

# Above asking: 'The Fall of the House of Usher' opera sells fast

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New production by OrpheusPDX sets the once-gothic chamber opera in sequestered Palm Springs.



COURTESY PHOTO: ORPHEUSPDX/JULIA SHERIDAN - The Oregon Episcopal School alumna, soprano Holly Flack, has enjoyed being at home instead of in Montclair, New Jersey. Her former music and choir teachers will be in attendance for OrpheusPDX's "The Fall of the House of Usher", as they were for "L'Orfeo".

Phillip Glass's opera "The Fall of the House of Usher" is usually set in a spooky, gothic house, with maybe a vibe of sibling incest between Roderick and Madeline.

Director Kevin Newbury has taken a different tack, setting it in the mid-century modern mecca of Palm Springs and giving it a gay subtext.

The two male characters had a strong boyhood bond. Roderick, who now lives as a recluse in a dated mansion, and William, the narrator, whom Roderick summons to help him, represent two ages of American gay male history, even though they are the same age.

Roderick is a closeted movie actor, of the type that preferred Palm Springs, California, as a respite from the nosy tabloids of Hollywood that could end a career by outing gays.

William arrives from San Francisco and is openly gay and comfortable with his sexuality. Newbury sets the opera in 1969 just before the Stonewall riots in New York, which kicked off a more militant gay liberation movement.

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"Our production has married film noir and mid-century modern architecture to symbolize the pervasive homophobia that is raging both outside the walls of the House of Usher and within the walls," the director Kevin Newbury told Pamplin Media.

For this OrpheusPDX production, Newbury and videographer Greg Emetaz shot a mini film to show on stage during one of Glass's word-free musical interludes.

Newbury said in the Golden Age of Hollywood, actors such as Rock Hudson, Montgomery Clift and Cary Grant lived in fear of being outed by Confidential magazine. Stars had to live within 100 miles of Hollywood to be on call for work, so Palm Springs became a gay actor refuge. Newbury briefly considered setting it in the AIDS crisis, on Fire Island, a gay resort on Long Island, New York, but the west coast won out.

He sees it as an emotional piece, with a political edge.

"The actors have an intimacy with Phillip Glass's score. You really care about these characters. We're living in a time when you can't even talk about being gay in half the schools in the country. There's a new prejudice against queer people, gay and trans, the full spectrum, and I think this is saying something about our shared history."

Philip Glass transformed Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 Gothic short story, with its clotted, overcooked prose, into a tense, psychological thriller of an opera. In the book, Roderick convinces the narrator that his roommate, Madeline, is dead and they bury her. When she pops up alive -- and noisy -- from her family tomb and (spoiler alert) frightens her brother to death, the horror story climaxes.

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"I find it to be one of Glass's most melodic scores, and one of his most heartbreaking and emotional," Newbury said.



COURTESY PHOTO: ORPHEUSPDX/GREG EMETAZ - In this production of Phillip Glass's "The Fall of the House of Usher", Roderick Usher is a Golden Age Hollywood film star. He often watches his old hit movies on his projector. A photo shoot on August 17 captured Holly Flack (Madeline) and Steven Brennfleck (Roderick Usher) in scenes from an original film, inspired by noir films of the 1950s and 1960s.

The music is more melodic than some Glass operas. When you hear the tambourine and sawing cellos you will be reminded more of the soundtrack to the movie "The Hours" than the grim pomp of his Egyptian opera "Akhnaten," although Glass still loves him some timpani.

Newbury says he would have made this opera the same way even before the current wave of anti-gay feeling in government.

"My approach is inherently queer. I don't really get phone calls to direct stories about safe places on the Upper West Side. I have a reputation for taking pieces in the queer cannon or bringing a queer perspective to pieces. This is a story for everyone who can relate to isolation and shame and regret."

## No words

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Newbury used the homemade movie to make Madeline the costar of Roderick. Madeline is played by Portlander Holly Flack. In "L'Orfeo" earlier this month, she had quite a mouthful to sing as Euridice, the new bride stuck in the underworld. But in "The Fall of the House of Usher" she has no words, only syllables to sing for much of the opera's 85 minutes. Flack rehearsed by keeping her lines, which are "Ahh, ahh, ahh ..." written on index cards with numbers telling her how many times to say them. "I specialize in stratospheric high notes," Flack told Pamplin Media. "I studied violin for 12 years and I have always found it easier to learn a melody than words, so that worked for me."

The three singers also harmonize a lot, and that is easier for Flack. She also sings offstage, as a spectral presence. In the wings, she can look at her cards, or at a monitor showing the conductor.

Madeline never sings at or looks at the narrator, so there's a sense that she may be a figment of Roderick's imagination, and perhaps she represents the sexuality he is trying to repress.

Singing without words was interesting -- she could capture a moment of pain in a single sound.

It's also a story about real estate, and Poe, Glass and Newbury save the best for last. Poe put the death scene in these words: "In her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse ..." Glass renders the moment in a high A flat, and Holly Flack is one of the few sopranos who can carry it off.