

THE BLIND EXPERIENCE

A multi-sensory performance installation
based on Lera Auerbach's opera *The Blind*

Directed by John La Bouchardière
Music by Lera Auerbach
Libretto after Maurice Maeterlinck
Sound design by Jody Elff

“Adventurous, eerie
and thoroughly engaging”

The New York Times

A Lincoln Center Festival
and American Opera Projects co-production

with generous support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation



Reviews from Lincoln Center Festival, New York

“An adventurous, eerie and thoroughly engaging example of immersive theater.” *The New York Times*
(Charles Isherwood, theatre critic)

“John La Bouchardière's unusual staging... conjured up an environment of emptiness and isolation.” *The Wall Street Journal*

“Evocative, moody and almost mediievally religious” *Opera Magazine*

“Strips the art form of its conventions – to evocative, thought provoking effect.” *New Jersey Star Ledger*

“Initially disconcerting but then vividly intense... I became highly attuned to the sounds, sensations and unseen movements unfolding around me.” *The New York Times* (Vivien Schweitzer, opera critic)

“Sitting there with mysterious voices swirling around me, I felt blind, vulnerable and strangely alone.” *The New York Post*

“The physical experience... is truly unique and remarkably executed ... lets the audience come away with an individual learning experience that will stay with them, potentially changing who they are.” *Sequenza21*

“An experience unlike any other – intensely powerful and intimate – that I will not soon forget.” *WQXR* (Operavore)

“Very moving as well as deeply inspiring both on a creative level and as a life experience.” *New Music Box*

“Nothing else I’ve ever experienced in the theater has made me so immediately homesick. I longed to be indoors (even though I was). Most terrifying was the end. When the opera concluded... we all sat in silence. It seemed the opera hadn’t merely ended, but decamped. I had been abandoned by *The Blind*.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A sightless world where listening become a lifeline” *The New York Times* (Anthony Tommasini, opera critic)

“La Bouchardière’s direction created a unique immersive environment [and] explored the concepts of imagination and communication in such a stunning, effective manner [that] “blindness” achieved a sort of liberation from the usual limitation of “seeing” an operatic work through the lens of another.” *Bachtrack*

Reviews from Trondheim Chamber Music Festival, Norway

“*The Blind* is not about the people in the play being blind, it's about people in general, that we are all blind.” *Addressa*

“*The Blind* is not an opera. It is a sensual experience... The sensory bombardment mercilessly pulled us into the blind confusion and fear... When the opera is over, we know hardly what to do.” *Scenekunst*

Now with several acclaimed stage works to her name, the prolific Russian-born composer and pianist Lera Auerbach wrote *The Blind* while a student at Aspen Music Festival in 1994. The opera is based on Maurice Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles* (1890), an early surrealist play exploring the plight of a group of blind people abandoned on a desolate island. Awaiting the return of the priest who led them from their home to feel the last rays of sunlight before winter, the characters discover that, silent for hours, their saviour actually lies dead amongst them.

A stage direction in the original script, indicating that several characters pray throughout, inspired Auerbach to add Latin psalms to the story, and to conceive the whole opera as an *a cappella* work for 12 singers. This exposure of unaccompanied voices emphasises the sense of loneliness in the starkly atmospheric tale, and the intensity of the singing provides an epic quality to Maeterlinck's metaphor of a society that has lost its way.

This universal experience is now heightened in John La Bouchardière's acclaimed reimaging of the piece for Lincoln Center Festival, which immerses the audience in the story by blindfolding them and placing them amongst the protagonists. Denying all the power to see and situating the voices within the audience, the performance unfolds in a shifting surround-sound world, in which non-visual senses are heightened and the opera's theme is shared.

Auerbach's original score has been developed to exploit La Bouchardière's avant-garde approach and an adaptation of her electronic piece, *After the end of time*, now prefaces the opera. This accompanies a rite of passage that takes the audience on a physical and aural journey from the bustle of modern-day life to remote solitude as each member of the audience is blindfolded and individually escorted to a seat by specially trained ushers.

As members of the public are led into the space, they encounter an unseen world that seems entirely realised. The forest floor underfoot, the leaves of bushes brushed past on the way, the gentle breeze in the face and the smell of damp complement an aural environment that convinces the audience of their new environment to the extent that some wonder if they are indeed outside. All these effects are developed and dramaturgically entwined within the score, providing all the sounds, smells and sensations referred to as the story unfolds: from howling winds and roaring seas to sickly flowers and chilling screams of the sighted child, the world of the drama is fully and harrowingly depicted. Isolated and sightless – like the characters amongst them – the audience experiences the opera as if in it themselves.

- [Listen to excerpts from *The Blind*](#)

Recorded live. Not for commercial use.
Archive recording available on request.

- [John La Bouchardière discusses *The Blind*](#)
- [Watch a panel discussion on Art & the Senses hosted by Lincoln Center Festival](#)
- [Watch 'before and after' clips from a schools' performance in Trondheim \(in Norwegian\)](#)





“A one-of-a-kind production and unique theatre experience... By allowing other senses to take over... we discover and enrich the understanding of who we truly are.” Lera Auerbach, *composer*

“Being visually impaired, I’ve struggled with Maeterlinck’s metaphor because it seems to make victims of the blind but being blindfolded with everyone else and stimulated through other senses, I could appreciate his message for society as a whole.” Rebecca McGinnis, *Access Co-ordinator, Metropolitan Museum of Art*

“After a while, I realize I'm huddling in a fetal position, something I would never, *could* never do, in a more traditional concert setting... The sounds disperse, flow around me. I imagine how the bardo might sound, the way it's expressed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In the *bardo*, the senses dissolve, and, as some Buddhists believe, the self disintegrates as the energy prepares to enter another life form.” Laurie Anderson, *performance artist*, writing for *Harper's Bazaar*

“You know exactly where you are, but everything suggests otherwise. Just like in the movie Narnia, you suddenly come to a different world... You feel alone and you become part of a bare and intense universe... The sound came from all sides. It never stopped, and the more intense it got, the more I lived myself into the story. "The Blind" is the first show that has managed to capture all my attention.” Linn Elise Solberg Rognes, *17-year-old pupil, Trondheim (Norway)*

The 12 singers (2 sopranos, 2 mezzo-sopranos, 2 contraltos, 2 tenors, 2 baritones & 2 basses) are dispersed evenly in the space – moving around according to the narrative and for emotional or dramatic effect.

The production requires a darkened empty space in which individual chairs for singers and members of the public can be arranged in a cluster pattern; dry ice, wind, scent-delivery and sound equipment is also required.

The performance lasts about 60 minutes including pre-show

Rental Contact

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Audio Technical requirements

Macintosh computer, running OS 10.6.8 or later, with available USB or Firewire
2 x USB or Firewire Audio interfaces, for a total of 16 analog outputs
14 x matched professional, low profile, grid-mountable speakers
2 x high-quality low-profile subwoofers
1 x small, battery powered speaker with 3.5mm plug 14 channels (minimum) of high-quality amplification
1 professional wireless in-ear monitor system, with active antennae

Key Technical requirements

4 x Scent Air distribution machines with cartridges
4 x 24" Mole Richardson wind fans (for *silent* operation)
2 x CO2 fog machines
Lighting board to control above systems, in addition to minimal lighting

Full technical specifications and production details available on request