



Margaret Garner Notes

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Margaret: Notes

Sebbie :

I am calling these notes, but they are mostly musings. The language is pedestrian, but I do like the way the scene is beginning to look.

Act one, Scene 1

The curtain opens on an array of shadows--thin, tall, wavey, like Giacometti statues--high and hovering against a back drop of red. (I see the colors of this scene as primarily red and black.) We hear "scratchy" sounds which become a kind of chant. Lights move to reveal the source of the shadows: slaves, about twenty ~~grouped into full~~ ^{group} and partial family relationships. [n.b. they should not be dressed in conventional "slave rags." Their costumes should be modernized versions of that.] The shadows shrink and fade as the chanting swells. I don't know what they are chanting, but it is something that has a trace of African melody or harmony and the word NO is distinguishable. Some of the "no's" are timid, fearful, some defiant, enraged, some are moans of pain. A woman's solo voice rises above the chanting. Her lyrics provide a list of what the "no's" are referring to: a mix of horrible things they fear will happen and warm recollections of what will be lost:

dancing together and breaking apart into

eg

Chorus: No ...

woman's voice

She: ...rocking chairs facing the rain

Chorus: No...

She: ...skin broken by a cane

~~Sort of like that, but of course other voices can be singled out within and from the group,~~

Meantime, lights are altering and focussing to reveal the woman leading the song is Margaret, and an apparatus indicating that these people are restrained, penned comes into view. Something gestural, not realistic, but very powerful in impact. Perhaps a single, twisted but menacing wire surrounds them. Or, better still, a series of vertical bars spaced among them in such a way that the slaves seem to be inhabited by the bars--their movements severely limited by them. *but which they also use in their movements*

Enter a crowd of white people [also with modernistic costumes instead of bonnets and those corny suits (~~see "Titus" for a splendid treatment of ancient and modern~~)].

Prominently among the crowd is an Auctioneer who quickly and business-like sets up his podium. ~~To the crowd~~ he announces the opening of the sale. His libretti will provide the information of what is happening. As:

is interrupted by (or accompanied by) a vendor's voice

Margaret: Notes

Auctioneer: By the powers approved by the great state of Kentucky and invested in me, hereby declare on the afternoon of the X day of May of 1856 in Boone County the sale of all elements and goods of the estate of John Gaines to be herewith open (Here a nod to John Gaines who stands apart from the crowd--closer to the slaves.) All bids to be considered....etc.

The Auctioneer begins with the slaves. He lists them, name, gender, age. While his list is delivered Gaines, the man nodded to, steps closer to the slaves who are being lined up, children in front, women behind, men at back in order of value. John Gaines makes some gesture (or word) of regret. Then he moves down stage and is surprised by the arm of another man on his shoulder. A man who has entered stage left.

John: Archie!

Archibald: Brother.

John: You never said a word! MTK

Archibald: Looks like I got here just in time.

John: In time?

The Auctioneer brings forward a girl about 10 years old and solicits bids. Archibald [by the way I don't think this is a good name for him--it doesn't make for impressive lyrics] interrupts the Auctioneer's calls by announcement that he is bidding on the lot, as is his prerogative as a family member. MTK

Slaves relief, regrouping into family groups. Crowd's consternation. John's disbelief.

John: What is this? Maplewood costs a rich man's fortune.

Archibald: Precisely. (He flashes \$)

John: You?

Archibald: Me (aggressively) Why not me? (softer)

John: Well...(reluctantly)

Archibald: You think I stole it? Or won it at cards?

John: Well...(as if it's possible)

Margaret: Notes

Archibald: Don't write me off yet, Governor (with smiling, mocking envy). Not yet. I know what you think. A widower gone to seed, roots withered, stalk sere. No blossom but my only child Elizabeth etc. With Chorus accompanying.

This exchange should expose the uneasiness of the brothers' relationship as well as some of their history.

Then:

John: What are your plans for the home our father made? If it is only a stake in a game of cards, I'd just as soon sell it piece by piece...

Archibald: I will make it grander than ever. It will be--he details his dreams of luxury, mastery and power. Begins as a solo eventually interrupted by John's words of caution about power and pleas for benevolent authority.

Planter's Dream

As:

Archibald: In my hands it will be glorious. I will have it all in my hands.

grand

John: A strong hand is not a fist.

Archibald: Yields will double in my hands. Work will triple in my hands.

John: Slaves' lives are in your hands.

Archibald: So is their death (emphatically) (Pause)...as they surely know.

At this moment the slaves exit, Margaret turning around to look at the brothers. They turn toward her. Her Giacometti shadow ascends and looms. "Scratchy" sounds. End of Scene.

Don't pay any attention to the leaden language. I just wanted to offer a sense of how the drama could be played out. Of course the Chorus should be integrated in more places than I have placed them. If we still want vendors they should be there to give tone and activity to the crowd--but not have songs to sing.

A lot of other things are lurking, but I wanted to get this off quickly.

I am also sending two songs I wrote for this opera some time ago. One is a lullaby Margaret sings to her child. Another a duet between her and Thomas (another horrible name--remember Uncle Tom?).

Let me know your thoughts...Whenever.

Toni Morrison

MEAN THINGS

FAR AWAY

SAD THINGS

FAR AWAY

SOFT THINGS

COME AND PLAY

PRETTY THINGS

HERE TO STAY

SLEEP IN THE MEADOW

SLEEP IN THE HAY

BABY'S GOT A DREAMING ON THE WAY

SLEEP IN THE MEADOW

SLEEP IN THE HAY

BABY'S GOING TO DREAM THE NIGHT AWAY

TONI MORRISON

THE ONLY MASTER

[SHE] HOLD ME

[HE] HOLD ON

[SHE] STAY SWEET

[HE] STAY STRONG

[SHE] BE MY MOONRISE

[HE] BE MY DAWN

YOU ARE MY SHOULDER

YOU ARE MY SPINE

YOU ARE MY COURAGE

YOU ARE THE SIGN

THAT LOVE IS THE ONLY MASTER

THE HEART OBEYS.

LOVE IS THE ONE MASTER

MY HEART OBEYS.

TONI MORRISON

Notes: Margaret Garner

It appears that certain things need to be done to bring the libretto closer to something I can then improve, alter etc. and then write the lyrics for. As is there is simply too much work yet to be done—work I can not do, and work I did not agree to do. If Debbie can handle this and some of the suggestions below, then I can go forward with this project. If not, then we are at square one. I've listed my concerns below—in two categories, primarily--most of which I have discussed with Richard. The basic structure, the narrative itself, is workable. The problems, as I see them, are as follows:

Style:

Dated, predictable language; stiff and artificial dialogue, explanations, and choral responses.

Visual conceptualization:

The narrative material is described in scenes that are conventional, familiar—with a serious absence of freshness.

I will try to address some of these issues.

The opening scene of an auction is straight out of Uncle Tom's Cabin and a thousand others books and plays—even movies. The fact of an opening auction scene is not the problem, but the way it is viewed needs imagination. For example, The focus might be on the black people immediately—not the business enterprise or the details of the

selling. Everybody knows how that goes. The problem is how to render this cliché in a fresh manner, from the slaves' point of view. The interest there should be on the human interaction of real people not representations of roles or positions. Perhaps the curtain could open on the pen, lit so that the shadows of the black people loom over the proceedings; when light grows we see black people in family groups—not the herd that they will be forced into later by the auctioneer. Music could rise from them, with Margaret's voice preeminent. Below or outside this area we begin to see the bidders, platform etc. The family formations are important because they are accurate and because it is a visual clue to the central tragedy of the institution of slavery. When they are corralled onto the platform, we will register the break-up. For example the children are presented first—they are the cheapest—next the older girls and women. The men are presented last. If a ten year old girl is offered first, before it becomes clear that one person will buy the whole lot, it is more dramatic and the relief of the blacks is as pronounced as it is understood. When Gaines interrupts the offering of this child by offering to buy the complete estate, the audience will feel both the terror of the system and one of the reasons for this terror. Note that the hard part is not labor and seldom violence. Rather it is what has been called "natal isolation;" that is, being without family, or social or legal status, or financial resources, etc. When the sale is complete and while dialogue between brothers and chorus etc. takes place, the blacks reform into those same family formations—with gratitude. The crowd can respond to this with comments reflecting the "argument": for benign treatment and/or for brutal treatment—an argument which the brothers also represent.

Margaret can assume her protagonist role during this activity in any number of ways: by aggressively returning the ten year old to her mother before the mother can manage to claim her child is one example.

The following comments point to other of my concerns about language, scene and action.

The blacks would not dare sing "Before I'll b e a slave I'll be buried in my grave" at an auction—although they might hum it. I still dislike the dependence on African American spirituals (the lyrics, anyway). They are too easy, too familiar and have lost their original power, becoming maudlin, by overuse as musical short-cut to emotion. Also the context and meaning is never clear to those not already knowledgeable. "When your lamp burns down." for instance references both the "foolish virgins" parable and the condemnation of the "sinful" owners.

The auction itself might be carried on in background to the conversation between the Gaines' brothers—which I believe is too perfunctory here. They can provide much of the history of their relationship and reflect the towns people's views as well.

There is way to much editorial or educational material here instead of drama and emotion.

I like to think of the set as more gestural, modern than realistic. It would help imagining the pen as suggested retaining pole rather than a naturalistic holding area.

The "White Chorus" should be called The Townspeople.

The auctioneer would not call them "slaves"; nor would he ramble on about what kind of work they were fit for (it's not his business); he would mention ages, gender, health and conditions of former ownership. He is not talking to people who never heard of slavery before.

The Secessionist is not needed if the dialogue and staging are well done.

The list of punishments is unnecessary, certainly here. If the violent force to which the blacks are subjected is required it should be more gracefully placed.

Mostly what I am worried about is having a Porgy and Bess—beautiful and exquisite music emanating from a naive, demeaning and stereotypical narrative.

As you can see, I need much help, more imaginative renderings before I can take on the job of re-writing the libretto and blending in the lyrics.