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THE OPERA LOVER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE

RUSSELL THOMAS

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Breaking barriers

By Hattie Butterworth

Redefining industry norms with his work on- and off-stage, tenor Russell Thomas shares how he is channelling trauma into powerful art to inspire and heal

If you could invite anyone to dinner who would it be? For two pins I can guess tenor Russell Thomas would say Wagner and Nina Simone. 'Huge fan of Nina Simone – her musicality, her advocacy, and how she created her own path,' reads his website. And so planning for an interview in which so many powerful influences and devotions relate to the artist at hand was simultaneously daunting and thrilling.

But quickly once we sat down and began chatting I knew my research was largely redundant. Thomas has gripping conviction and a musical personality of activism. Ringing through my ears remains the key take-away: 'People are comfortable with people that look like them'.

As is often the case when talking to tenors in their 40s – Thomas is 47 – we start with Wagner and the role of Parsifal. Thomas's role debut in Wagner's final opera opens at Houston Grand Opera on 19 January, and our meeting followed the first week of rehearsals, two weeks before Christmas. 'I'm enjoying the process of getting to know this style more deeply,' Thomas smiles. 'I've done some Wagner things, but never a role like this Parsifal. I think the piece changed musical history, because of the nature of the harmony. Wagner was trying things that had not really been explored before on that scale.'

Stamina is often my concern when speaking to singers about Wagner. After all, the four hours and 45 minutes of *Parsifal* can also be quite the experience, even for an opera enthusiast. But Thomas is remarkably sanguine about the role's demands: 'Of all the Wagner roles, I think it's probably the easier one. For the young Heldentenors who were once baritones, this is usually the first Wagner role that they do. Parsifal is longer than Sigmund, but it sits >



DAVID PHOTOGRAHY



CLARE BURDA

Above: Russell Thomas as Otello in the Royal Opera House's 2022 production

in a comfortable range. There's almost never a thick orchestration when you're at a part of the voice that doesn't shine.'

But, he tells me, the challenge has appeared when attempting to memorise the score. 'Learning it was not so tough, but memorising it and really getting it into your voice and into your body is very difficult. Knowing exactly what you're saying and where and why and who you're talking to is the hardest part.'

We begin to discuss how to practise and internalise Wagner and move to Thomas's own learning regimen. 'My process is usually starting with the words. I read the words and speak them as I'm reading, just to feel them in my mouth before I start ever learning notes. Then I go towards rhythms and the rhythmic structure of the piece. I'm trying to figure out when I should be very square and 'in the rhythm', and when I should stretch a word, syllable or rhythm to make the text sound more natural.'

Thomas made history in the UK in 2022 as he became the first Black Otello in the Royal Opera House's history. It was a moment not without criticism from Thomas, who questioned why it had taken so long for the opera house to diversify the role's casting. Racial injustice in opera is something Thomas has been repeatedly campaigning against,

recently co-founding the Black Leadership Arts Collective to support young Black singers in gaining opportunities within the profession.

But for Thomas's own trajectory, he recognises an element of luck, though not without intense perseverance: 'I was very bold. I reached out to people and I sought people out. I auditioned for things that had no business auditioning for and those people said, "I like your style, I will follow along. I will help you?."

Thomas is a Miami native. His earlier years took him from Florida's New World School of the Arts and the Florida Grand Opera Chorus via prestigious young artist programmes to the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. From there his career has seen him work with practically every important US company, as well as the Bayerische Staatsoper, Opera Frankfurt, Deutsche Oper Berlin and Opéra national de Paris.

In spite of all of this success, Thomas' dreams were never fiercely set on the voice, but on the art of opera as a whole. 'My dream was never just to be a singer. But I knew that if I didn't sing that I would be involved in opera in some way. I didn't know what way that was, and I was very blessed that I had a voice that people wanted to invest in.'



L.A. OPERA

Above: Thomas' residency at LA Opera continues with the world premiere of autobiographical work *Fire and Blue Sky* in June

Combining his dedication to all aspects of opera is being seen in his ongoing residency at LA Opera. The first role of its kind at the company, Thomas became a curator of the new After Hours recital series and as a mentor to the Russell Thomas Young Artists. The next project is one of immense personal significance to Thomas, working to develop an autobiographical vocal work based on his relationship with his mother. In June, the world premiere of *Fire and Blue Sky* will combine music by composer Joel Thompson with a libretto by poet Imani Tolliver, based on conversations with Thomas himself.

'The piece is about my growing up in a household where I was a child of a rape. I was conceived from a rape and my mother was forced to give birth because her mother was religious and believed she couldn't have an abortion.'

I'm moved to ask why he felt compelled to share this experience on stage. It emerges to have been a somewhat spontaneous decision that changed Thomas' life: 'I spoke about it first in an interview in Frankfurt,' he explains. 'After the performance a lot of women came up to me and said how it touched them that I spoke about this. They said how inspiring it was to see the success of a kid who grew up under those circumstances.'

'I get emotional about it because I felt so much shame about it for so long. Then just speaking about it sort of off the cuff, because one interviewer just asked me about my family? It was a "Russell Thomas" thing to do - I just say things and I don't necessarily think about them. But it had such a profound effect on people who read that article.'

'It wasn't about this American guy who's coming to sing in Frankfurt in a new production. They cared about the fact that there's this guy who grew up, who was conceived under violent circumstances, but who has become a successful person in an art form that usually you don't find a lot of Black people being successful in. Statistically I should not be a success.'

To turn this personal emotional experience into a work of art was something Thomas felt compelled to do during the residency, 'Where else was I going to be able to do this kind of thing and have it written in a way that I felt was personal?'

'I found a poet who publicly shared her own experiences of sexual assault, and she wrote this piece. It's not violent in the least, but it's not about the violence. It's about the relationship between this mother and her child.'

The work is sung by Thomas with an additional female voice role taking on the part of the mother.

'In my experience with my mother as a child I felt like there was such a disconnect. There was this gulf emotionally between us. It was always a story that I wanted to tell.'

As ever with Thomas's projects, he hopes the impact will go beyond the premiere: 'I've been asking the community engagement office in Los Angeles to find groups of people who are actively talking about these things – not just talking about sexual violence and trauma, but the effects of them on a family. Where are those women who carried the pregnancy to term, or who are still raising those babies? What is the effect of that trauma on the relationship with that child?'

'In my experience with my mother as a child I felt like there was such a disconnect. There was this gulf emotionally between us. It was always a story that I wanted to tell'

'I don't know if my story is that unique,' he asserts. 'But it's something that I think needs to be spoken about and this is a very meaningful way. It's like therapy for me – I've done a lot of therapy, but this is another level. Just being able to share this story and to be intimately involved in its creation.'

Our conversation takes Thomas's project into the wider context of the classical music industry, where to share personal trauma and create art around it hasn't been traditionally encouraged. Then to Thomas' mantra: 'People are comfortable around people who look like them – they just are.'

'I personally don't think that it's possible to give yourself or your audience 100 per cent of yourself if you're not honest about who you are.'

It reminds me of a recent conversation I had with composer Errollyn Wallen, who disclosed that she's often the only Black person in the audience at the Royal Opera House. I bring this up to Thomas and ask why he thinks Black people generally don't go to the opera.

'The reason for that I think is because they don't feel comfortable in those spaces,' he says. 'They don't see themselves reflected in those places. When I sang Otello in London there were so many Black people coming to the stage door.'

'One night there was maybe six or seven Black folks. And they came and said how great it was to see me on stage. They were not from the arts or singers. You will see a diverse audience if you have a diverse stage.'

Thomas believes this lack of diversity stems from the decision makers: 'Oftentimes the only way you're going to get a diverse stage is if you have people in the back office that are also diverse. You can't just put a few token Asian or Black people on the stage and

say, "Look at what we're doing". It has to be systemic. And you're not going to do that if everybody who's making the decisions mostly look the same.'

Thomas reveals elements to the issue that have certainly passed me by, which can stem from basic hiring practices: 'People have told me several times "Oh, we never get any Black applicants". And I ask them, "Where do you put the information?" If you're putting them only in blogs for arts of course you're not going to get any Black folks applying. They're not looking for jobs there because they have not traditionally been included in those searches.'

'I don't think that the practices that become exclusionary are necessarily conscious. Yes, I'm sure

there are people who are very consciously racist and they said "I don't want that person in my office", or that's in the back of their mind. But this isn't always about conscious racism.'

I'm so taken with how logical Thomas' explanations are. It's clear that beyond his captivating voice, Thomas has a vocation of leadership that the industry needs to follow.

'I think this is the kind of thing I hope that I can make my mark in this business with. That I championed all singers and artists and that I champion opera. But I will always speak for the idea that we need to have diverse voices. There are people who are qualified to do these jobs and to be in these spaces who have something to share.' ON

Below: Latonia Moore as Aida and Russell Thomas as Radames in LA Opera's 2022 production of Aida

