










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Bonhoeffer: The liturgy he deserved.

Thomas Lloyd's 'Bonhoeffer' (2nd review)

BY: **Kile Smith** 03.15.2013

Thomas Lloyd calls his *Bonhoeffer* a "choral theater piece," which is exactly right. It's 70 minutes of choral singing, but this tribute to a World War II martyr doesn't present itself as a choir performance. Watching it is like watching an elaborate church service play out.

The Crossing: Lloyd, *Bonhoeffer*. Maren Montalbano, Rebecca Hoke, Rebecca Siler, sopranos; Maren Montalbano Brehm, alto; Guillaume Comber, violin; Ulrich Boeckheler, cello; Mike Sparhuber, percussion; John Bailey, organ and piano; Tim Early, Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch, dancers. Tim Early, choreographer; Donald Nally, conductor. March 10, 2013 at Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral, 38th and Chestnut Sts.

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A martyr's gamble (and a composer's too)

KILE SMITH

Because Donald Nally and The Crossing have performed my music, anything favorable I write about them might be read as biased. But I wanted to describe the effect of Thomas Lloyd's *Bonhoeffer* on me. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and work I have known and loved for a long time; many years ago I set his poems from prison, *Stationen aus dem Wege zur Freiheit*.

Lloyd calls his *Bonhoeffer* a "choral theater piece," which is exactly right. It's 70 minutes of choral singing— specifically, men's choir with an occasional women's trio— but it does not present itself as a choir performance.

A male and female dancer enter at times, and leave at times, but it's not a dance performance. A violinist, cellist, percussionist and keyboardist doubling on piano and organ are really more accompaniment (even when spotlighted— and they were wonderful) than performers.

Bonhoeffer is not a performance. It's a liturgy.

In the same way that clergy, musicians and congregants enact a public work (the literal meaning of "liturgy"), so does Lloyd arrange the singers, dancers and instrumentalists in *Bonhoeffer*. Watching it is to watch an elaborate church service play out.

Moment of confession

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The men all wear button-down, open-collar shirts of various muted colors, led by the male dancer, whose white shirt with half-rolled-up sleeves copies the famous photograph of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Berlin's Tegel Prison. The costuming likens the men to prisoners or to permutations of Bonhoeffer.

The Lutheran pastor and theologian, arrested for his role in the most famous of plots to assassinate Hitler, corresponded with his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer while in prison. Words from these letters make up a good part of Lloyd's text for *Bonhoeffer*.

Most affecting is the almost constant shuffling of positions during the piece. The men filter through the audience, as if in a lost procession. They move into a semblance of choral performance array, but not for long. Soloists move about, the choir's form mutates into circles and lines; sometimes they sit, sometimes backs are to the audience. They gather around a phonograph, they sing to all the corners of the space, and, in one stunning moment, they diffuse and aggregate into facing duets, confessing to, and absolving, each other.

Dancing without touching

I expected the dancing to distract me. It did not, but rather enhanced the theatricality. Tim Early, dancer and choreographer, created an absorbing ritual, at times downcast, at times yearning, but never maudlin. Dancer Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch was tender and noble, sometimes soloing, sometimes joining Early. Only once, I believe, did they— heartbreakingly— touch.

Her role, and that of the three women singers (lovingly performed), personified Maria. Once Dietrich was arrested, they would never meet again, but their letters sear in the hope of their ultimate union in marriage. Bonhoeffer was hanged—on direct order from Hitler, well after all hope of a Nazi victory had been dashed—on April 9, 1945, not one month before Germany surrendered.

Physical challenge

Thomas Lloyd's music, in one sense, never changes. The vocal writing is softly declamatory and chant-like. It's usually understated, as chant is, often in unison or in steadily rhythmic chords.

When it breaks into individual lines, the effect is more of layers than of counterpoint. It seems intentional, because the syllables, many times shoehorned into stubborn beats, evoke the image of imprisonment. Words seem to lean against walls that won't break, or to hang onto bars that won't bend.

While *Bonhoeffer* contains an overflowing amount of text, and Lloyd often sets it high in the voices, the massed tension is relieved by the form's articulation into episodes. Short and not-so-short vocal solos abound, airing out the texture. The men of *The Crossing* had to have been tested, and the physical movement had to have challenged singing and listening. They responded to the challenge magnificently.

Lloyd's gamble

Other pleasant surprises were the numerous quotations from classical repertoire that echoed Lutheran chorales, Bonhoeffer's piano playing, and spirituals he discovered in America. I call them pleasant surprises because I can't overemphasize how huge a gamble the composer took to include these.

Salting repertoire pieces into a new work can be disastrous; familiar genius easily overwhelms. But Lloyd feathered entrances and cleverly layered musical events with original material.

The quotations came and went, and except for one spiritual sung around the phonograph, they were not dramatic destinations. Instead, they were poignant reveries, part of the swirl of the fog of imprisonment.



The staging, by Early, Lloyd and Nally, was riveting. In this work of accumulated power, too much cannot be said about Donald Nally's musical direction. The pacing and brilliance of execution was consistently and utterly engaging.

That power and that pacing come, ultimately, from Thomas Lloyd, whose moving creation of this liturgy— really, a sacred space set apart from any normal concert performance experience— is admirable. Not only that: The public work *Bonhoeffer* succeeded. ♦

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