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Blind Injustice: Six lives wrongly incarcerated, one story of hope and resilience (July 11)

by Daniel Hathaway

Opera can be a powerful medium for documenting social injustice, especially when the plot hits close to home. Case in point: the six wrongly convicted individuals in Northeast Ohio whose stories are told in David Cote's and Scott Davenport Richards' 80+-minute work, *Blind Innocence.*

The opera, premiered by Cincinnati Opera in 2019 and subsequently produced in Colorado, New Jersey, and New York, was presented by Chagrin Arts on July 11 at the Outcalt Theatre in Playhouse Square.

The tightly-constructed, one-act music drama tells the real life stories of Rickey Jackson, Nancy Smith, Clarence Elkins, and the East Cleveland 3 — teenagers Laurese Glover, Eugene Johnson, and Derrick Wheatt — all imprisoned for crimes they didn't commit. The opera follows each of them from their conviction to their eventual release through the work of the Innocence Project.

The 300-some reconfigurable seats of the Outcalt Theatre drew the audience in close to the performers on three sides, including the chorus prepared by Jay White and orchestra set up oratorio style, all conducted by Andrew Grams.

Cotes' libretto, based on 15 hours of verbatim transcripts of interviews with the exonerees, is closely echoed in Richard's music, which seeks to preserve the pitches and speech rhythms of each character. Supertitles were provided, but not really necessary.

Dominic Aragon brought a streak of villany to the arrogant Prosecutor who turns getting convictions into a game with a score card. Daniel Stein was more nuanced as the dedicated and overworked Defense Attorney.

The strong voiced Ashlee Foreman embodied the law student Alesha, who continually questioned the reasoning of both the Prosecutor and the Defense Attorney.

The East Cleveland Three — Laurese Glover (Orson Van Gay II), Eugene Johnson (Marvis Stevens), and Derrick Wheatt (Avery Davidson) held on to their boyish personalities and closeknit friendships even during their long incarceration.

As Derrick Wheatt's mother, Briana Hunter created a captivating moment when she visited her son in prison and they reminisced about his childhood and dreamt of making his favorite corned beef sandwich. Suddenly it hits you: he's just a good hearted teenager.

Timothy Culver brought a variety of emotions to Clarence Elkins, who was desperately trying to understand how he could be convicted of rape and murder based on the dubious testimony of his six-year-old niece. And Davis Fischer was

believable as the chain smoking, hard hearted Earl Mann who had actually committed the crime.

Brian Keith Johnson brought gravitas to the role of Ricky Jackson, a Clevelander who spent 39 years in prison for a murder he had no part in.

As Nancy Smith — falsely accused of molesting children — Marian Vogel delivered a poignant aria about her job as a Head Start bus driver.

Richards's brilliantly constructed score calls on a variety of musical idioms from classical to Jazz and hip-hop to pop, yet always feels honest and continually advances the sometimes difficult narrative.

Conductor Andrew Grams expertly led the excellent twelve-member instrumental ensemble and chorus. He kept things moving but left the singers room to let their sometimes long musical lines flourish. The coordination between "pit and stage" was seamless.

Eric Van Baars' inventive staging — just some moveable chairs and tables — made for a law office, a prison visiting room, a prison reading circle, and a prison hole, giving each scene its own visual identity.

April Rock's costuming was simple but served the purpose. Jack-Anthony Ina's lighting reflected the mood of each scene, and sound designer Richard Ingraham created an enjoyable listening experience.

While wrongful imprisonment is abstractly compelling as a theme, it gains weight and urgency when some of the people being portrayed are actually sitting next to you in the theater. On July 11, Laurese Glover, Rickey Jackson, and Nancy Smith — who were portrayed by Orson Van Gay II, Brian Keith Johnson, and Marian Vogel — were in the audience and made themselves available for a talkback session with director Eric Van Baars, composer Scott Davenport Richards and librettist David Cote following the show.

Their comments were heartfelt and intensely personal.

Rickey: I don't think we ever get over it, it's about learning to live with it.

Nancy: Opera is often sad and our stories are sad. It didn't just happen to me, it happened to my four children too.

Orson Van Gay II: Telling somebody's truth through opera comes with responsibility — the responsibility of being honest. It's an honor to fight for something that could be taken away from any of us.

If art sheds light on real life, it doesn't get more real than this.

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The premiere was given by Cincinnati Opera on July 22, 2019. Since then it has been performed in Colorado in 2023 by Opera Theatre of the Rockies, Peak Performances in New Jersey in February of 2024, and In February 2025 it premiered in New York City's Lincoln Center, in a production of MasterVoices.

It made it's Cleveland debut on July 11 - 13 at the Outcalt Theatre in Playhouse Square. Presented by Chagrin Arts these performances marked the first that were not directed by Robin Guarino.

The 80+-minute, one-act opera is based on OIP co-founder Mark Godsey's book of the same name, and on interviews with six people who had their convictions overturned through the efforts of the Ohio Innocence Project.

Blind Injustice tells the real life stories of Rickey Jackson, Nancy Smith, Clarence Elkins, and the East Cleveland 3 —Laurese Glover, Eugene Johnson, and Derrick Wheatt — all of whom were convicted and incarcerated for crimes they did not commit. The opera follows each of their stories from the time the alleged crime was committed, through their incarceration, the work of OIP, and ultimately their release.

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The Wall Street Journal called it a "powerful piece of music theater." National Public Radio's Elizabeth Kramer said "the opera's overarching call for awareness can resonate with audiences universally." *Seen and Heard International* noted "Richards's potent music and Cote's hard-hitting words."

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How can such painful real-life stories be so beautifully presented?

Relevance to Northeast Ohio — everything is real and it happened right here

Use of verbatim quotes from interviews with the exonorees.

Part of what we wanted was to have an Ohio-cenric cast as well. So not all the artists who are involved, but most of them, are from Ohio.

Use of the chorus

Dominic Aragon Prosecutor — Making getting convictions a game

The strong voiced Ashlee Foreman embodied the role of the law student Alesha.

Daniel Stein — The dedicated Defense Attorney

Timothy Culver brought emotions to Clarence Elkins who was trying to understand how he was convicted of rape and murder based on the dobious testimony of his six-year-old niece.
Davis Fischer, chain smoking hard hearted Earl Mann who had actually committed the crime

Darryl Lewis, Earl Mann's cellmate, (Ensemble)

East Cleveland Threee — Laurese Glover (Orson Van Gay II) , Eugene Johnson (Marvis Stevens), and Derrick Wheatt (Avery Davidson).

Briana Hunter, Derrick Wheatt's mother — the captivating scene when she ws visiting her son in prison — they reminisce about his childhood — [My god, he's just a good hearted young boy]

Brian Keith Johnson brought gravitas to the role of Ricky Jackson, a Cleveland who spentn 39 years in prison for a murder he did not commit.

Marian Vogel, Nancy Smith

Morgan Potts, A Young Edward Vernnon (Ensemble)

Blind Injustice Chorus

Andrew Grams, Conductor
Eric Van Baars, Director
Jay White, Chorusnaster & Assistant Director
April Rock, Costume designer
Jack-Anthony Ina, Lighting desginer
Richard Ingraham, Sound designer

Scott Davenport Richards (composer)
David Cote (Libretto)

Mark Godsey (author, Blind Injustice)

Post Show Conversation
Eric Van Baars, Director
Scott Davenport Richards (composer)
David Cote (Libretto)

Three exonerees and the artists who portrayed them
Laurese Glover — Orson Van Gay II
Ricky Jackson — Brian Keith Johnson
Nancy Smith — Marian Vogel

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