



You are here: [Home](#) / [Opera](#) / Opera review: Visionary 'Field' Provides Artistry to Savor

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Opera review: Visionary 'Field' Provides Artistry to Savor

11/09/2012 by [Evans Donnell](#) (Edit)



"It is not the business of this narrative to answer that question," a magistrate investigating the disappearance of an antebellum plantation owner tells a witness at one point in David Lang and Mac Wellman's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

Intriguingly, it is not the business of the 2002 opera-play to answer any questions but to ask them. The audience decides whether to come up with answers or simply marvel at the journey. In the visionary hands of



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RANDOM STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES

**Film Review: Captivating
and Suspenseful 'Closer to
God' Cuts to the Marrow**

By [Evans Donnell](#)

Artistic Director John Hoomes and Nashville Opera the freedom to do both is entertainingly encouraged.



Ambrose Bierce ("An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge") wrote a very short story that inspired the hybrid work. Lang (who won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for *The Little Match Girl Passion* and has just been named composer of the year by Musical America) fashioned the score to a libretto by Wellman (an Obie Lifetime Achievement Award winner among other honors for such works as *Sincerity Forever*, *Bad Penny* and *Crowbar*), who has often crafted fascinating pieces freed from traditional rules of language and structure.

On the surface there's a *Twilight Zone*-ish horror/mystery tale where Mr. Williamson vanishes while walking across an open field outside Selma, Ala., in 1854. His disappearance occurs in full view of family, neighbors and slaves; all have different reactions to the event, and different explanations regarding what happened and why.



"When younger...I believed myself destined for some great enterprise. My feelings are profound, but I possessed a coolness of judgment that fitted me for illustrious achievements. This sentiment of the worth of my nature supported me when others would have been oppressed, for I deemed it criminal to throw away in useless grief those talents [...]"

Music Review: Alias springs into action with three world premieres

By [John Pitcher](#)

Alias Chamber Ensemble is in the mood for love. Judging from its terrific spring concert on Wednesday night at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music, the group is also in the groove. Nashville's adventurous chamber group premiered no fewer than three new works during its two-and-a-half hour performance at Turner Recital Hall. That's likely a [...]

Luhmann v. Fitzgerald, or There Oughta Be a Law

By [Clyde Fitch Report](#)

We interrupt this theater-oriented column to talk about a book and a movie. At first, you'd think they're the same: The Great Gatsby. They're not. They're F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece, The Great Gatsby, and Baz Luhrmann's anti-masterpiece, The Great Gatsby, wherein he treats the April 10, 1925, novel as if it were the blueprint for a bungalow that [...]

Opera review: 'Madame Butterfly' Soars On Beautiful Wings

By [Evans Donnell](#)

Nashville Opera has a beautiful Madame Butterfly on display this week in Jackson Hall. If you've watched it before, you'll appreciate how vibrant this new version is; if it's your first time, you'll get a shimmering introduction to one of the opera world's greatest hits. As seen at Tuesday's final dress rehearsal General and Artistic [...]

Alex Useted is New Nashville Children's Theatre Tech Director

By [ArtsNash](#)

Nashville Children's Theatre (NCT), the nation's oldest professional theater for young audiences, is pleased to announce the addition of Technical Director Alex Useted. Useted brings extensive

The story isn't chronological, bouncing back and forth between moments that occur before, during and after Williamson's apparent departure from this life. There's also the clash between the dying order and hints of the post-slavery world that will soon be born; such elements add more layers to the *Field* puzzle-box.

The lead performances in this hybrid piece come from a mixture of well-regarded opera singers – mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera as Mrs. Williamson, soprano Rebecca Sjöwall as the Williamsons' daughter and tenor Robert Anthony Mack as the house slave Boy Sam – and two of the region's top actors. Those actors play two parts each: Brian Russell is Mr. Williamson and a magistrate who holds an inquest about his disappearance, and Eric Pasto-Crosby is Williamson's neighbor Armour Wren as well as Williamson's overseer and brother Andrew.



ALIAS Chamber Ensemble provides a quartet – Zeneba Bowers and Alison Gooding on violins, Matt Walker on cello and Chris Farrell on viola – to play Lang's score conducted by Dean Williamson (the accompaniment by Amy Tate Williams that helped singers and actors prepare for final rehearsals and upcoming performances should be noted as well). My **ArtsNash** colleague John Pitcher will have more to say about this production's music on Saturday, so for now let me say their beautiful work reinforces and often spurs the action on the raised platform in Noah Liff Opera Center's upstairs studio

space.

Working on that platform (as well as a step-ladder that allows Rivera's face to appear above a hanging depiction of the Williamson home) the aforementioned performers give finely-etched performances. Rivera makes her character's descent into madness palpable, with her real-life pregnancy enhancing the poignancy and tragedy of her plight; Sjöwall's girl-woman is a somewhat wild creature who seems more in touch with another world; and Mack adroitly acknowledges his character's caught-in-the-middle existence as he struggles between his loyalties to the Williamsons and his fellow slaves.

Pasto-Crosby makes clear distinctions between the awkward and kindly Wren and the arrogant and cruel Andrew; Russell's Williamson is a man whose confusion and consternation as his well-ordered life becomes a nightmare is visible on his body and clearly heard in his voice; his magistrate is a person whose by-the-book mind and manner are ill-equipped to handle the mystery that comes before him.

Members of the Nashville Opera Ensemble – including Sonya Sardon as the slave Virginia Creeper, Jennifer Whitcomb-Oliva as the Old Woman, Bakari King and Brooke Leigh Davis along with Charles E. Charlton, Byron K. Harvey II, Dave Ragland and



experience from Chicago's theaters to Nashville. "Alex absolutely has the chops, and is going to be a great fit," says NCT Artistic Director Scot Copeland. "We've been fortunate to [...]"

Music Review: Blair String Quartet brings the Christian Teal era to a close with a breathtaking 'Grosse Fuga'

By **John Pitcher**

There are many things you probably don't know about violinist Christian Teal. For instance, "he's worked [at the Blair School of Music] for more than 40 years," said Blair String Quartet violist John Kochanowski on Saturday night at Ingram Hall. As soon as Kochanowski finished his thought, Teal dropped his score on the stage floor, [...]

Review: High Museum mixes passion, politics and myth with 'Frida and Diego' show

By **ArtsATL**

Frida Kahlo's "Self-Portrait as Tehuana Diego in My Thoughts" (1943), oil on masonite, from the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of Mexican Art. Two of the most important Mexican artists of the 20th century take center stage in Atlanta with "Frida and Diego: Passion, Politics, and Painting," on view through May 12 at the High Museum of [...]

Dance Theatre of Tennessee: Up close and confidential

By **John Pitcher**

Dance Theatre of Tennessee takes its mission of bringing ballet to the people seriously. For its upcoming third season, the company and its artistic director Christopher Mohnani are introducing a new series called "Ballet in the Park," which will deliver top-notch professional ballet to the masses for free. Of course, no worthwhile endeavor is completely [...]

Theater review: '12 Angry Men' Another Studio Tenn Triumph

By **Evans Donnell**

FRANKLIN, Tenn. – One of the toughest challenges for performing artists is to make us look at something we think we know well in a new way. Studio Tenn Theatre Company does just that with its gripping rendition of *Twelve Angry Men*.

Dionne Marie Simpson – sing and act their roles so convincingly that you may, among other things, find yourself believing in the voodoo their characters may have used to send Williamson away.

Barry Steele's lighting is superb; he offers everything from yellowish beams of moonlight to a hellish red as Prince Zandor's dark magic apparently takes hold. Pam Lisenby's costumes and Sondra Nottingham's wigs/make-up nail the pre-Civil War South look. Cara Schneider also deserves kudos for the Williamson house and a horse headaddress that moves in and out of various scenes courtesy of Michelle Hinson; credit Made First with the stage construction and Erica Edmondson and 615Design with some first-rate scenic painting.



Yes, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* is not a traditional opera; it is instead a multi-discipline work that celebrates the wide spectrum of performing artistry. Does it supply ready answers? No, but that's really beside the point. Go and see what vision, risk-taking and commitment to excellence can produce.

Performances of The Difficulty of Crossing a Field will be today at 8 p.m., Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Noah Liff Opera Center in Sylvan Heights (3622 Redmon St.). Tickets (\$35 for Reserved and \$50 for Premiere) are available by calling Nashville Opera at (615) 832-5242, the TPAC Box Office at (615) 782-4040 or online at www.nashvilleopera.org. The opera is spoken and sung in English with no projected translations. Composer David Lang is scheduled to attend the opening night performance and post-show discussion. The format for each show includes the 80-minute Lang opera presented in its entirety, a short intermission, followed by an Opera Insights discussion moderated by John Hoomes.

Artistic Director Matt Logan and his top-flight cast fill a courtroom in the Historic [...]

Belcourt Screens 'Mother of George' as part of Sundance USA

By [ArtsNash](#)

Belcourt Theatre has been selected by the Sundance Film Festival as one of only 10 venues in America to screen a specially selected film on Thursday, Jan. 31 as part of Sundance Film Festival USA. It's the fourth year Sundance has picked the Belcourt for such a screening. The film this year is *Mother of* [...]

Classical Style: Much-anticipated Weems exhibit makes a timely debut at the Frist Center

By [John Pitcher](#)

Earlier this week, members of the media were taken on an advance tour of the new Carrie Mae Weems retrospective at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. Weems, one of America's preeminent art photographers, accompanied the group along with her husband Jeffrey Hoone and exhibit curator Kathryn Delmez. Any lingering doubts that any of [...]

Boiler Room Theatre Opens Acclaimed 'Floyd Collins' Musical Friday

By [ArtsNash](#)

FRANKLIN, Tenn. – The Boiler Room Theatre will stage the acclaimed American musical *Floyd Collins*. The production opens Friday (April 19) and runs through May 4 at the theatre's Factory at Franklin venue (230 Franklin Rd., Bldg. Six). Acclaimed as "the original and daring musical of our day" by New York Magazine, *Floyd Collins* is based on [...]

Playwrights Horizons' Sanford Writes a Lengthy Letter on Length

By [Clyde Fitch Report](#)

Two of my three favorite plays this season have been produced by Playwrights Horizons. They're Samuel D. Hunter's drama, *The Whale*, about a 600-pound man self-destructing and Annie Baker's comedy drama, *The Flick*, revolving around three adrift souls working at a small town movie house. I'm so enthusiastic about the courageous nature of both plays [...]

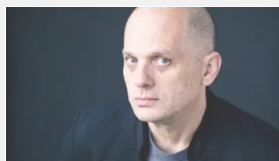


*Photos by Reed Hummell courtesy Nashville Opera.

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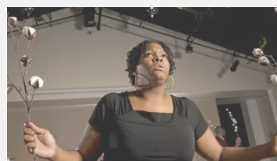


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Film review: Providing Fresh SoCal Air for 'Much Ado About Nothing'

By [Evans Donnell](#)

I like renditions of William Shakespeare's plays best when elaborate costumes and sets take a break and the Bard's words simply get to breathe. Now, it's true the rather fabulous Southern California house director Joss Whedon uses for his modern-dress, black-and-white *Much Ado About Nothing* isn't a humble abode (it's the house he lives in [...])

Film review: Hooper's Dizzy Gimmickry Hampers 'Les Misérables'

By [Evans Donnell](#)

Few recent films have stirred up passions like the long-awaited movie version of the *Les Misérables* musical has. That's not surprising given the show's world-wide following – more than 60 million people in 43 countries have seen it on stage since 1985. Now Tom Hooper (Oscar-winning director of *The King's Speech*) has helmed a star-studded [...]

'Southern Baptist Sissies' Concludes Nashville Run This Weekend

By [ArtsNash](#)

Southern Baptist Sissies, the Kirk-Burgess Productions presentation of the Del Shores' acclaimed play, continues through Saturday after opening to sold-out shows during the July 5 weekend at the Darkhorse Theater. Tickets are going quickly, with the limited tickets remaining for the remainder of the run. With its theme of religion clashing with sexuality, *Sissies* has [...]

Film review: 'Lincoln' As Noble Man More Powerful Than Myth

By [Evans Donnell](#)

When we mythologize real-life figures it becomes easy to admire them while keeping them at a distance; how can we possibly live up to their extraordinary words and deeds? But when we remember they are just as human as ourselves, that they have triumphed over their imperfections when it mattered most, we can embrace and [...]

No Place Like London: Attend Nashville Rep's 'Sweeney Todd'

By [Evans Donnell](#)

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About Evans Donnell

Evans Donnell is the chief theater, film and opera critic as well as co-founder of ArtsNash. He wrote reviews and features about theater, opera and classical music for *The Tennessean* from 2002 to 2011. He was the theater, film and opera critic for ArtNowNashville.com from 2011 to 2012. Donnell has also contributed to The Sondheim Review,

Back Stage, *The City Paper* (Nashville), the *Nashville Banner*, *The* (Bowling Green, Ky.) *Daily News* and several other publications since beginning his professional journalism career in 1985 with *The Lebanon* (Tenn.) *Democrat*. He was selected as a fellow for the 2004 National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and for National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) arts journalism institutes for theater and musical theater at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism in 2006 and classical music and opera at the Columbia University School of Journalism in 2009. He has also been an actor (member of Actors Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA), founding and running AthensSouth Theatre from 1996 to 2001 and appearing in Milos Forman's "The People vs Larry Flynt" among other credits. Donnell is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association (www.americantheatre critics.org).

Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd indeed. When the (just rechristened) troupe formerly known as Tennessee Repertory Theatre presented the 1979 Stephen Sondheim–Hugh Wheeler musical masterwork in 2008, the sold-out run, featuring Lane Davies as the “Demon Barber of Fleet Street” and Martha Wilkinson as that very special pie baker Mrs. Lovett, wowed reviewers (including [...])

Play it again, George: Antheil's raucous 'Ballet mécanique' roars at Blair

By [John Pitcher](#)

The audience that streamed into Ingram Hall on Sunday night to hear George Antheil's seldom-performed Ballet mécanique figured they were in for a once-in-a-lifetime experience. They were wrong. Moments after Antheil's steamroller of a piece for automated grand pianos and percussion ensemble ended, Paul Lehrman, the composer responsible for completing the work's modern orchestration, held up his [...]

Classical review: Murray gives the king of instruments the royal treatment

By [John Pitcher](#)

Every year, some of the world's greatest organ virtuosos come to Nashville to play on the Schermerhorn Symphony Center's magnificent Schoenstein pipe organ. On Sunday afternoon, it was organist Thomas Murray's turn. One of America's foremost concert instrumentalists, Murray is a long-time professor of music at Yale University. He's best known for his interpretations of [...]