

## CIM Opera Theater to begin *The Juniper Tree* on Halloween

by Jarrett Hoffman



Murder, cannibalism, a return from the dead, and revenge — basically everything you could want from an evening out. You get all of that in Philip Glass’ and Robert Moran’s *The Juniper Tree*, presented by CIM Opera Theater beginning on Halloween night, October 31.

Arthur Yorinks’ libretto is based on the Brothers Grimm story, which begins where else but with a stepmother. She worries that her stepson reminds her husband of his

own late wife. Her solution? We might call it unique. She kills the kid — gruesomely — then feeds him to her unsuspecting husband in the form of a stew. The boy later returns as a bird, seeking vengeance.

In a phone call, director Dean Southern (*above*) said he’s long been drawn to the realms of fantasy and horror. “As a kid, I was probably a vampire for Halloween more than anything else.”

But choosing to put on *The Juniper Tree* was more about its own merit as an opera, and its relatively recent composition in 1984. “This is my first year as artistic director of CIM Opera Theater, and I wanted to bring new and recent works to our students,” Southern said. “I think it’s important for them as developing singers and artists, but I also think it’s important for the opera world at large.”

(Fans of classics should note that Southern also loves that repertoire. “We’re doing *Magic Flute* next semester, and I can’t wait to work on that,” he said.)

It's unique for an opera to have two composers. In this case, Glass and Moran used each other's themes to provide unity, but Southern said it's still clear which composer was responsible for which passage. In Glass sections, the director said that all of the hallmarks of that composer's writing are there. "He's a master at creating atmosphere, mood, and a sense of timelessness."

Moran's style tends to be more dramatic, which is important considering the subject matter. His contributions include an extended scene for the stepmother. "We've been calling it a mad scene, as in the bel canto tradition," Southern said. "It shows her psychosis and her frame of mind, very much like *Lucia* or any of the mad scenes from Donizetti and Bellini, but using contemporary style and language."

Another Moran highlight is the scene after the boy's sister buries his bones under the juniper tree, where their mother also rests. "It's absolutely transcendent," Southern said. "That was the moment that really sold me on this opera. It's just spectacularly beautiful."

The students have been enjoying the darkness of *The Juniper Tree*. "Halloween is in the air, and we are having so much fun going there with this piece," Southern said.



Leaning into the holiday even further, the production will feature black-and-white silent films created by students at the Cleveland Institute of Art. They've used old horror movies as a model — "things like *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or *Nosferatu*," said Jacob Koestler (*left*), who teaches at CIA and guided the students.

Filming took place in 26 hours over 2 days at Hale Farm and Village in Bath. "It was sort of amazing that everything we needed scenically all existed in one place, and it was all period-perfect already," Koestler said. "Not to mention it's run by the Western Reserve. That made this a very cool University Circle relationship, with all three institutions based out of the same neighborhood."

The films play an important structural role in the production. "There are some large modernist sections by Philip Glass with no real action onstage," Koestler said, "so it became a question of how to fill that in with intensity, horror, and fantasy. We've gone to great lengths through communications between the Institute of Music and the Institute of Art to figure out when the focus should be on the stage, and when we want to bring the lights down and move the action to the screen."

When conductors perform a score live with film, they're often tasked with staying in strict time. In this case Harry Davidson, leading the CIM Orchestra, will have flexibility: technicians will be responsible for adjusting the speed of the video depending on the flow of the music.

One complication on the film side came from the production being double-cast. That meant the CIA students had to produce two versions of their work so that the actors appearing on the screen would be the same ones onstage in each performance. "I could say that was exciting or I could say it was really difficult, but they're kind of the same thing as far as education goes," Koestler said.

*Performances of The Juniper Tree run at Mixon Hall at 7:30 pm on October 31, November 2 (sold out), and November 3. Opening night is dedicated to A. Grace Lee Mims' memory. Tickets are available [here](#).*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 29, 2019.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)