

Opera Essay: *Grounded*

Carol Crocca

Washington National Opera opened its 2023–2024 season with the world premiere of *Grounded*. Composed by two-time Tony Award® winner Jeanine Tesori with a libretto adapted by George Brant from his eponymous play, and directed by Tony Award® winner Michael Mayer, *Grounded* is commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and co-produced with the Washington National Opera.

Alan Henry on Oct. 30, 2023, at broadwayworld.com expanded on the production:

“*Grounded* tackles subjects rarely seen in opera: drone warfare and its impact on service members and their caregivers. When Brant’s play was first staged in 2013, drone warfare was a new technology. Now drones are used commonly on the battlefields and beyond, but their impact is less understood. To present these issues in opera form, Brant expanded his one-woman play into a multi-character libretto, giving full voice to those in the pilot’s orbit. Working with Tesori, Brant created new characters, such as “Also Jess,” who embodies the pilot’s dissociated self, and a male chorus called the “Drone Squadron,” a haunted group reflecting the history of combat.”

As to Emily D’Angelo’s performance in the Washington premiere, Kate Wingfield on November 4, 2023, at metroweekly.com wrote:

“Mezzo-soprano Emily D’Angelo, who made a spectacular virtual debut on the Vocal Arts DC series two years ago, rewarded the opera’s central focus on Jess. The many powerful qualities of her radiant voice incarnated the various sides of the character: the ace’s gutsy swagger alongside maternal warmth and conflicted emotions.

Innovating masterfully with LED screen technology, this is an immensely visual experience: there is the boundless flight of a war jet, the eternal agitation of a targeting grid, the expanse of a Nevada highway, the monstrous vision of an instrument of war.”

There was, however, some controversy. Charles T. Downey, Sun Oct 29, 2023 at 12:43 pm, washingtonclassicalreview.com, explains:

“Controversy erupted last spring over the sponsorship of this opera by General Dynamics, a major American military contractor that sponsors the entire WNO season. WNO released a statement that none of its sponsors ever had “any involvement in the creation of *Grounded* or in the contents of its libretto.” And there was the opinion that, in spite of the dire effect of drone warfare on its protagonist, *Grounded* may not be an anti-war opera after all.

“The opera implies that old-fashioned fighter piloting is nobler, and better for soldiers’ mental health, than the video-game-style drone deployment that has expanded the battlefield to encompass, potentially, all of us. Darkly, given the state of global affairs lately, the piece seems to say that war is OK; there are just better and worse — more and less authentic — ways of waging it.”

The New York Times.com, By Zachary Woolfe

And, aside from the “Is it an an-war opera or not?” question, not all the reviews were favorable. Mr. Woolfe also commented, as reported in Broadwayworld.com:

But “Grounded” is more surreal — and eventually psychotic — material, and Tesori and Brant don’t pursue Jess’s dissolving mental state with the relentlessness, economy or extremity of, say, Berg’s “Wozzeck.” While it’s understandable that the Met would want a single-actor play expanded into something more traditionally grand, the bagginess is palpable in the transition from an 80-minute monologue to a two-and-a-half-hour opera.

In washingtonclassicalreview.com, Sun Oct 29, 2023 at 12:43 pm, Charles T. Downey opined:

“Both acts dragged, making for what felt like a long night in the theater, but was only 2-1/2 hours. If you think tracking remote targets for hours as a drone pilot is boring, try watching an opera about it. Even worse was an aria about making a PowerPoint slide presentation.”

He summed up, however, with the following:

“Of course, no one seeing this production can ignore its relevance to the conflict in the Middle East with its devastating news delivered by the hour. Although a war story should hit hard regardless of current events, this context brings *Grounded* into an especially visceral focus. That it may provoke, unsettle or firm one’s beliefs is testament to its power.”