

THE DEATH OF KLINGHOFFER

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

Background: Art Based on Historical Events and Figures

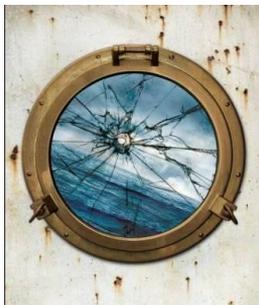
- Many works of art are inspired by events of the day or by real figures in response to war, great moments of achievement, struggle, or even horrific events such as the murder of Leon Klinghoffer.
- Examples include great works such as Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Picasso's *Guernica*, or even films like "The King's Speech."
- Often these works of art are not just about chronicling history, but they use the history to invoke issues central to the human condition.
- The opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, is based on a true story, but addresses many more issues than the history it tells. First let's understand the story...

Background: The hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* and the murder of Leon Klinghoffer

- Leon Klinghoffer, 69, a retired businessman who was wheelchair bound, and his wife Marilyn, were celebrating their 36th wedding anniversary with a cruise on the *Achille Lauro*. On October 7, 1985, four hijackers from the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) took control of the liner off Egypt as it was sailing from Alexandria to Port Said, Egypt. Holding the passengers and crew hostage, they ordered the captain to sail to Tartus, Syria, and demanded the release of 50 Palestinians then in Israeli prisons.
- The next day, after being refused permission by the Syrian government to dock at Tartus, the hijackers singled out Klinghoffer, a Jew, for murder, shooting him in the forehead and chest as he sat in his wheelchair. They then forced the ship's barber and a waiter to throw his body and wheelchair overboard. Marilyn Klinghoffer, who did not witness the shooting, was told by the hijackers that he had been moved to the infirmary. She only learned the truth after the hijackers left the ship at Port Said.

Background: The hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* and the murder of Leon Klinghoffer cont'd

- Initially, the hijackers were granted safe passage to Tunisia, but U.S. President Ronald Reagan ordered a U.S. fighter plane to force the get-away ship to land at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy. Abu Abbas, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Front and mastermind of the hijacking, was sentenced in absentia by the Italian government to a life sentence. He eventually found refuge in Iraq, where he died in prison in 2004 after having been captured by the American forces.
- Klinghoffer's body was recovered by the Syrians on October 14–15 and returned to the United States days later for burial. Four months after her husband's murder, Marilyn Klinghoffer died of colon cancer at age 59. The Klinghoffers are survived by two daughters, Ilsa and Lisa Klinghoffer.



About the Opera

Pulitzer Prize winning composer John Adams and poet librettist Alice Goodman created the opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Critical reaction is divided, as is reaction to the opera's treatment of the Palestinian and Jewish characters. *The New York Times* called the opera "humane, perceptive, and engrossing." Manuela Hoelterhoff writes in *The Wall Street Journal* that the opera "turns the sport-killing of a frail old Jew in a wheelchair into a cool meditation on meaning and myth, life and death." The 2011 OTSL production is the first American staging of John Adams's opera since the original 1991 production, although the opera has been performed in concert version several times.

The Vignettes: An Overview

- There are three scenes selected for discussion.
 - Vignette One is an interchange between the captain of the ship and one of the hijackers.
 - Vignette Two is a scene between reporters and a group of “media interested” hostages.
 - Vignette Three is the final scene of the opera featuring the response and emotions of Marilyn Klinghoffer to the murder of her husband.

Vignette I – Mamoud/Captain exchange

Mamoud, one of the hijackers engages the Captain in a “conversation.” The Captain listens to the experience of Mamoud and imagines that Mamoud’s story of suffering could further his cause more effectively than using violence.

[Click here for audio \(requires internet connection\)](#)

Questions about Captain/Mamoud's Exchange

- Mamoud shares the story of his own personal pain and anguish. What do you feel when you hear Mamoud's story?
- Can you think of other operas, plays, art, books, or movies that evoke similar emotions, even when the characters involved do inhuman, unjustifiable deeds?
- The Captain believes that Mamoud's story of suffering could further his cause more effectively than using violence. Is the captain naive?
- What is the role of listening?
- Is telling a story effective in getting relief? Can it ever lead to resolution or peace?

Vignette II – The Press and the Hostages

- In this scene the press is interviewing the hostages about what happened and how they responded. Several young women vie for the attention from the press.

[Click here for audio \(requires internet connection\)](#)

Vignette II Discussion Questions

- The press plays an important role in terrorism. What role does the press appear to play here?
- What is it that compels some human beings to seek the “limelight?”
- This scene makes the tragic death of Leon Klinghoffer disappear. Why?
- How do we get to the “real” story of human suffering and not trivialize it?

Vignette III – Marilyn Klinghoffer’s Aria

- Marilyn Klinghoffer, upon learning the fate of her husband from the Captain, directs her fury at him and accuses him of embracing the terrorists. She then reminisces about her memory of her husband, “Together at night when the children were out I wouldn’t glance up from the book on my lap for hours at a time, and yet it was the same as if I had gazed at him. I knew his face so well, his beautiful smile.”

[Click here for audio \(requires internet connection\)](#)

Vignette III Discussion Questions

- What emotions are conveyed in Marilyn's aria? What is their effect on the audience?
- Why are simple words so moving and/or profound?
- What is the significance of Marilyn having the last words in the opera?

Final Reflections:

Christianity, Judaism and Islam each prohibit senseless violence and taking of human life.

- Thou shall not murder. Exodus 20:13
- It is because of this that We have decreed for the Children of Israel: "Anyone who kills a person who has not committed murder, or who has not committed corruption in the land; then it is as if he has killed all the people! And whoever spares a life, then it is as if he has given life to all the people." – Qu'ran, Surah **al-Ma'idah, 5:32**

The Death of Klinghoffer

Symposium and Performances

"A Work that Fires the Heart:" Exploring Darkness and Light in The Death of Klinghoffer, a panel discussion including interfaith leaders and featuring remarks by Dr. Gerald Early, Director of The Center for Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. The event will be held on Thursday, May 26 at 7 p.m. at the Ethical Society of St. Louis, 9001 Clayton Road.

Performances at the Loretto-Hilton Theater, 130 Edgar Road:

June 15, 17, 23, 25 @ 8 pm

June 19 @ 7 pm and June 21 @ 1 pm*

Call 314.961.0644 or visit ExperienceOpera.org for ticket information.

*The audience is invited to a post-performance discussion led by members of the Interfaith Steering Committee and alumni of The Sidney and Anna Frager Jewish/Muslim Teen Dialogue Group (JAM/Jews and Muslims).

Educational activities in
conjunction with *The Death of
Klinghoffer* are made possible by



THE SILK FOUNDATION