

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

War Music

ADAPTED AND DIRECTED BY LILLIAN GROAG
BASED ON THE BOOK BY CHRISTOPHER LOGUE
CHOREOGRAPHY BY DANIEL PELZIG
MUSIC COMPOSED BY JOHN GLOVER
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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“THE SEA IS ALWAYS COUNTING”

An Interview with Composer John Glover

BY DEBORAH MUNRO

Although writing and visual images inundate today’s society, *War Music* recalls the oral tradition of Homer’s time. Its robust language and musical metaphors present a rare challenge to modern audiences, insisting that they value sound and sight on an equal basis. The story is not complete without its soundscape of music and spoken poetry, which makes the job of composer John Glover a complex undertaking: he is not just scoring a script but rather creating a musical language that threads together events, characters, and themes.

Trained as a classical composer, Glover is an emerging voice in contemporary music. He primarily writes concert music and his work is heavily influenced by classical and contemporary literature, from a cello solo inspired by *Salomé* to an orchestra work based on Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* and chamber music that incorporates the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Frank O’Hara, and e. e. cummings. The recent recipient of a master’s degree in composition from University of Southern California, he is also a freelance writer, a dramaturg, and the operations manager for the American Composers Orchestra.

Glover began collaborating with adaptor/director Lillian Groag on *War Music* more than two years ago and has since been part of the project’s development through multiple workshops in A.C.T.’s First Look new works program. Shortly before rehearsals for the premiere production of *War Music* began at A.C.T., he spoke to us about his musical inspiration and the process of developing an ambitious piece that fuses music, drama, language, and movement into a contemporary interpretation of one of Western civilization’s most beloved classical texts.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN *WAR MUSIC*?

In straight theater, music is usually incidental. It’s for set changes, scene changes, and a little bit of underscoring, but it’s not intrinsic to the fabric of the work. *War Music* is unique in that music plays a fundamentally important role in the piece. Of course, Christopher Logue tells us that. The word “music” is half of the title of his book, so obviously the aural aspect of sound to convey story and characters is very important to him.

[Director Lillian Groag] is a brilliant musical mind as well as a theatrical one. We met six years ago when she was directing Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West* at Glimmerglass and I was singing in the chorus. Opera singers often spend so much time memorizing notes

and learning the score that the meaning of the words gets lost, but Lillian challenged us to work with both the music and the text. She seemed to get the whole scope of the piece: the sound of things and the theater of things. That struck me. Since then, we've done a few collaborations, usually working with incidental music. When we were doing *The Imaginary Invalid* [in 2006], she dropped this book into my lap called *War Music*. She said, "I think this is amazing. I think it needs to be onstage. There's music in it and I don't know exactly what that means, but I think that you're the right person for it."

I read it in a night. The *Iliad* has always been a favorite of mine, and Christopher Logue comes back to the heart of what it's all about: the sound. This story was originally told orally and Logue's text really reflects that—it demands to be read out loud, which is why Lillian wanted it onstage. And not only are the rhythms important, but Logue actually conjures sound with the words he uses. He talks about the sound of the ocean. He talks about the chiming of Achilles' armor and the sound of the moonlight reflecting off the sand. At one point, he actually references the first downbeat of a massive classical orchestra conducted by Solti. When I finished the book, I went back to Lillian and said, "There's music everywhere in this story, it's *begging* to be there." That started the journey of Lillian developing a piece where music would play a front role in the drama.

But it's a tough balance. Lillian wanted to get back to the classical ideal of Greek theater in which music, drama, and movement were completely integrated and played at an equal level. Actors chanted and sang; they played drums and other instruments onstage. We can barely come to grips with how it must have sounded, especially because today it's rare to have all the elements play at the same level in a theatrical space. *War Music* is a unique challenge in that way. The music is not incidental. It's playing a much bigger role in the piece, but of course it's not more important than the words or the visuals. That turns all of our jobs—the composer, the director, the choreographer, and the designers—into a delicate balancing act.

HOW DID YOU ACHIEVE THAT BALANCE IN COLLABORATING WITH LILLIAN AND CHOREOGRAPHER DANNY PELZIG?

I was involved right from the beginning of the process, which is not at all common. I lived in Los Angeles when the project started, actually on the same block as Lillian. As she was crafting the script, she would come to me with requests about the music, which opened up the possibility for me to bounce back ideas to her. We talked a lot about what the instrumentation might be and how we might do it. She'd say: "I think we need leitmotifs. We need musical imprints for these characters, much the way Wagner does in the *Ring* cycle,

OPPOSITE Page from John Glover's original score for *War Music*