

Driving Around Los Angeles with The Industry's *Hopscotch* Opera

By Veronika Krausas



Is all time simultaneous? This phrase, sung during the opera HOPSCOTCH, perfectly describes the event. There are 24 limos driving around Los Angeles, where the 24 chapters of an operatic story are told simultaneously. As an audience member you experience the story in varying orders. As an audience member you are part of the action that is literally happening in the car beside you. The Wall Street Journal says that Hopscotch "has broken the fourth wall with a vengeance."

The heart of Hopscotch was the central hub located at the Southern California Institute of Architecture where 24 video screens live-streamed the action at all the locations, *simultaneously*. Although the tickets were quite pricey and sold out almost immediately (for an intimate four-member audience per limo experience), the central hub was free to everyone.



Hopscotch Central hub

The story was originally to be based on the novel *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortazar, from which the name and variable order of chapters of the project was taken. The rights to the novel were not granted but this resulted in a story developed by six Los Angeles writers about Los Angeles.

The opera tells the story of the artist Lucha, a young Hispanic girl, from her quincinera to her meeting her first husband, the scientist Jameson (they meet in a car accident/fender bender!), to Jameson disappearing and Lucha ultimately joining together with her artist colleague Orlando.

There were over 200 performers and production staff involved in this project along with the six main composers and six librettists. I was fortunate to be one of the six composers involved in this project and wrote 4 scenes. One scene has Lucha in the middle of a nightmare in which she imagines seeing Jameson with a woman in red. It takes place in the fabulous Bradbury building in downtown Los Angeles. This historic building was where the final scenes of *Bladerunner* were filmed. The audience encounters Lucha at the entrance singing “Is this a dream?” and proceeds to follow her up the open cage/grill **elevator** and then follow her down four flights of marble stairs as itinerant jazz musicians, dancers and the characters of Jameson and the woman in red float around her and the audience with a film-noire score.



photo: Dana Ross

In another scene Lucha finds herself in Chinatown encountering a fortune teller and pulling a tarot card to try and explain the disappearance of Jameson. Lucha pulls *The Lovers* and her *reading* is sung to her, accompanied by a violinist. The lovers from the tarot card then materialize in the main plaza in China town where the lovers, accompanied by 2 flutes, swirl around Lucha, the Chinatown plaza, and the general public.

The New Yorker music critic Alex Ross, in his blog *The Rest is Noise*, wrote “Of all the *Hopscotch* scenes, this is the one that most determinedly invades a public space, causing considerable perplexity among spectators.” The 4 official audience members leave the accidental audience in the plaza and then follow the fortune teller into a limo and choose their own tarot cards and have their readings performed for them in the limo while driving to the next location. The *Hopscotch* tarot deck was specifically created for the opera and all 12 cards are elements found in the opera.

After the fortune-telling scene, the audience is shuffled off to another limo with Lucha, who then sings an aria questioning “*Is all time simultaneous?*” accompanied by a music box that she plays while the limo drives to the next location. Both the China Town and Bradbury scenes had librettos written by the playwright Tom Jacobson.



photo: Veronika Krausas

At the Everygreen Cemetery, Lucha’s friend Orlando is paying his final farewells to his deceased wife. As you drive around the cemetery in the limo, Orlando sings of his memories of Sarita (his departed wife). Her ghost (dressed in a vivid red Día de Muertos costume) sits opposite and sings in an echo and then departs the car. Two violists accompany Orlando and musically fade as Orlando’s words also become fragments, like the fading memory of his wife. Janine Salinas-Schoenberg was the librettist.

In my final scene I wanted to use a car wash, a ubiquitous and iconic Los Angeles location. Due to the drought in Southern California, we opted for audio and video versions of a real car wash. The location was also transplanted to an Airstream placed in Elysian Park, across from Dodger Stadium. The audience enters a time-warped ‘car wash’ with the 50’s clad performers: a soprano, who is chopping vegetables and making soup, a narrator, and two musicians, a tuba and double bass. The choice of instruments was to create a slightly claustrophobic effect in a small contained space, as one feels when going through an actual car wash. This is an interlude chapter that uses the text of French situationist Guy Debord, one of the main influences for the

entire opera, where the singer and narrator muse on how *[People] thought the deficiency of their life was natural. We wanted to break out of this conditioning, in search of different uses of the urban landscape, in search of new passions. People can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is animated.*

The scene echoes the journey of the whole opera with the soprano finishing with *Our life is a journey in winter and in the night. We seek our passage...*



photo: Dana Ross

This certainly was a journey! Hopscotch was conceived by Yuval Sharon (the artistic director of The Industry, the experimental opera company in Los Angeles). I was thrilled to be part of this wonderful project. A wonderful sense of community was formed among the creators, performers, production staff, and the audience, especially with the meeting/viewing place of the central hub. **LA Times** music critic Mark Swed describes Hopscotch as “ the first epic L.A. opera [that] requires not artificial immersive reality but virtual reality... all the episodes as transmitted to the Hub, all the animations and all the expendable material together online (or on an app or disc), and "Hopscotch" will surely and with irresistible suitability become the first exceptional hyperopera.”

Veronika Krausas is a Canadian composer based in Los Angeles and on faculty at the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California.

www.veronikakrausas.com

<http://hopscotchopera.com>

<https://www.theindustryla.org>