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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Veil of Forgetfulness

a 21st Century Mystical Opera in Two Acts

for eight women's voices, pipe organ, flute, oboe, cello and synthesizer

Story, Libretto and Music by Susan Stoderl

Art Installation by Sarah Olson

The Veil of Forgetfulness tells the story of Abbess Marie and her spiritual band of six renegades. The Abbess (who is secretly the famous poet, Marie de France, bastard sister of King Henry II and Keeper of the Veil) has been entrusted with fulfilling the Legend of the Veil. Like ivy clinging to its walls, the roots of the increasingly codified medieval Church, as represented by the character of Sister Regina, extend further and grow stronger each day. The six must find and initiate their seventh member before they are denounced as heretics. Set in medieval Shaftesbury Abbey, the work is specifically intended for performance in churches.

The Veil of Forgetfulness (words and music by Susan Stoderl) will receive two semi-staged concert readings as *part* of the 16th annual "Music at Holy Trinity" concert series, New York City, November 11 at 4:00 p.m. and November 13, at 8:00 p.m. (<http://www.holytrinity-nyc.org/arts/music/concert.shtml>). The eight women of the cast will be accompanied by a small chamber ensemble of flute, oboe, pipe organ, synthesizer and cello. The readings will be conducted by the composer. In a "Meet the Artists" forum, the ideas and concepts behind the work will be presented on November 7, at 7:15 p.m. All events take place at Church of the Holy Trinity, 316 E. 88th Street, New York, NY (located between 1st and 2nd Avenues). Tickets for the performances are \$20 general admission, \$15 Students and Seniors. Tickets are available at the door.

An art installation made specifically to enhance both the meaning and visual integrity of the opera will be created by artist Sarah Olson (<http://www.Sarah-Olson.com>). In addition to serving this reading, the installation will serve as a prototype for the eventual art installation/set design for the proposed fully-staged and orchestrated premiers in 2008-2009.

In concept, *The Veil of Forgetfulness* borrows from medieval mystery plays. The substance of the mystery plays was taken from the mass liturgy and performed in the interior of churches. Through them, there was a distinct call for the broadening of current thought.

Using a rich *harmonic* and rhythmic palette, *The Veil of Forgetfulness* is unique in several ways. Little modern opera has been written to be specifically performed in churches, nor has an opera made extensive use of the pipe organ as part of the orchestra. Few operas are written for an all female cast, as well as it is highly unusual to make opera multi-disciplined in nature, particularly on a small scale.

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Brief Synopsis

Set in *Shaftesbury Abbey*, *The Veil* tells the story of Abbess Marie and her band of six spiritual renegades who struggle against the stranglehold of the codified Medieval Church. The six Keepers of the Veil must find and initiate their seventh member before they are denounced as heretics. Abbess Marie, secretly the famous 12th century poet Marie de France, and bastard sister of King Henry II, is the First Keeper of the Veil. Her task is to fulfill the Legend of the Veil. If fulfilled, the prophecy will allow the seven Keepers to transcend earthly life and return to the Time Before God. All of the veil's length accumulated as a result of their good deeds will be left behind to ease mankind's way. If the prophecy is not fulfilled, the cloth returns to its original tiny square and the process begins again. If the cloth falls into the wrong hands, it can just as easily be used for evil purposes. If the seven do not fulfill the quest, not only will they be executed as heretics, but they will be trapped in a long cycle of reincarnations.

Scene-by-Scene Description

Act I, Scene 1: *Shaftesbury Abbey, 1199, Divine Hour of Prime.* Abbess Marie stands guard just inside the chapel as her band of spiritual heretics meet. The Sixth Keeper, Deborah, a Jew granted asylum by the Abbess, narrowly escapes through the back entrance as Regina enters by the front.

Act I, Scene 2: *Scriptorium next to the chapel.* Joan Plantagenet, Countess of Toulouse appears at the Abbey *requesting* asylum. In an advanced state of pregnancy, Joan was forced to flee in the midst of a full rebellion. She requests that she be allowed to take the veil upon the birth of her child. All sense that Joan is not long for this world. Moreover, she is the long-awaited seventh member of their group which will allow them to fulfill the Legend of the Veil. Sisters Brigid and Azenora rush in fearing that Dympha may reveal too much to Regina in her latest hallucinations. Regina, in yet another of one of her thinly veiled attacks, accuses Deborah and Dympha of poisoning the novices. When the fray has settled, the Abbess is left in reflection. She formulates a plan to keep Regina at bay long enough for the six Keepers

of the Veil to meet and initiate their seventh member before they are either exposed as heretics or Joan dies.

Act I, Scene 3: *The Chapel, later at None.* Outside the chapel, Regina stands at the door and sings of her ambitions and frustrations. She should have been made Abbess, and was not. Abbess Marie shelters both a nun of Cathar descent (Margarette) and a Jew (Deborah). If Abbess Marie and the others are removed, her way is cleared to become Abbess with all of its privileges. After Regina enters the chapel, Deborah, once a member of a well-to-do Jewish banking family, watches the falsely pious Regina. She questions whether her loyalty to the sisters is misplaced. Should she escape while she can? She has lost everything to the "Christians" before. What makes this any different? Abbess Marie formulates a plan to see that the legend is fulfilled. Dympha is known for tearing pages out of any book she is allowed to touch and turning them into nightingale wings. If she were to tear a few from the gift to the Abbey's richest patron, all of the Keepers would have an excuse to stay up throughout the night working in the Scriptorium. Regina would have to care for the sick in the infirmary by herself, thus clearing the way for their secret ceremonies.

Act II: *The Scriptorium after Compline.* Joan is brought into the Scriptorium. The Legend of the Veil is presented. In the shadows, Regina is spying. As the sisters proceed with their ceremony and their own life stories, Regina comes to see that she has severely misjudged all of them through her own pettiness and misery. As they proceed, she becomes more and more agitated, because the Archbishop's troops which she has summoned will arrive within the hour. After each tells her personal story to Joan, Regina realizes how wrong she has been about all of them and in her quest for power beyond all else. She interrupts the ceremony, begging each to listen to her. They must leave before they are killed. All quietly and kindly go about their business to finish the ceremony. Joan reaches to accept the veil, takes it, and then slowly sinks to the floor dead. As the six join in, their black veils slip to the floor, and underneath is one of iridescent blue. Regina overcome with emotion goes to the body. She takes the candle from the altar and places it at Joan's head and covers the body with the blue veil. While she is doing this, the others depart, their mission complete. The Abbess holds out an additional long length of the blue material to Regina as she too departs. As the opera closes, Regina is left alone in the center holding the blue veil.

Who Was Marie de France?

*Few know I am Marie of France,
Who writes of legends and romance.
From their towers and from their shroud,
Woman's whispers I tell aloud,*

Abbess Marie, Act I, Scene 1

The Norman poetess, Marie de France (ca 1135-1216), was famous for 15 *lais* (romantic tales of love set in octo-syllabic verse). Her human insight, as well as her well-known stature as a woman writer were quite unique at the time. Through these *lais* she helped expand such famous legends as King Arthur and Tristan and Iseult. Her stories

describe and comment upon what many women faced in their feminine roles during this time. Often this was quite contrary to Church teachings.

In addition the *lais*, Marie de France translated into French, *The Ysopet*, a collection of 103 fables originally translated from Latin into English by Henry Beauclerc.

Religious texts include *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick* and *The Life of St. Audrey*. The first tells of an Irish knight, who upon his descent into a cavern, witnesses both torment and happiness. The second work is a hagiographic text describing the life of Saint Audrey.

Exactly who the real Marie de France was is unknown. One theory, although not the most prevalent, is that she was Marie, Abbess of Shaftesbury. and/or the illegitimate sister of King Henry II.

The Characters / Cast / Bios

The characters found in *The Veil of Forgetfulness* have been inspired by the *lais* of the historical Marie de France (ca. 1136/7-1216). The stories have been altered to fit this story. The *lais* can be found in published book form and on the internet in Anglo-Norman French, in rhymed English, and in story form.

The exact identity of the historical Marie de France is unknown. The character of Abbess Marie is inspired by one of the lesser-favored theories of her actual identity. The real Abbess Mary of Shaftesbury lived until 1216 and became Abbess in 1189. For purposes of this story, the years were slightly altered and she is Marie de France.

SUSAN STODERL (composer/librettist), a native of Southwestern Kansas, has worn many musical hats in her evolution from singer to composer. From 1997-2001, she was the Executive and Music Director of what *The New Yorker* referred to as ... *that spunky little downtown opera company*, Opera Nova. She first began composing at the age of 50. Her first compositions were premiered in 2002 on a program entitled "Under Construction," featuring works in progress by women composers at the Pulse Ensemble Theater. As part of an all-American music concert, Ms. Stoderl's song cycle, *Songs from a Jade Garden*, was performed at Lake Placid Center for the Arts in 2004. In 2005, her opera *A.F.R.A.I.D.* was selected to premiere as one of two operatic offerings in The New York International Fringe Festival. Glenda Franks wrote for New York Theater-Wire (2005): Susan Stoderl possesses ... *considerable talent for the operatic and beautiful counterpoint choral pieces A.F.R.A.I.D.* was then expanded into two acts and continued in a ten-month run at Brooklyn Repertory Opera.



SARAH OLSON (art installation), was born in Riverfalls, Wisconsin, and is currently a visual artist residing in New York City. Ms. Olson received her Bachelors of Fine Arts in painting from the University of Colorado at Boulder.



Further study was done at Studio Art Centers International, Florence, Italy, and the Lacoste School of Fine Arts in France. She earned her Masters of Fine Arts in painting from the New York Academy of Art, New York, NY. In 2004, Ms. Olson 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, 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. Ms. Olson has been a guest lecturer on *Women in Biblical Tradition*, McMaster

University, Toronto; a guest lecturer at St. John University, New York; and panelist in Scope Art Fair, *Religion and Art*, Ethan Cohen Fine Art, New York.

STEPHEN FRASER (Organist) is a native of St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada and has completed degrees in music at the University of Toronto, the Eastman School of Music, and Yale University. He is particularly interested in the art of improvisation and composition and spent all of last year studying organ improvisation in Paris, France with organist Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin and composer/organist Thierry Escaich. Since September, Mr. Fraser has been Associate Director of Music and Director of the Children's Choir at The Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City.



The Cast

ABBESS MARIE: Illegitimate half-sister to King Henry II, Author – Marie de France, First Keeper of the Veil Abbess of Shaftesbury

Abigail Acero's (*November 13 performance*) roles include Desdemona, Elsa, Fiordiligi, First Lady, Priestess (Aida) and Freia. New York audiences recently heard her as Mimi in dell'Arte Opera Ensemble's *La Boheme* and as Fanny Fern in the Brooklyn Lyceum production of Susan Stoderl's, *AFRAID*. Ms. Acero has performed throughout the New York metropolitan area with Pacific Opera, the dell'Arte Opera Ensemble, DiCapo Opera, Pacific Opera, Amato Opera, Jerome Hines/Opera Music Theater International, the New York Cantata Singers and the Choral Symphony Society. A native of New Jersey, Ms. Acero received her B.A. in Spanish Language and Literature from Vassar College, where she minored in Music. She continued to study music privately in New York and Madrid while attending graduate school at Columbia University, where she completed her doctoral degree in History. She received additional musical training from Jerome Hines/OMTI, Pacific Opera, the Mannes College Wagner Theater Workshop and in master classes with Mirella Freni, Chuck Hudson and Deborah Birnbaum.



Lorene Phillips (*November 11 performance*) has performed with Syracuse Opera, Mohawk Valley Opera, Opera Nova, Opera New York, Brooklyn Repertory Opera and the Syracuse Civic Symphony. She has performed roles including Suor Angelica, Fiordiligi, Antonia, Lily in *The Secret Garden* and Dr. Charlotte in *Falsettos* to name a few. Ms. Phillips has combined her experience as a choral director and singer into preparing singers for roles and performances. She has over 8 years experience preparing students for auditions, performances and tours. Her students are professionals and pre-professionals, many of whom are members of SAG, AEA and AFTRA and perform both regionally and in New York City. As a conductor, Lorene made her professional conducting debut with the Hendrick's Chapel Choir and members of the Syracuse Symphony in the Schubert Mass in G. She has conducted and arranged music for the Marble Collegiate Church Children of the World Choir and performed at Town Hall, Avery Fisher Hall and Carnegie Hall with the choir. Her early opera conducting experience with Opera Nova includes the world premiere of Scarlatti's *Eraclea* as well as *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Most recently she has worked as the assistant conductor in Brooklyn Repertory Opera Company's production of Susan Stoderl's *A.F.R.A.I.D*



REGINA: Former Mistress of King Henry II, Head of Novices, Inspired by "Equitan"

Tracy Bidleman, soprano, has delighted audiences with her portrayals of such diverse characters as Fiordiligi in *Così fan Tutte*, the Mother in *Hansel and Gretel*, the Mother in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Alice Ford in *Falstaff* and Micaela in *Carmen*, to name a few. Ms. Bidleman has performed with the symphony orchestras in Seattle, Phoenix, Colorado, Colorado Springs, Wyoming and Harrisburg as well as the Boulder Philharmonic, the Martinu Philharmonic, the Pacific Northwest Chamber Orchestra and the Women's Philharmonic in San Francisco. Since her arrival to New York, she has sung as a soloist in Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall and Alice Tully Hall. She has worked with such esteemed conductors as Janos Acs, Jacques Delacote, Julius Rudel, Emerson Buckley, Anton Guadagno, Nan Washburn, JoAnn Faletta, Stuart Malina, David Lockington and Jack Herriman. She has been a regional winner in the Metropolitan Opera competition and a finalist in the San Francisco Opera competition. She received a MM from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a BM from Central Washington University. Of the many reviews she has had over the years, this is one of her favorites: "...soprano Tracy Bidleman was so stunningly cast as Phyllis that she nearly eclipsed all that shared the stage with her..." Wayne Johnson, Seattle Times Critic.

**BRIGID: Copyist/Scribe, Fifth Keeper of the Veil, Based Loosely Upon "Chaitivel"**

Elizabeth Munn (November 11 performance) recently appeared as Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* with New York Metro Arts Vocal Ensemble. She performed the roles of Belle Fortune and Rachel Sticher in Susan Stoderl's *A.F.R.A.I.D* at the Brooklyn Lyceum Theater. Her work as a concert soloist includes Handel's *Messiah* and *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, Faure's *Requiem*, the Schubert *Mass in G*, and the Vivaldi *Magnificat* and *Gloria*. Ms. Munn has been a performer in the *Composer/Librettist Studio*. Other performances range from Monteverdi to Reich, including appearances with the *Lyra Baroque Orchestra*, *Nautilus Music-Theater*, *St. Mark's Choral Society & Orchestra*, *North Star Opera*, *Theatrical Music Company*, *Capella*, *Virgin Ground*, *The Rose Ensemble*, *New and Slightly Used Dance*, *Orchestra Dancing in Your Head*, *Regina Opera* and *Empire Opera*.



Amanda White (November 13 performance) relocated to New York in 2004, after two years of performing and studying in Paris. A stage animal with a flair for contemporary music, White's musical performances run the gamut from opera to musical theatre to rock, and she has performed with such varied organizations as the *New York Grand Opera*, the *MIT Gilbert and Sullivan Players*, and the *Boston Rock Opera*. Recent performances have included the role of *Mary Lee* in the Stoderl's opera *A.F.R.A.I.D.* with the *Brooklyn Repertory Opera*, the *Queen of the Night* in concert with the *New York Chamber Players*, *La Charmeuse* in *Thais* with *Amici Opera*, and a solo recital entitled *La Diva de l'Empire*, featuring music of Prokofiev, Ravel, Rossini, and Satie. Upcoming performances include *Zerbinetta* in *Ariadne auf Naxos* with the *Brooklyn Repertory Opera*, *Luigia* in *Viva la Mamma* with *Amici Opera*, and a solo recital entitled *Mozart Bonus Features: Extras, Deleted Scenes, and Bloopers*. White is also a writer for *Classical Singer Magazine*. Amanda White holds a BM in *Vocal Performance with an Emphasis in Opera* from *The Boston Conservatory*, having graduated *Magna cum Laude*. Her popular and entertaining website can be accessed at www.notjustanotherprettyvoice.com.

**DYMPHA: Seer, Healer, Mentally Unstable, Third Keeper of the Veil, Loosely Based Upon "Laustic"**

Ilya Speranza is a graduate of *The New England Conservatory* and *The Juilliard School*. At home in both *Opera* and *Concert*, she appeared in the world premiere of *Robert Kapilow's New Moon* with the *New Jersey State Opera* in which she sang the role of the "Royal Mathematician" and "Barbara de la Guerra" in *Victor Herbert's* only opera, *Natoma* at the *White Barn Theater* in *Westport, CT*. Ms. Speranza created the title role of "Ondine" in *Seymour Barab's* new opera *Ondine* for the *Center for Contemporary Opera* and sang "Marenka" in *Smetana's Bartered Bride* with *The State Repertory Opera of New Jersey*. She sang in the world premiere of *Anthony Davis' Tania* with the *American Music Theater Festival* in *Philadelphia* and toured with the *New York City Opera National Company* as "Frasquita" in *Bizet's Carmen*. Other regional appearances include "Liu" (*Turandot*) and "Frasquita", both with the *Cincinnati Opera*, "Elisetta" (*Il Matrimonio Segreto*) with *Berkshire Opera* and "Naiade" (*Ariadne auf Naxos*) with *Long Beach Opera*. She has appeared as a featured soloist with the



Lake Charles and Alexandria Symphony Orchestras, the Summit Symphony, the Bronx Arts Ensemble, Bucks County Symphony and Brookhaven Choral Society. Her most recent performances include a recital of American and German music at the Baroque Concert Hall in Vienna's Altes Rauthaus and the world premiere of a new American Opera, "A.F.R.A.I.D." at the New York Fringe Festival.

JOAN: Daughter of King Henry and Eleanor, Niece of Marie, Wife of Raymond VI of Toulouse, Seventh Keeper of the Veil

Nicole Pantos collaborates regularly with composers to perform opera, chamber and recital programs. She has appeared in concert in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and in all time zones of the continental US. Her voice has been heard in a variety of venues: by millions at the Christmas Tree Lighting in Rockefeller Center, the Korean Embassy in Washington, DC, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Carnegie Hall, on WQXR, to the famed Nikolaikirche in Wismar, Germany. She recently performed a recital of new music, premiering Sarah Dawson's song cycle Reflections on Motherhood, at the Nicholas Roerich Museum. Other recent solo engagements include Mendelssohn's Elijah with the Flemington Chancel and the world premiere of the opera A.F.R.A.I.D. by Susan Stoderl at the Soho Playhouse in NYC as part of the NY Fringe Festival. Ms. Pantos will perform Roberta Picket's jazzy setting of Five Poems by Nabokov in Cornelia Street's "Schizoid Music" series presented by Frank Oteri of the American Music Center. She will also perform a recital in Women's Work at the Renee Wailer Concert Hall, a concert series devoted to presenting the new music of living female composers. At this venue, Ms. Pantos will premiere NYC composer Joyce Hope Suskind's "War and Peace" and Korean composer Hyo-Shin Na's "Song to be Forgotten." Ms. Pantos has performed the operatic roles of Zerlina, Musetta, Mimi, Gretel, Pamina, and Manon (Massenet). She has been formally trained as a concert pianist, harpist, and flutist, and Ms. Pantos holds degrees from Princeton University and Manhattan School of Music.



DEBORAH: Jew given asylum after the Massacre of York, Cook, Sixth Keeper of the Veil

Tracey Adele Cooper has sung with Ithaca Opera, Virginia Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, New Jersey Verismo Opera, Manhattan School of Music, Natchez Opera, Harlem Opera, Danbury Opera, Norwalk Opera, and the Bregenzer Festspiel (Bregenz, Austria), among others. Ms. Cooper, whose voice has been described by renowned coach/accompanist Dalton Baldwin as a "diamond" has sung the title roles of Aida, Adriana Lecouvreur, Alcina and Tosca, as well as Santuzza (*Cavalleria Rusticana*), Fiordiligi (*Così fan tutte*), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*), Leonora (*Il Trovatore*), Amelia (*Un Ballo in Maschera*), Ortrud (*Lohengrin*), Maddalena (*Andrea Chenier*), Venus (*Tannhäuser*), Sieglinde (*Die Walküre*) and Baba (*The Medium*). Ms. Cooper was hailed as Donna Anna with Cartersville Opera's *Don Giovanni*, in which performance a reviewer described her as a singer with "...a voice of power and beauty... a true young dramatic" and praised her singing as possessing "marvelous flexibility." Recent performances for the dramatic soprano have included solo recitals in New York City, San Francisco, a sold out recital at Williamsburg, Virginia's historic Kimball Theater; Liza Dulin in Brooklyn Repertory Opera's *A.F.R.A.I.D.*; and Gerhilde (Sieglinde cover) with New Jersey Concert Opera's *Die Walküre*. Ms. Cooper will next be heard in recitals in San Francisco and New York City and Eboli in *Don Carlo*.



AZENORA: Illuminator, Confidant of Abbess Marie, Second Keeper of the Veil, Loosely Based Upon "Le Fresne"

Barrett Cobb has performed as soloist with the National Chorale, the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, the Sine Nomine Singers and Baroque Orchestra, the Orchester des Landesteater Dessau, and the AIMS Orchestra. She has performed the roles of Azucena in *Il Trovatore*, Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*, Enrichetta in *I Puritani*, Gertrude in *Romeo et Juliette*, Mrs. Trapes in *The Beggar's Opera*, among others. She is the alto soloist on the Sine Nomine Singers' recording of Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, on the Newport Classic label. She holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the Oberlin Conservatory and a Master of Musical Arts degree from Yale University. Originally from Nashville, Ms. Cobb began her musical career as a flutist. She has performed concerti with orchestras in New York, New Jersey, Tennessee, North Carolina, Hanover (Germany), and Bogota (Colombia.)



MARGARETTE: Nursing Sister, Fourth Keeper of the Veil, Based Loosely upon "Yonac"

Christine Reimer has brought her versatile mezzo-soprano voice to a wide variety of venues. She made her international debut in Ireland as Madame Dufresne in the Wexford Opera Company's production of Leoncavallo's *Zaza*. She has also appeared as a featured soloist in Graz, Austria with the Graz Festival Orchestra and spent 3 months performing in Interlaken, Switzerland as a soloist in a Broadway review. Here in the U.S., she has performed with The Buffalo Philharmonic, Marin Opera, Oakland Opera, Opera Northeast, Liederkrantz Opera, Regina Opera, and the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players singing Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel*, Dorabella in *Così fan Tutte*, Cherubino in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Prince Orlofsky in *Die Fledermaus*, Maddalena in *Rigoletto*, Siebel in *Faust*, Melissa in *Princess Ida*, and the title role in *Carmen*. Her most recent project was performing the role of Luna Simon in Brooklyn Repertory Opera's production of *A.F.R.A.I.D.* Having earned a Bachelor of Music Degree in piano performance from San Francisco State University, Ms. Reimer continues to work as coach/accompanist as well as a voice teacher. She is currently on the faculty at New York University, The Steinhardt School as a private voice teacher and a coach.

