

# Thomas Paine in Opera: Thoughts on Viewing *Thomas Paine in Violence*

by Mariam Touba

"*Agrarian Justice: The Musical*"? or, perhaps, "Variations on a Theme of *Agrarian Justice*"? One can only speculate on a possible subtitle for *Thomas Paine in Violence*, Paul Pinto's eighty-minute opera that premiered in New York City in November 2017 at HERE, in association with *thingNY*, both forums for experimental theater.

Pinto, writer, composer, actor, producer, and promoter of electronic sound performance, is the prime creative force behind this innovative work. The self-described "opera-sermon" was directed by playwright and composer Rick Burkhardt and choreographed by Chloe Treat. It was presented to appreciative viewers at a venue on the edge of Manhattan's SoHo with a cacophony of unusual stimuli and new sounds.

Lights, brilliant and stark, open on Thomas Paine, seated, elevated over a sound studio. He is dressed in a white gown and a shawl that may evoke the ethereal, or simply the sleepwear in which he died. Paine hovers above the accoutrements and culture of a radio station, itself a somewhat antiquated method of communication in our digital age. The performer, Joan La Barbara, is a woman, an artistic choice pointing us toward the dynamics of powerlessness. La Barbara is renowned for vocal versatility and technique, and, with her chiseled features, she inhabits the role so well that this gender-bending casting has, ironically, less impact. Her virtuosity is matched by an ensemble of four men in constant motion, leaping, dancing, prancing, and enunciating to perfection. They serve as a Greek chorus of Paine's thoughts, memories, and subconscious blended with our own contemporary concerns. When the inevitable reference to present-day politics, culture, or technology arises, the anachronism is followed by the quick, winking aside, "Whatever that means," a source of humor in a serious production that nonetheless does not lack for laughs. The words of this "Manchorus" come out in rapid-fire phrases, sometimes preceded by an announced introduction, "Biography!" Paineites have the advantage here, as isolated snippets—the chorus seldom verbalizes full sentences—like "making stays," "bridges," "near execution," would make no sense to those not familiar with his life story. (I found myself laughing out loud at the plaint, "Harvey Keitel wearing my hats,"—a fleeting reference to Keitel's nuanced portrayal of Paine in the 1982 Ettore Scola film *La Nuit de Varennes*). A leitmotif is Paine's recitation of illness—major and minor—that plagued him in his life. The list is startlingly accurate—typhoid, abscess, gout, vertigo, a series of strokes, etc.—reflecting Paul Pinto's intimate knowledge of Thomas Paine's life. Pinto must know that the

resilient Paine was no hypochondriac—rather the list is more likely a metaphor for the illnesses in society that prevent Paine's vital message from being heard.

Indeed, that is the theme: virtually the only full sentences in the opera are the words of *Agrarian Justice*, Paine's 1797 work that addresses and proposes solutions for the systematic income inequality of his day, but, as Joan La Barbara/Thomas Paine tries to read them over the cosmic airwaves, she/he is always stymied. Nonetheless, they are repeated often enough—especially the phrase "justice, and not charity"—that they are absorbed by an audience mostly unfamiliar with much of Paine's life and writings (a long excerpt from *Agrarian Justice* is also provided in the program for good measure).

This same frustration manifests itself differently when the Manchorus articulates two of Paine's sentences. They recite, "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly" from the *American Crisis I* in perfect harmony, but, in an amazing rapid repetition, the phrase morphs into something else, either sinister or meaningless. The opera actually closes with Paine's observation on poverty from *Agrarian Justice*, "More persons fall annually into it than get out of it," but this strange, thrilling chant eventually turns into "Poor sons hate your rights." The "violence" of the opera's title is this evisceration of Paine's message, words as crucial for our age as for his.

But, speaking of words, they sometimes fail in this production. Paine, as he tries with endless frustration to broadcast his message, blurts out obscenities, over and over—sometimes bleeping them out because this is radio, after all. My complaint is not uttered out of prudery: while curse words are ubiquitous in our society and on stage, Paine did not use them. This is one aspect of his character that is not in dispute; he eschewed vulgar language and off-color stories. The challenge for Pinto and all other playwrights and screen-writers—wordsmiths, all—who want to depict Thomas Paine remains to capture their subject's passion, clear language, and approachability without falling back on the too easy use of crude language.

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Thomas Paine's Spirit sits at the center amid the cacophony of voices and instruments in a radio studio

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