

## The historical background for *Klinghoffer*

*The murder of Leon Klinghoffer was so powerful a tragedy in part because it was so brutal and senseless, and in part because the killing of one American citizen brought home the danger of foreign terrorism in a way that was still rather rare, long before September 11th.*

*The characters in the opera see historical events from their own perspectives and with their own biases. Much debate has centered on how the characters interpret history, especially since the facts of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict are so fiercely disputed by historians and by partisans on all sides. Disputed histories are nevertheless powerful drivers of human thought and action, so the chronology below is offered as a reference for the audience, with the important caveat that nearly every fact listed here is the subject of ongoing debate.*

**1897. The first Zionist Congress** announces Zionism's goal of establishing a home for the Jewish people in Israel.

**1917.** The **British Balfour Declaration** makes a formal statement of support for Zionist aspirations: *"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing will be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."*

**1920-1947.** The League of Nations, incorporating the language of the Balfour Declaration, awards the **Palestine Mandate** to Britain comprising modern-day Israel, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jordan.

**1939-1945. Nazi Germany** attacks and conquers most of Europe, and murders 6 million Jews in the course of the Holocaust. Highly restrictive British immigration policies over the Palestine Mandate allow entry to a very small number of European survivors of the Holocaust.

**1947.** Amid growing tensions between Arabs, Jews, and the British, Britain pulls out of the region and turns sovereignty over to the United Nations. The UN General Assembly votes to compromise by partitioning the Palestine Mandate into Arab and Jewish states and to internationalize the city of Jerusalem. The partition is accepted by the Jews but rejected by the Arabs in the Mandate, who make efforts to block Jewish statehood.

**1948. The 1948 War.** David Ben-Gurion proclaims the independence of the new State of Israel. Arab armies from Egypt, Transjordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq attack in the first Arab-Israeli War, called by the victorious Israelis the "War of Independence." 700,000 Arabs become refugees from areas under Israeli jurisdiction. The Arabs who remain become Israeli citizens and comprise about 20% of Israel's population while Israel obtains 20% more land than the U.N. partition allotted.

**1967. The Six-Day War.** Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq move armies to Israeli borders, in perceived acts of war intended to destroy Israel. Israel launches a pre-emptive strike and a six-day war ensues. Israel captures the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the Gaza

Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and removes the barriers in the Old City, allowing all religions free access to their holy sites.

**1967-1970. War of Attrition.** Arab nations refuse to make peace and the PLO calls for the destruction of Israel. Israel begins construction of settlements in the Sinai, Gaza and West Bank as security outposts.

**1973.** A coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria launch a surprise attack on Israel in the **Yom Kippur War**. With Egypt supported by the Soviet Union and Israel by the United States, the conflict represents a near confrontation between the two superpowers.

**1978. Camp David Accords.** Menachem Begin and Anwar el-Sadat sign agreements paving the way to the 1979 Peace Treaty.

**1979.** Egypt becomes the first Arab country to recognize Israel, and Israel returns the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

**1982. The first Lebanon War.** PLO units in Lebanon increasingly attack the north of Israel, and Israel invades Lebanese territory, defeating Lebanese and Syrian troops. The PLO leadership is expelled from Lebanon to Tunisia.

**1985.** Four terrorists from the Palestinian Liberation Front hijack the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, hold passengers and crew hostage from October 7-9 demanding the release of 50 Palestinians held in Israeli jails, and murder disabled Jewish-American passenger Leon Klinghoffer. After two days of negotiations the hijackers agree to abandon the ship in exchange for safe-conduct, and are flown from Port Said towards Tunisia on an Egyptian commercial plane. The plane is diverted by U.S. Navy fighters from the *U.S.S. Saratoga* and lands at a NATO base in Sicily, where the hijackers are arrested by the Italian authorities. Their leader, Abu Abbas, is allowed to continue on to Tunisia, while the other three are imprisoned in Rome. All of the hijackers are later released on parole by Italian authorities.

**1987-1993. The first Intifada.** Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank engage in an uprising, or *intifada*, against Israeli control of these territories, beginning the first suicide attacks against Israeli civilians. Israel responds with increased military force.

**1991.** The world premiere of *The Death of Klinghoffer* takes place in Brussels.

### ***The Death of Klinghoffer* -- Chronology and Response**

- 1987 – Following their success with *Nixon in China*, composer John Adams and librettist Alice Goodman begin work on a new opera. *The Death of Klinghoffer* is commissioned by a consortium including Belgium's Theatre de la Monnaie, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Opéra de Lyon, the Glyndebourne Festival, the Los Angeles Festival, and the San Francisco Opera.
- March 1991 – *The Death of Klinghoffer* premieres in Brussels, conducted by Kent Nagano and directed by Peter Sellars. Critical reaction is divided. 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." Katrine Ames writes in *Newsweek* that "Adams creates a revolutionary, continually shifting tapestry," calling the opera, "a work that fires the heart."
- September 1991 – The opera has its American premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Weeks before, a three-day riot in nearby Crown Heights had resulted in the murder of a rabbinical student following a car accident that ignited tensions between the African American and Jewish populations. In this tense atmosphere, *The Death of Klinghoffer* generates controversy. Criticism focuses on a scene depicting fictitious Jewish American neighbors of the Klinghoffers, interpreted by some as satirical. Adams revises the opera for subsequent productions, deleting the scene.
- November 2001 – A planned performance by The Boston Symphony Orchestra of excerpts from the opera is canceled after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The cancellation prompts debate about censorship. Musicologist Richard Taruskin defends cancellation in a *New York Times* op-ed article, charging that the opera is too sympathetic to the terrorist characters. Taruskin's charge generates further debate among critics and scholars.
- September 2003 – A film version of the opera, directed by Penny Woolcock for Channel 4 in the UK, wins the Prix Italia. The film is screened at the Sundance Film Festival as well as festivals in Jerusalem, Sydney, Rotterdam, Buenos Aires, Lincoln Center, and Brussels. The film is banned from a film festival in the Palestinian city of Ramallah because it is considered pro-Israeli.

John Rockwell writes in the *New York Times* that the film "unshrinkingly shows the viciousness of terrorism and the three-dimensional reality of victims who might otherwise recede into facelessness... 'Klinghoffer' is not anti-American or antibourgeois or anti-Semitic but prohuman. It shows unequivocally that murder is nothing more than that, vicious and unconscionable."

- December 2003 – The Brooklyn Academy of Music presents a staged concert version of the opera by the Brooklyn Philharmonic. Anthony Tommasini writes in the *New York Times*: “No one will be able to dissuade those who believe that 'The Death of Klinghoffer' puts a simplistic gloss on impossibly complex hatreds... For what it's worth, my companion on this occasion, a young Israeli psychiatrist and an army veteran...found the opera humane, perceptive and engrossing. Whatever your take, this ambitious and deeply felt work deserves to be heard and debated.”
- April 2003 – Adams wins the Pulitzer Prize for "On the Transmigration of Souls," a musical memorial to the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>, commissioned by the New York Philharmonic.
- 2005 – The opera is staged at Auckland Town Hall, New Zealand and the Edinburgh International Festival, Scotland. Anna Picard writes in *The Independent*, "The opening choruses for the exiled Palestinians and exiled Jews -- an intoxicating blend of the devotional and the secular -- are without parallel in contemporary art music.”
- January 2009 – The Juilliard School presents a concert performance by students. Joshua Rosenblum write in *Opera News*: "The result was an extraordinary performance of a rarely heard but important and overpowering contemporary work of continuing relevance. . . Adams' intensely pulsating score is texturally opulent, unerringly attuned dramatically and at times downright gorgeous; his use of the full orchestra is masterful."
- February 2009: Dr. Joseph Polisi, the president of the Juilliard School, publishes a letter in the *Juilliard Journal* responding to criticism of the school's decision to present the opera.