

Anna Deavere Smith takes a fresh step with first opera, 'The Walkers'

The renowned actress and playwright's new work with composer Daniel Bernard Roumain appears as part of 'Proximity' at Lyric Opera of Chicago

[Michael Andor Brodeur](#)



From left, Gordon Hawkins, Issachah Savage and Jeff Parker in Lyric Opera of Chicago's "Proximity." (Todd Rosenberg Photography)

CHICAGO — A violent streak runs through the work of award-winning actress, playwright, professor and newly minted librettist Anna Deavere Smith.

But it's not there for the sake of dramatic action or shock value. Over Smith's three decorated decades of documentary-style theatrical work, and especially in "The Walkers," her new short opera created with composer Daniel Bernard Roumain, the noise of conflict is also the source of music.

"I'm interested in that place in speech where people have to break out of sentences and use musical sounds and get up and act," she tells me backstage at the Lyric Opera of Chicago a few hours before the March 24 premiere. "It's often discord that causes that to happen in a person. Also, my work is about race, and race in America comes from very violent beginnings, and it's often in our face."

"The Walkers" premiered as part of Lyric Opera of Chicago's "Proximity: A Trio of New American Operas," a tripartite presentation of new works curated by the renowned soprano (and Lyric's special projects adviser) [Renée Fleming](#) and assembled into a unified work by director [Yuval Sharon](#). (Or at least, that was the idea.)

Along with Roumain and Smith's piece, "Proximity" comprised premieres of two other works: "Four Portraits" is

a visually arresting but wan and meandering gloss of smartphone-era alienation by composer [Caroline Shaw](#) and librettist Jocelyn Clarke that came across like halfhearted homework from the early pandemic. Countertenor [John Holiday](#) and baritone [Lucia Lucas](#) delivered finely sung performances with what they had to work with but couldn't effectively fill the emotional void presented by their respective characters, A and B.

The third piece, "Night" is a gorgeous and haunting stand-alone work for chorus and soloist from composer [John Luther Adams](#), set to a poem by the late [John Haines](#). (On Friday, its Sybil was beautifully sung against a glowing galaxy of stars by mezzo-soprano Katherine DeYoung, a last-minute substitution for an ill Zoie Reams.)



Lucia Lucas in "Proximity." (Todd Rosenberg Photography)

All three operas shared a single set — a gleaming half-pipe of LED screens put to relentlessly innovative use throughout the evening — but they also shared a single problem: In a truly baffling decision, Sharon opts to intermix the three works, hammering them into an unwieldy dovetail by toggling between the two longer operas scene by scene — and plunking Luther's composition like an afterthought at the finish of the first act.

Sharon has made a name (and earned a MacArthur "genius grant") for his reverent dismantling of operatic expectations.

With the Los Angeles-based experimental company the

Industry, Sharon staged performances on [escalators](#), in front of [green screens](#) and at sites scattered around the city for audiences shuttled by [a fleet of 24 cars](#). His 2020 debut with Detroit Opera, where he now serves as artistic director, was "[Twilight: Gods](#)," a pandemic-friendly drive-through staging of Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" spread through the levels of the Detroit Opera House's parking garage. And his current flip-it-and-reverse-it production of Puccini's "[La Bohème](#)" (which arrives April 28 to Opera Philadelphia) tells the tale from finish to start.

According to Sharon's program notes, the idea behind this inelegant shuffle play was to create a "visual depiction of interwoven humanity." But throughout, the splitting and staggering of individual acts registered more like a crude strategy to address a glaring unevenness between the operas. Despite a politely written request from Sharon to abstain from measuring the works against each other (or, "resist a conventional mode of watching and listening"), "The Walkers" emerged, inarguably, as the main attraction of "Proximity" and the evening's (frequently interrupted) highlight.



The company of Lyric Opera of Chicago's "Proximity." (Todd Rosenberg Photography)

"The Walkers" zooms in on a community torn apart by gang shootings in Chicago, where between 2016 and 2020 (when work on the opera began), gun violence had claimed over [3,200 lives and injured over 13,000 people](#), according to [city statistics](#).

More specifically, "The Walkers" trains its focus on the efforts of [CRED](#) (Create Real Economic Diversity), an organization founded in 2016 by Obama-era secretary of education and South Side native Arne Duncan (portrayed here by actor Jeff Parker). CRED continues to offer educational support, job training and mental health services to Chicago youths ensnared in gang culture by working

directly within the afflicted communities. (According to [CRED](#), nearly 75 percent of gun violence in Chicago takes place in just 20 of its 77 neighborhoods.)

Yuval Sharon, Anna Deavere Smith and Daniel Bernard Roumain rehearse "Proximity." (Lyric Opera of Chicago)

Since 1992, Smith, 72, has distinguished herself as both playwright and actress for meticulously researched plays that often find her transforming into dozens of characters drawn from hundreds of interviews.

"Fires in the Mirror," a trenchant exploration of the community devastated by the 1991 Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, was a breakthrough hit and a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize. Her Tony-nominated 1993 show "Twilight: Los

Angeles, 1992" expanded the grainy picture granted by the camcorders capturing riots in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict. Since then, projects such as "House Arrest" (2000), "Let Me Down Easy" and "The Arizona Project" (both 2008) and "Notes From the Field" (2015) have channeled individual voices to dig deep into national debates on civil rights, health care and the school-to-prison pipeline. Taken together, they represent Smith's career-long search for "the American character."

"The Walkers" continues this quest, but in a form that represents altogether new territory for Smith.

Here, the music that shapes the speech of Smith's interview subjects is refined and elevated through Roumain's richly limned and emotionally attentive score. Onstage, Smith's characters have always cast a kind of heroic glow when channeled through her own performances; but in this show, embodied by a cast of stellar singers and set within the classical-feeling context of a gruesome murder, the story attains both a mythic richness and a gutting humanity.

This is aided by Smith's recognizable approach, which combines documentary feel with uncanny cinematic spectacle, employing the arcing LED stage to superimpose interview excerpts and identify characters, before abruptly transforming the entire scene into a neighborhood basketball court, a Chicago side street, a family funeral.

The company of Lyric Opera of Chicago's "Proximity." (Todd Rosenberg Photography)

But above and beyond the spectacle of the staging, "The Walkers" was a showcase of superb singing. Tenor [Issachah Savage](#) as CRED director Curtis Toler, charismatic baritone [Gordon Hawkins](#) as the Preacher Man and baritone [Norman Garrett](#) as Bilal, a neighborhood hero returning from prison, all gave memorable performances — especially Garrett, whose voice summons a volcanic power that leaves intact an endearing sweetness.

Soprano [Whitney Morrison](#) delivered a devastating performance in the second act as mother Yasmine Miller, mourning the death of her 20-month-old boy, Sincere, to a stray bullet. And soprano [Kearstin Piper Brown](#) in the role of the pink-wigged Chief's Daughter #2 was a sensation,

particularly in a scene “live-streamed” to the screen from the back of a speeding Jeep.

Perhaps most compelling about “The Walkers” is the detectable presence of the voices Smith incorporated into the libretto. She and Roumain make a dream team in terms of preserving (and serving) the natural music of speech. Indeed, much of the opera’s music seems to spring from language, rather than the other way around. The music seamlessly segues into passages of tightly packed rap, and draws back into beautifully arranged atmospherics. Conductor Kazem Abdullah admirably led the Lyric Opera Orchestra, which sounded bright and vivid (especially across the strings) and felt wrapped around the singers’ voices all evening — easily the most seamless aspect of this seam-strewn presentation.

“The Walkers” doesn’t feel finished, but it does feel buoyed by promise. With American opera companies leaning away from conventional wisdom and toward increased investment in new productions, an opera such as “The Walkers” feels like a powerful show of opera’s ability to combine grand spectacle with intimate storytelling, and the form’s untapped potential to contribute directly and immediately to critical cultural conversations.

If there’s a larger lesson to be taken from the damaging proximity to the other works in “Proximity,” it’s that the voices

we have long struggled to hear in the opera hall deserve the time and space to be heard — in full, without interruption.

Proximity runs at Lyric Opera of Chicago through April 8.
lyricopera.org.

correction

An earlier version of this story misspelled the first name of conductor Kazem Abdullah. The story has been corrected.

Critics' picks for spring dance, theater, music and art

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