confessional, and Thompson does not seek absolution. Rather, very much in the Jewish tradition, Thompson seeks *teshuva*, the Hebrew word for penitence that literally means "return." He struggles to confront the past, returning again and again. It is inescapable. "I am caught in this," he sings. "It will never be over. I will always be in it. Shouting at the captain. I'm still shouting."

*My Lai* is not a morality play. Thompson is not Everyman. Confession is not a guiding character. Thompson is confessing but this is not a tribunal. We are not here to judge but rather to join Thompson in seeking *teshuva*, confronting the sins of silence and indifference. The doors are open here—but they are closing. This is *neila*.

I honestly don't recall where, in the process of writing the piece, the metaphor of *neila* became central to me, although the metaphor of the closing door of atonement was there from the start. Thompson lands his helicopter in the midst of hell and screams in rage, "Open the door, open the fucking door." He tries in vain to divert his attention by grabbing a remote and turning on the television. But rather than distract, a "Let's Make a Deal"-type game show makes Thompson a contestant, forced to choose between doors behind which the nightmarish scenario of *My Lai* emerges.

The musical and dramatic structure of the opera is formed by Thompson's three landings in the midst of the carnage. Thompson's first landing is an unsuccessful attempt to reason with the commander of C Company and to call for medical assistance. After alighting, he reports the incident on his radio transmitter and is ordered not to intercede. However, he lands the helicopter again, ordering his crew to take aim at their American comrades. Unsuccessful, Thompson and his crew fly off in despair, returning a third time—this time to save

the few survivors, including the small child pulled from a ditch filled with corpses. In each landing, Thompson goes through the helicopter doors and faces the Doors of Heaven. Reality is countered by the twisted hallucinatory nightmares of being forced into choosing a fateful door. "Let's Make a Deal."

Isolated and approaching the end of his life, Thompson creates his own *neila* service. His doors are closing. He reflects, tortured, unsettled, feeling as if he has transgressed despite his deeply moral choices. The allegorical *neila* service finds its way into the music, drawing melodic fragments from Ibn Ezra's liturgical poem.

Last year, Thompson's then eighteen-year-old gunner, the late Lawrence Colburn, attended the premiere of *My Lai* in Chicago. Like Thompson, he was left scarred for life. He told me that he felt lucky to be in the helicopter with Thompson because he could not say what he would have done if he were on the ground that day with C Company.

*My Lai* joins Hugh Thompson in his soul-searching struggle. The audience is not there to vicariously experience it, but to participate in this *neila* service.

I might be at BAM, or I might go to shul.

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