

Arts & Entertainment

Watkins' 'Dark River' at Oakland Opera

By Ken Bullock, Special to the Planet

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Behind a scrim decorated with concentric circles, framed by cotton bolls, Emmett Till is dancing (performed by Hannefah Hassan-Evans), high-stepping in his Chicago finery, until he acknowledges a white woman passing—after which, two white men in black beat him in a brutal, stylized assault that turns his dance into writhing.

That's where Oakland Opera's world premiere of Mary D. Watkins' *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story* takes off: with the reaction of the rural African-American community to Till's murder in the mid-1950s. The staging employs a broad, long ramp that leads through the audience to the main stage, where the ensemble gathers in a cotton field to mourn Till and other victims of lynch law. It seems as if every spare foot of the Oakland Metro Operahouse, off Jack London Square, is in use; later, the audience will turn to watch scenes in a sharecropper's home, positioned like a loft, opposite the main stage.

In a flashback to the late '20s, a black woman and two young girls are sorting cotton when one of the girls, seeing the schoolbus pass by, asks why she can't go to school like the white kids. Jeanine Anderson, as her mother, sings beautifully, giving perspective and comfort to her daughter, one of 20 children. Bolanle Origumwa and India Wilkerson accompany her well as the two girls. The daughter, wondering why she can't go to school, will grow up to be Fannie Lou Hamer, who will lead the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the '64 Democratic Convention.

When the story jumps ahead to 1962, it starts to take off. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers arrive in rural Mississippi; Fannie Lou (sung and acted by the splendid Raina Simons) is surprised to learn she has a constitutional right to vote—and becomes more and more deeply involved in the movement, at first to the consternation of her husband, Papp (a prepossessing Jo Vincent Parks)—and for good reason. While attempting to be registered as a voter, Hamer and her family are thrown off the plantation where they've sharecropped.

Twenty-three scenes, with an intermission, take the audience through Hamer's odyssey and the mushrooming of the civil rights movement—from the treacherous fieldwork of voter registration and providing the indigent with food and necessities through demonstrations and the decision to work with white students, the beatings and murders of movement workers, to the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Party and its challenge of the Mississippi delegation at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City in 1964, and finally, to Hamer's dismissal for her integrationist views in 1966 by a reconstituted SNCC, responding to Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power.

Mary Watkins' music, played by a sextet conducted by Deirdre McClure, with music director Skye Atman on piano, lucidly propels and embellishes the action throughout, a complex and often harrowing series of events, epic in scope, over four years' time, crystalized in the figure of Hamer, a middle-aged wife and

mother with a sixth-grade education, who heroically takes up the cause of civil rights, finally believing it to be that of human rights.

For those who remember the events, the opera often touches some of the same nerves, has the same sense of tension and urgency that gave—and gives—a feeling both of immediacy and of history in the making.

The score is fluid, constantly shifting—the composer later remarked on its many rhythmic and harmonic changes—with a low, dark, insistent sound, driven by strings and percussion, alternating with more lyrical moments, brightened by woodwinds. Stylistically, it's an ambitious and successful amalgam of modern compositional modes with jazz orchestration and gospel themes, all shifting in and out, kaleidoscopically, with the action, the sung dialogue and speeches.

There was comment about the pageant-like quality of the opera, the first half in particular. The lyrics come through most clearly when figures of speech are rendered as simple poetry, and with quotations of scripture, especially Hamer's quoting of Proverbs 26 to a penitent Sheriff's Wife (after an aria beautifully sung by Cary Ann Rosko): "He who digs a pit for another will fall therein ... and he of ill will who rolls a stone will see it return." Much of the narrative seems taken directly from a wire service teletype; it's made caustic, satiric in moments like J. Edgar Hoover (Kenneth Woods) announcing, "If you turn up dead, we'll investigate," lightened by humor and the vernacular: "Fanny Lou, they're playing your speech on the picture tube!" Papp exclaims over the phone, long distance.

With the scene in jail and a lively skit where the men re-enact with brooms blacks defending themselves against nightriders, ending on a hilarious note when a "mean old woman" and her two sons send Klansmen scurrying when they shoot the gas tank in their car, the first half ends. After intermission, the opera doubles in intensity, with the Freedom Democratic Party's trip to Atlantic City. In his boxer shorts, a cigarette-smoking LBJ (Woods again) calls from his hotel room to deflect the possible damage to the southern voting bloc if the official Mississippi delegation is unseated in favor of the "One Man, One Vote" Freedom Party. Hamer meets with NAACP chief Roy Wilkins (Charles Alston), who tells her to go home, go back to the farm; let the educated staff do the work. An ebullient Hubert Humphrey (Alan Cochran) tenders crocodile tears and a scant compromise, while his beaming secretary (Hassan-Evans again) flutters humorously about him like a moth.

Much of this is based on the original events, all in counterpoint to the speeches by Aaron Henry (a splendid Darron Flagg), civil rights attorney Joseph Rauh (Alexander Frank) and Hamer, famously asserting, "I question America" and "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." Sound familiar?

The cast of 20, whether singing as a chorus or delivering the many individual roles, can't be praised enough for its singing and acting. It's a real opera, in that all the different production elements come to the fore, a highlight of every Oakland Opera performance. Darryl V. Jones of Cal State East Bay directed, choreographed (with Hassan-Evans) and served as dramaturge; Oakland Opera Artistic Director Tom Dean designed the set with Jesse Miller; Robert Anderson lit it; Susan Swerdlow produced and did the ensemble music direction. And there are more involved in the project produced by the composer, Oakland Opera and Cal State over the past few years. It's emerged, a moving, singing scroll of modern history, like the old Popular Front and WPA murals, illuminated by and illuminating the story of one brave woman who stepped forward for the good of all.

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EAST BAY EXPRESS

Dark River Ahead

Oakland Opera recreates the Fannie Lou Hamer story

By Rachel Swan

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When you drop a pebble in a stream it forms concentric circles on the surface of the water. You could say that image symbolizes change — or, at the very least, disruption. Thus, it seems apropos that Oakland Opera artistic director Tom Dean designed the set for *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story* with circles as a predominant motif. (One needs to look no further than the word "river" to know it's a story of movement and change.) In Dean's set, brown spherical disks adorn a transparent curtain that's framed by cotton buds, all painted with curlicue stems and flowers as thick and white as an antebellum pinafore. Cotton represents a sordid past, and the curtain promises to open up to something new — starting on the day that a black woman from Mississippi decided to exercise her right to vote.

Though she wasn't a central figure in the civil rights movement, Hamer makes a perfect character for an opera. Born to sharecroppers, Fanny Lou Hamer (née Townsend) was the youngest of twenty children. She came up hard, forced to leave school after sixth grade and condemned to a life in the fields. At a young age she married fellow sharecropper Pap Hamer, moved to another plantation shack, and started a family of her own. Hard-scrabble beginnings helped Hamer get a thick skin (she's the person responsible for such quotations as "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired," a prominent refrain in *Dark River*) and a tender heart. She was known for speaking plain and constantly invoking the Bible. She was, in other words, the archetypal heroine of melodrama — one who, by suffering, becomes virtuous.

In this case, "melodrama" is a compliment. After all, what is opera but "melos" (i.e., music) and "drama" at their most extreme? *Dark River* starts off heavy, with the specter of Emmett Till (Hannefah Hassan-Evans) dancing behind the curtain while the cast members emerge with their pitchforks and rakes. They sing a haunting number about justice and remembering the past, which closes on a jazz chord. Then we're instantly shuttled back to a 1920s-era cotton plantation, where young Fannie Townsend (Bolanle Origenwa) plays patty cake with her sisters under the watchful eye of her mother Lou Ella (Jeannine Anderson). The narrative skips around a bit but mostly focuses on Hamer's activism in the 1960s, which began after she heard a sermon by Reverend James Bevel urging African Americans to vote. Mesmerizing soprano Raiña Simons stars as the adult Hamer.

Composer Mary D. Watkins and director Darryl V. Jones created *Dark River* as an ensemble piece, though it features several climactic moments of Simons singing by herself, often from a podium, usually addressing other members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi, always framed by cotton buds. Simons vivifies the character, who apparently was a singer in her own right. She stares unflinchingly at the white cops and racists who try to bring her down, and at the Democrats who sneer when Hamer and fellow activists disrupt their 1964 National Convention. *Dark River* reaches its peak when Hamer delivers one of her most famous speeches to the Democratic Convention's Credentials Committee. "Is this America, the land of the free, and the home of the brave?" she asks, hitting a long cadenza on brave. "They burn us, they lynch us, they make our lives hell!" The word hell is a protracted high note, beautiful and bracing and probably two octaves beyond the average singer's range. At a recent Sunday matinee, it drew an audible "All *right*, girl!" from the audience.

But Simons stands in good company. Singer Jeanine Anderson, who plays minor characters throughout the play but is well known for her singing on local jazz projects, is also a phenomenal presence. She and Simons both know how to manhandle this material, which is no easy feat. But for a few upbeat gospel tunes that feature the whole chorus, most of the songs sound through-composed (meaning nonsectional, with no sing-songy melody to latch onto). Watkins' music mixes jazz and blues in a nontraditional way, often requiring singers to wrangle with complex harmonies or chord tones. It takes a capable musician not only to understand this stuff, but also to give it the emotional heft it needs.

Oakland Opera Theater is a budget company whose members know how to use resources. Their flagship venue, the Oakland Metro Operahouse, includes a proscenium stage and a large floor space that's subject to endless reconfiguration. In this case, Dean had the audience flank both sides of a long walkway, which served as an extension of the stage. Music director Deirdre McClure stood in one wing, conducting her six-piece orchestra (piano, strings, reeds, drums, and keyboard). A second stage hung in the rafters just above the bar. Decked in wood paneling, it served as the set for Fanny and Pap's small plantation home. Jones typically had multiple planes of action going at once, with Emmett Till appearing in the background while the ensemble stood in front.

That setup worked for a play that's preoccupied with connecting things — the personal to the political, the particular to the general, the past to the future. Watkins chose to gloss over details of Hamer's personal life and focus instead on her activism, particularly the events leading up to the 1964 Convention. *Dark River* culminates in 1966, the year Hamer was asked to leave the SNCC. (In the play, Hamer lost face because she favored integration over the predominating view that whites should go back and educate their own communities.) It's a bold note for Watkins to end on, and one that she manages to make hopeful. I'll spare you the ending, but "hope" should give a bit of a clue.

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