

The Veil of Forgetfulness

A precedent-setting and promising opera by Susan Stoderl to debut at Church of the Holy Trinity Concert Series

By Jody Revenson

In a time when we have recently learned of well-known religious leaders revealing a questioning of their beliefs, a consequent question that needs to be asked would be: is questioning religion a function of doubt or a path to stronger compassion and faith? *"The Veil of Forgetfulness,"* a twenty-first-century mystical opera) by composer Susan Stoderl poses this subject matter but allows viewers to come to their own conclusion, or, perhaps, come to their own questions.

Set in Shaftesbury Abbey, *The Veil of Forgetfulness* is the story of Abbess Marie and her band of spiritual renegades who struggle against the stranglehold of the codified medieval church of twelfth-century England. This diverse group of women must rush to complete their own chosen purpose on Earth as well as the quest inherent in fulfilling the Legend of the Veil. A small scrap of this mystical Veil is bestowed upon one called to be the First Keeper of the Veil. It is her task to find and initiate six other worthy souls into its mysteries. Each of these six must have the gift of sight, and each must have independently sought and persisted on a spiritual path in spite of overwhelming obstacles. Their own particular trials have provided a task each has devoted themselves to in order to make the world better for humanity. As the legend states, the Veil of Forgetfulness is a gift from the Divine Creator, given to help those souls who labor for good and yet are called upon to suffer. The cloth imbues in its holder the bliss found in the Time Before God, the Divine Creator, a place some might call heaven. The holders of the cloth feel no pain, guilt, hatred, or remorse. This respite from life's trials enables them to pursue their task regardless of what life deals them. Once seven keepers are assembled, they may escape their worldly trials to transcend earthly life to the Time Before God. The Veil's length, which grows in proportion to their good deeds, will be left behind to ease mankind's way. The larger the Veil grows, the more humanity may be helped. However, there is a great responsibility to the Veil of Forgetfulness, because if the cloth falls into evil hands, it can be turned to evil. Those who lose the cloth will be forced to reincarnate many times before they are at last free. If the group does not remain intact before the seventh member is initiated, the cloth reverts to its original small fragment and the process must begin anew.

At the opera's start, the Abbess—secretly the famous poet Marie de France and the bastard sister of King Henry II—and the other Keepers must find and initiate a seventh member before they are denounced as heretics. Many of the characters are based upon those found in the writings of the real Marie de France. Sister Azenora, who was abandoned to the Abbey at birth, is an Illuminator in the Scriptorium and a confidant of the Abbess. Sister Brigid is the Copyist/Scribe who once had hundreds of men literally dying for her hand. The Nursing Sister, Margarete, of Cathar descent, was mystically presented with a shapeshifter lover after being long imprisoned by her husband. Sister Dympha, who has lost her mind, is a healer in the infirmary; and Deborah, an asylumed Jew who was a victim of the York Massacre that took her family and her wealth, now works as a cook. The potential seventh member, the very pregnant and close to death Countess Joan of Toulouse, is the sister of Richard I, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and niece of Abbess Marie. Marie's adversary, the "saintly" Sister Regina, Mistress of Novices, was once the mistress of King Henry II and believes the position of Abbess should be hers. By the end of the tale, as soldiers have been dispatched to arrest the seven on charges of heresy, Sister Regina comes to question whether it is perhaps *she* who is the heretic and *they* the saints.

"Faith is acceptance, says Ms. Stoderl, "but I also believe it involves questioning, for otherwise how does it grow? Questioning is not a lack of faith but rather its strengthening. Faith should not be confused with religion—faith is of the Divine, religion is of man. Without faith, how does one have hope, and without hope, how does one truly live life rather than just existing?"

Social, religious, and political hypocrisies and injustices seem to repeat endlessly through time, with all too few and brief surges of humanity in between them. Few individuals concern themselves with stopping or questioning this pattern, even when they are negatively affected. Ms. Stoderl draws a parallel between women of the past who have dared to question these issues as she (and others) question them in the present day. Though separated by centuries, the same concerns are still being posed.

As Sister Azenora sings: "True faith is a principle upon which many cast aspersions./And in fact, the road to finding it often has numerous diversions./Many might call paths such as these sinful, but is that always so,/when from some of these ill-conceived choices our spirit will grow?/True faith allows forgiveness of error along our path to the Divine./And through forgiving, it is True Faith we find."

Integral to opera is an ever-evolving art installation by Sarah Olson that mirrors the inner emotional life of each character and heightens the story as it unfolds. Not a prop, the art is a living, changing part of the drama. The prototype installation will be mixed-media projections cast on a scrim set behind the singers.

The Veil of Forgetfulness was invited to participate in the 2007 performances of the critically acclaimed concert series, "Music at Holy Trinity," Church of the Holy Trinity, 316 East 88th Street, New York, New York, 10128, and will offer performances on November 11 at 4:00 p.m. and November 13 at 8:00 p.m. A discussion of the art and ideas behind the production will take place at 7:15 on November 6. The all-female cast will be accompanied by flute, oboe, cello, synthesizer, and pipe organ.

Ms. Stoderl began composing at the age of fifty. "I believe that the passion and expressiveness of the human voice as found in opera can contribute significant insight into the human condition and aid in its transformation. Through my work, I would like to encourage as many people as possible to question, feel, and grow."

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About the Artists:



Susan Stoderl, a former singer, turned to composing at the age of fifty. *The Veil of Forgetfulness* is her second completed opera, the first being, "A.F.R.A.I.D." which premiered at the 2005 New York International Fringe Festival, followed by a ten-month run by Brooklyn Repertory Opera. Prior to that, her song cycle "Songs from a Jade Garden" was heard at the Lake Placid Center for the Performing Arts. She plans to finish her third opera in 2008–2009, "One Summer Day."



Sarah Olson, currently residing in New York City, received a fellowship for the creation of and participation in *The Divine Body: God, Gender, and the Diversity of Early Christianity* from Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, and The Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Other awards include a portrait commission and residency to research the setting of *The Veil of Forgetfulness* in Shaftesbury Abbey by The Stanley-Ware Family Foundation.

Jody Revenson is a writer and book editor for Disney Publishing Worldwide.