

*Dramaturg's Dispatch: Our first week of Remote Residency*

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by Peregrine Teng Heard

*The future is the breakout room.*

We convene on the screen: a grid of artists, neatly framed and slightly pixelated. On the first day of our Remote Residency, the arrival of each face on the screen prompts (muted) exclamations of delight. We were all together in a physical room only two months ago, when we held our initial workshop to experiment with the ideas driving this adaptation of *Macbeth*. Now we are gathering online to push that experimentation into the next phase—and into an utterly new format. Heartbeat Opera's *Lady M* will live on the same digital platforms, on the same viral channels, in the same anonymous-yet-never-private space that we imagine the Macbeths of our time to reign over.

Now the Weird Sisters adjourn to a breakout room with our Movement Director Emma, and we're Zooming off into the future of opera.

*That blood made me hungry.*

For the second day of rehearsal, we establish a routine—a welcome practice in the unbounded time of quarantine. Ethan leads us in a meditation, then shares the creations of each company member from the night before: our homework takes the form of photographic still lifes, video compositions, vocal recordings, and improvised text message conversations between characters. By the end of the first week, our shared Google Drive is a treasure trove. This is more than character research; singers are becoming filmmakers, location scouts, and costume designers before our eyes.

Cranberry sauce and gluten-free flour clump on a checkerboard of black and white hallway tiles, conjuring a scene of cocaine-fueled violence in a hotel bathroom. *Lady M* sends exhortatory texts to her husband (*x Thane x*), and he sends her the smiling devil emoji in reply. One of the Weird Sisters leads a kickboxing workout that begins and ends with a generous glass of red wine. The limitations of lockdown are inspiring flights of imagination and opening up corners of the piece that we hadn't expected.

After homework review, Emma leads our physical warm-up, and we're off to the breakout rooms. Jacob and Dan lead music rehearsal in one; Ethan digs into the Shakespearean text in another; and Emma devises "choreography for boxes" in the other. Band members and sound designer Senem tune in later in the afternoon to rehearse Dan's arrangement; clarinetist Gleb will double as sound engineer once his bandmates have all recorded their parts in isolation. For every freeze in someone's video, our team comes up with a fresh insight on how this digital medium can uncover

more contours of the Macbeth story. We are converting an indeterminate quarantine into an electric collaboration.

*Can I borrow the baby for a second?*

The Remote Residency is an opportunity for open-ended exploration, and our first week reveals just how many echoes of Shakespeare's and Verdi's texts reverberate through our lives. Our adaptation locates the Macbeths in a city like Manhattan—a city defined by striving, climbing, excelling. In the opera, the Macbeths' path to power is bloody and ends on a battlefield; in 2020, what would this couple undertake to achieve all that fate promises them? They would scheme, sure. Maybe they would get involved in fraud, insider trading, or worse, if they thought they could grasp the power and security that massive wealth connotes in our country, where there is no crown to claim.

Heartbeat's *Lady M* paints a backdrop of consumerism, viral influence, and the excesses of the 1%, against which the audience can judge the ambitious couple with new eyes (and, thanks to Dan's arrangement, ears). We call it a fantasia because we want to play within the nightmarish margins of Shakespeare's play and Verdi's opera. When Lady M says she has given suck, a chasm of parental grief opens in the play—but how many productions take that chance to envision the Lady as a mother—much less to imagine Macbeth as a bewildered, bereft father? An improvisation on Friday included a toy borrowed from Quentin's daughter and Felicia's own baby blanket (from her nearby childhood bedroom closet), and highlighted how the couple's *vendetta* duet comes not simply from hunger for power but also from profound despair.

Next week, our adventurous company will perform at Virtual Soirées. The work they showcase will represent only a fraction of the creative muscle and ingenuity summoned by this Remote Residency; still, the experience of connecting with these performers online to witness their commitment to opera and their immersion in the story of *Lady M* will contain the full power of what we have discovered. There is a way to feel the artists' voices in your bones, even at this distance.