

## **MT EVEREST AND THE 1996 DISASTER**

While the phrase “feeling on top of the world” is often used to describe a general sense of exhilaration, in its literal application it refers to the peak of Mt. Everest, which at 29,029 feet above sea level is the highest place on the planet. Other mountains may pose more difficulty and greater risk, but the symbolic feat of “summiting” (a verb used by climbers to indicate reaching the summit) Mt. Everest is the ultimate achievement. In fact, unlike other treacherous peaks, Everest poses challenges that have more to do with the effects of the cold and thin air than it does with the actual climb. As we will see in this opera, climbers are as likely to die while descending the mountain as they are while attempting to reach the summit. As one climber put it, “Climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain.” (A feature film which appeared shortly after the opera’s premiere simulated the difficulty of the climb. While it may have taken some poetic license with the story, it nevertheless provides a good visual picture of the difficulties faced by the climbers).

The mountain now called “Everest” was recognized as the world’s tallest peak in the early 1700’s. In 1865, the Royal Geographical Society named the mountain after Sir George Everest, former Surveyor General, though the locals referred to it as Sagarmatha (in Nepal) or Chomolunga (in Tibet), the two nations which border the mountain. Everest himself objected to the name because it could not be spelled or even pronounced by the local population. Prior to the first successful ascent, about twenty-five of the climbers who tried unsuccessfully to reach the summit died on the mountain.

It is not clear when the summit was first reached. In 1924, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine were believed to have reached

the top, but since they did not have a way of communicating with those below, and both died before they could return to camp, the question cannot be answered. Mallory, by the way, was the man who coined the phrase “because it was there” to explain his obsession with climbing the mountain. The first people to summit and live to tell the tale were New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, in 1953. Since news of the successful climb by a Commonwealth citizen reached England about the same time as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (the current reigning monarch, as of this writing), it was seen as especially fortuitous, and Hillary was knighted, while Norgay was also given a prestigious medal.

Over the years, a number of other climbers successfully made it to the top. In the early 1990's, a number of veteran climbers, assuming that their expertise, combined with an elaborate support system, could make such ascents relatively safe, began to organize guided climbs up the mountain. For a hefty fee (in the 1996 expedition, which is the subject of this opera, the cost was \$65,000) even inexperienced amateurs could reach the summit. While the veteran climbers looked down on these organizations, they were so popular that at times several such parties made the ascent at the same time.

Hubris, however, seems invariably to lead to a fall. The 1996 climbing season provided a reality check for this booming business, just as the Challenger disaster reminded us that space travel was not as safe as we had supposed. In May of that year, two commercial climbing parties (along with an IMAX film crew) were on the mountain at once, making the final ascent to the summit. (Prior to the actual ascent, clients had to spend several weeks practicing and getting used to the high altitude). One of these parties, led by Rob Hall of Adventure Consultants, lost four members, including Hall himself. A fifth, Beck Weathers, survived after being left for dead

twice, though he lost one hand and the fingers of the other hand. It happened that a writer, Jon Krakauer, was part of the expedition, having been sent by *Outside* magazine. His book *Into Thin Air* became a best-seller. Some members of another party, called Mountain Madness (led by Scott Fischer, who also lost his life), felt that they had been misrepresented in Krakauer's book and subsequently published their own accounts. A number of unfortunate factors led to the failure of the mission. A surprise blizzard prevented the descent from taking place on time. One of the climbers had been an airline pilot, who was used to seeing clouds from above. He immediately recognized the danger posed by these clouds and made an early descent. Perhaps the main problem was Hall's poor judgement—possibly the result of a loss of mental acuity caused by the high altitude, as he was generally known for his professionalism and his belief that safety should be the primary concern. Although it had been established that the descent had to begin by 2:00 P.M. in order to return safely to one of the camps before dark, he persevered well beyond that time. Perhaps he was motivated by his desire to allow Doug Hansen to realize his dream of reaching the summit. Unlike the wealthy clients who made up the bulk of the parties, Hansen was a working-class man who had taken a second mortgage on his house to join Hall on a previous trip, during which he was forced to turn back just short of the summit. Knowing that Hansen could not afford another try, Hall invited him to join him on the 1996 expedition without paying the fee. As is shown in the opera, Hall remained faithful to Hansen till the end. Although some accounts indicate that the two had become separated at the end, the librettist Gene Scheer learned from his personal interview with one of the survivors that it appeared that the two bodies were together on the slope. All in all, the storm claimed eight lives. Later in the year, another seven fatalities occurred, making 1996 the worst

year ever in Everest's history. (Note: there is no practical way of retrieving bodies of those who die on the mountain. Scheer notes that "When you climb Mt. Everest, you are literally walking through a graveyard.")

Nevertheless, new climbers persisted, and the death rate fell to slightly higher than four percent. However, other problems developed. In his 2008 book, *High Crimes: The Fate of Everest in an age of Greed*, Michael Kodas describes how the sense of honor and cooperation that existed among climbers in earlier times had deteriorated, and that the base camps had become hotbeds of prostitution and theft. Guides were found to be abandoning their clients, and unscrupulous vendors were endangering the lives of climbers by selling defective oxygen tanks. Perhaps the 1996 expedition, which is the subject of this opera, could be seen as a tribute to a code of honor and heroism which was quickly fading into the past.

## **CHARACTERS**

Rob Hall, tenor—mountain-climbing guide, leader of the expedition

Jan Arnold, mezzo-soprano—Rob's wife

Beck Weathers, baritone—a climber

Meg Weathers, child mezzo-soprano—Beck's daughter

Doug Hansen, Bass-Baritone—a climber (In the Lyric production, this role will be played by Craig Verm, an experienced mountain climber in real life, who also appeared in the Dallas production)

Guy Cotter, baritone (with amplification for walkie-talkie effect)—part of the support team

Mike Groom, spoken—a guide

SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) chorus-- representing the ghosts of climbers who have died on the mountain

## **THE OPERA**

*Everest* had its premiere at Dallas Opera in January, 2015. The current Lyric production represents the second time it has been performed, an event which may be more important for the future of a work than the premiere itself. Everyone loves a world premiere, with critics and reporters flocking in from across the nation. Yet many of these operas never get past the first production. What is important is getting a second company to express faith in the opera's significance. In the past the Lyric has been involved in at least two second productions that helped propel the operas into the mainstream: "Vanessa," now recognized as a great American classic, and "Of Mice and Men."

Before we delve into the plot, a few words about the musical language of the opera would be in order. If you are looking for an opera with tunes that you can hum as you leave the theater, this opera is not for you. However, if you are looking for an intense musical drama without big solos (sometimes called "park and bark" arias), then you can anticipate the type of theatrical performance that only opera can deliver. There are some extended solo pieces, but they are meant to move the story forward, not to show off the singers' voices. The power of the operatic voice is used to intensify the emotions expressed. Like most contemporary composers and librettists, Scheer and Talbot put the story front and center.

Joby Talbot's music has some features of "minimalism," a form of music championed most prominently by Phillip Glass and Michael Nyman, featuring frequent repeated phrases and sparse harmonies. Tremolos (rapid repeated two-note sequences) and glissandos (sliding from one note to another) are prominent. However, he is no

slave to any particular musical style. The most noticeable feature of his orchestration is the prominence given to the percussion section, using four or five percussionists to play a variety of about thirty “instruments,” including a marimba, “Turandot gongs,” three different Chinese cymbals, temple blocks, a thunder sheet, a slapstick, and an egg shaker.

Another important feature is the extensive use of the chorus as a character of equal importance with the principal singers. The chorus is onstage for the entire opera. It is hard to think of another opera in which the chorus is so central to the action, though *Turandot* and *Boris Gudenov* come to mind.

One notable aspect of Talbot’s choral composition technique is his extended use of a fugal form, which we normally associate with the Baroque period. This consists of overlapping choral lines, in which the voices come in one at a time with the same words and music, creating a layering effect.

The action of the opera is continuous, without a break; the score, however, indicates that it was conceived of in twelve scenes, as will be reflected in the following synopsis. There is a single set, and the characters are on stage the whole time; lighting is used to focus our attention on a single character or group of characters.

**SETTING: MOUNT EVEREST (AND THE HOMES OF ROB HALL AND BECK WEATHERS). The mountain is symbolized by a pile of boulders, represented by cubes onstage.**

**TIME: May 10-11, 1996**

**Scene 1 (Prologue): “Is this how it ends?”**

The first sound we hear is that of a short-wave radio; the libretto indicates that this should be playing as the audience enters the theater. We then hear the sound of the wind and an ethereal

chorus. The curtain opens on a map of Mt. Everest, which is then lifted to show Beck Weathers lying unconscious on the mountain. The chorus begins singing "Is this how...?" while the basses break from the rest of the chorus to ask "How many breaths will you take in your life? Will you only count the last ones you take?" The full chorus continues, "A wisp of cloud in a clear blue sky? It's something nobody ever sees. Dreams and contingencies spun into elegies - One more step... it feels pure and beautiful/Beyond answers, beyond questions. Is this how it begins?"

### **Scene 2: Everest summit, 2:30 P.M.**

Rob Hall has reached the summit. In a solo he celebrates his achievement and sings, "It's so beautiful!" He remains at the summit, waiting for Doug Hansen to join him. The chorus, however, tells another story: "Do you remember becoming unaware?" (a reference to his diminished mental state resulting from loss of oxygen). They remind him he is already past the time of the scheduled descent and of the importance of timing and oxygen.

### **Scene 3: Beck's Barbeque**

The title of this scene is ironic. Beck has misplaced one of his mittens and is wearing a barbeque glove instead. The stage directions indicate that he is delirious and is hallucinating that he is conducting a barbeque at his home, recounting his adventures: "The stars were so close, it was like walking inside the Milky Way....Reach out, pluck the stars from the sky...fill your pockets with them." A couple enjoying some drinks can be seen at the side of the stage. He explains that he was considered a wimp as a child, perhaps explaining why he wanted to climb the mountain. The lights go up on his young daughter at home, who asks, "Can you see me?"

#### **Scene 4: Doug's ascent**

Rob is seen assisting Doug, who sings over and over "One last step." His climbing history, discussed in the opening chapter of this guide, is explained. Rob reminds him, "You're on top of the world" and takes his photo. The chorus, however, ominously counts off the minutes, reminding us that danger awaits.

#### **Scene 5: Photos of Jan**

This scene consists largely of a flashback, with Rob's memories of spending time with his pregnant wife, discussing a name for their daughter. In an aria which includes the most lyrical music in the opera, Jan sings of her concern for Rob (though this appears to be taking place in Rob's imagination). She also sings about Ruth Mallory, the widow of a deceased climber. Rob's reverie is interrupted when Doug calls to him for help, saying he cannot breathe.

#### **Scene 6: Doug Collapses**

Rob tries to get Doug to move, but is unable to do so. He calls to the base camp to ask for more oxygen. The two men are engulfed in the clouds.

#### **Scene 7: Beck clicks out of the line**

Beck's daughter, Meg, is heard reciting a nursery rhyme. Beck imagines that he sees her. Meg comments that Beck often seemed to be sad, and Beck confirms that "Darkness has followed me my whole adult life." His thoughts are echoed by the chorus. Beck admits that he had been suicidal. (In fact, he had undergone the journey in attempt to escape his depression—and he reported that in this sense he succeeded, despite the terrible price he paid). Beck is now blinded by the high altitude; nevertheless, he sings of his exhilaration at reaching the "Balcony," a high point on the mountain, where he has to wait (in vain) for Rob's return.

He realizes that he has lost contact with Rob. Mike Groom appears on the scene and urges him to descend. In the meantime, the chorus reminds us that it is now 5:00 P.M., three hours past the time that he should have started his descent.

### **Scene 8: The storm hits**

Jan is on the phone with the base camp, worried that Rob is still on the mountain. Lights go up on Rob, calling for more oxygen. Guy, at the other end of the line, tells Rob that he should desert Doug and save himself. Rob refuses, informing Guy that Doug can hear him. The chorus ominously sings, "All of it spinning away, ground into stardust." As they repeat this phrase, we hear Jan urging Rob to persevere.

### **Scene 9: The huddle**

The lights go up on Beck, as a group of climbers with varied colored jackets huddle below him (possibly a hallucination). The lights then go up on Rob, Doug, and Jan. Jan sings, "Too easy to die, easy as falling asleep." Doug, Rob, and Beck echo this phrase, and the four join in a quartet singing of the unbearable cold. (Jan herself had joined Rob on previous excursions, having reached the summit. She was also an M.D., and often served in that capacity on previous climbs. This time, her pregnancy forced her to remain at home.)

### **Scene 10: The South Summit**

Rob is trying to pull Doug along, and he attempts to carve out a place for Doug to get him out of the wind, but he realizes that Doug has died. Rob calls Guy with the news and tells him that his legs are giving out. Guy patches through a call from Rob to Jan, as the chorus urges him to hold on.

## **Scene 11: The phone call**

The chorus reiterates the question they asked at the beginning: “How many breaths will you take in your life?” They count down the time. Looking at Beck, they lament “Left for Dead.” As the chorus hums, Rob sings “Sarah”—thus naming his soon-to-be-born daughter. Rob and Jan sing of their love for each other. Though they realize that Rob cannot survive another night on the mountain, Rob tells her not to worry.

## **Scene 12: The Cavalry's not coming**

Jan tells Rob, “Don't feel you're alone.” The chorus, however, sings of the change in the weather which doomed the expedition. Names of people who died in previous climbs are projected onto the set, including those of Rob and Doug, who, now dressed as ghosts, join this chorus, while retaining their individual vocal lines. In Beck's imagination, Meg sings, “Where are you, Daddy?” (In an interview, Beck said it was his vision of his daughter that enabled him to persevere against enormous odds). Beck declares, “I see you,” but the chorus responds, “It's time to add another name.” Beck defiantly cries, “No.” Having regained his sanity, he realizes it will be up to him to survive (“The Cavalry's not coming”), and he stumbles into camp and is embraced by the others as the final curtain falls.

## **JOBY TALBOT**

British composer Joby Talbot was born in Wimbledon in 1971. He earned a Master of Music degree in composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. His compositional output has been quite varied, most notably in ballet and film music. His 2011 ballet score for “Alice in Wonderland” was the first such score commissioned by the Royal Ballet in over twenty years. This was followed three years later by another ballet for the same company, based on Shakespeare's “The Winter's Tale.” Among his film credits

are “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” “Son of Rambow,” “Franklyn,” and “Closed Circuit.” In 2014, he was recruited to collaborate with librettist Gene Scheer to compose the music for “Everest,” which was to be his first opera.

### **GENE SCHEER**

One of the most significant ways in which contemporary opera differs from earlier operas is the increased importance of the librettist. Whereas librettists traditionally had been subservient to the composers, today they work as equal partners and often share equal billing (as is the case with Broadway composers; we speak of Puccini’s operas but of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals). In fact, it was the librettist Gene Scheer’s idea to make “Everest” the subject of an opera; Dallas Opera then paired him with Talbot.

Gene Scheer was born in New York City in 1958. Contrary to the careers of most librettists, his formal education was in music, not literature or theater, and he earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degree at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. He initially aspired to be a singer, and he travelled to Europe for to pursue that goal, but he eventually realized that his singing talent, while adequate, was not going to get him to the top. As a result, he became increasingly involved in theater, which led to his career as a librettist (at which he has been successful enough to make his living entirely from writing).

As a librettist, Scheer has worked with a number of well-known composers. He has collaborated with Tobias Picker on two operas: *Therese Raquin* and *An American Tragedy*. He has worked with Jake Heggie (whose *Dead Man Walking* was performed last season—libretto by Terrance McNally) on a number of collaborations, including *Last Acts* (the title was later changed to *Three Decembers*), *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and *Moby Dick*, which may well

come to be considered one of the masterpieces of 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera. He recently collaborated with Jennifer Higdon on the highly acclaimed opera *Cold Mountain* (based on a Civil-War novel, though, ironically, the title could well have applied to “Everest” as well).

Though primarily known as a librettist, he has not let his musical education go to waste. He has written a number of song cycles and other vocal works, which have been performed by notable singers including Renee Fleming and Denyce Graves.

Presently, he lives in New York City, with his wife Christine, who is a singer and musician in her own right.

Scheer was first attracted to the subject of the 1996 expedition when he read Krakauer's book. The opera, however, is based primarily not on written sources but on his personal interviews with the survivors, most notably Beck Weathers. He considered this a promising subject for an opera because, “Opera does Big well,” referring to the event as a “huge mythical subject” and a “large emotional canvas.” He believes that music is the best medium for expressing physical reality, such as the loss of brain cells suffered by the climbers, and that music can express shades of meaning that words can only hint at. For him, the opera deals with “really big sorts of existential themes.” He also was interested in the way that crises such as this one “bring out the best and worst in people.” He says that what he is looking for in opera is “the chance to watch people making decisions in real time that will affect those people and their families for the rest of their lives.”

### **CNN OPERA**

Though originally coined as a pejorative term, the term “CNN Opera” has come to describe an opera based on current or relatively recent events that were newsworthy at the time they

happened. The 1996 Everest disaster was one such event. The most prominent composer of such operas is John Adams, who composed *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Dr. Atomic* (about the first test of a nuclear weapon). Other relatively recent operas that fall into this category would be *Harvey Milk* (Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie), *Dead Man Walking* (Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally), *X: The Life and Times of Malcom X* (Anthony Davis and Thulani Davis), and *An American Soldier* (Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang), about the war in Afghanistan. Going a bit farther back into history, we could mention *Ballad of Baby Doe* (Douglas Moore and John Latouche), *Silent Night* (Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell), and *John Brown* (Kirke Meacham)—all of which have been performed at the Lyric.

The reason that this phenomenon is notable is that while a number of operas in the past were based on historical events, very few made it into the mainstream. Mozart and Puccini, for example, used literary sources exclusively. Wagner's operas are all based on mythology. Only Donizetti's "Three Queens" trilogy, based on English history, appear to have made it into the canon. Verdi did try once to write an opera based on a recent event—the assassination of the King of Sweden—but he was able to get it past the censors only by moving the locale to the U.S. and replacing the king with the Governor of Boston. In recent years, however, while composers have also mined the field of our great classic literature (*The Great Gatsby*, *Little Women*, *Cold Mountain*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Moby Dick*, *Grapes of Wrath*, etc.), they have also sought greater relevance by shining a light on recent history to place these events in a meaningful context.

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