**Alice Goodman – Interview**
**by James Williams**

**James Williams:** Many critics regard you as the greatest librettist of the 20th century in English, as do I, so I want to start by asking your thoughts on the form more generally.

**Alice Goodman:** I think that the vital thing about libretti is that they have to be got at first hearing: the top line of sense is not buried underneath. You may say, on sixth or seventh hearing, "oh wow! Look at all this wonderful stuff I've just found for the first time." And it will be there, because a good librettist will have got subcutaneous, subterranean meaning—word games, allusions, half-rhymes—echoing through. But the top line, which expresses the thing that is happening now, the topmost emotion—is what you should hear and understand first. I think there's something Thomas Aquinas says, about how the first sense of reading in Scripture must be the literal sense. In poetry you can have all sorts of complexities—blind corners, mazes, unplumbed depths, rock pools, what have you—that the reader's eye and mind take in from the page. With libretti, that doesn't work. And that's where many people get the idea that that a libretto is necessarily less good than a poem.

**JW:** But then all of those "subterranean" meanings that are built into a complex libretto are also resources that play into the kind of polyphony that opera is. Opera can pick up and work with this complexity because it's continuous with it.

**AG:** Right, it's there. And when you attend an opera, you are receiving something that is so multidimensional—in its meanings, its structure, and in the contributions that go into it from so many people—that, while you can't get it all at once, what you can get is enough. My dear friend [the poet] Elise Partridge rented an apartment in New York so that she could attend all the performances of *Klinghoffer* at the Met in 2014. She said she got something different from it every night. As you can do, or could do, if tickets to the opera were cheaper. But you should still be able to know that you have, as it were, passed into this world of surpassing richness and complexity for one night. I suppose, in many ways, I'm a maximalist. That's why I like liturgy, and that's why I have always loved opera. The prophet Isaiah says, "I shall set before you a banquet of rich foods and well-aged wines, on my holy mountain," or words to that effect. That's opera.

**JW:** When I interviewed Peter Sellars many years ago, he told me that part of what he first admired in your work was an ability to cross high and low subject matter within a high, epic register.

**AG:** It's one of the things I admire in John's music too. Peter and I were undergraduates together. He was, of course, famous by the time I knew him, because he had actually worked as a professional theater director from the age of 15, staging, amongst other things, an entire *Ring* cycle: almost one-man, with lots of puppets. He was apprenticed to a puppeteer. Suddenly, around about our junior year, Peter discovered that I knew what I was doing writing, in the same way that he knew what he was doing with theater. We became really good friends, and we used to listen to music together. He had an enormous record collection, floor to ceiling, in his room in Adams House. We talked a huge amount about books, about theater. And I appeared in a couple of his productions. Making theater was what Peter did. He has a really intense feeling for the stage, and everything it does, a sensitivity to human emotion, and to moral theology.

**JW:** How did *The Death of Klinghoffer* follow on from your first project with Sellars and John Adams, *Nixon in China*?

**AG:** Both operas were conceived of from the beginning as three-way collaborations. *Klinghoffer* was conceived of, actually, as a four-way collaboration with the choreographer Mark Morris as an equal partner. We hadn't finished writing *Nixon* when we decided *Klinghoffer* would be the next project. It was about 1985. We were doing a Guggenheim "works in progress" thing for *Nixon* in New York. There was a kind of partial performance with some of the singers. I remember we were going up to take our seats, and Peter said, "our next opera is going to be *Klinghoffers Tod*." And I thought, this will work. Because one of the problems I've seen in a lot of modern operas is that they decide to do some great person's life, or something that takes place over years. This seems to me to be a mistake. I think you need something that is confined, something that uses that space and time, and the idea of space and time.

**JW:** When *Nixon* was commissioned, John Adams wanted a libretto written in couplets. Was there any such formal request or stipulation with *Klinghoffer*?

**AG:** No: we were already working together at that point. With *Nixon*, John wanted couplets, and Peter called me up because he knew I could write couplets, I could think in couplets. But there was no formal steer with *Klinghoffer*.

**JW:** Because you were established co-equal collaborators by that point?

**AG:** One of the factors with both these operas is that I was commissioned. This is an important distinction in the making of operas, because normally the librettist is employed by the composer and is paid a portion of the composer's commission.

**JW:** From a poetic point of view, there are at least three forms in *Klinghoffer*: the chorus writing, then a mix of rhyming couplets and Skeltonics [short, staccato lines] which you use for the scenes.

**AG:** The choruses are essentially what is called free verse, though there's a lot of iambic stuff going on in there too. Then in the scenes, I needed to figure out how to write for the hijackers. I'm writing in English, but they are not thinking in English. So, one of the things I looked at a lot—as well as a number of books of hadiths that Peter gave me to read of hadiths—was medieval Spanish poetry, both in and out of translation. Because the influence of Arabic poetry on medieval Spanish poetry is so strong: it's a palimpsest.

**JW:** One interesting decision was to give the hijackers and the Klinghoffers the same metrical pattern in their speech. What was the process of finding their voices like?

**AG:** The Klinghoffers' voices are related to voices of my members of my family, and people I knew growing up, aunts, uncles, cousins, Sunday school teachers, and grandmothers. It is an English that I've always known, the English of American Jews.

**JW:** Are you frustrated that the nuance of your own acquaintance with Judaism, and your own rootedness in Judaism, have been lost in some of the hostile receptions of the Klinghoffers?

**AG:** Not at all, though the outrage at the libretto has been kind of spectacular. I did not anticipate it, much less its intensity. I thought, "I have just done the best work of my life: this is a great opera! I will write more operas! This is my life." The one person who picked up the nuances of

what you tactfully call "the hostile reception" is Professor Robert Fink. I was so pleased that he wrote the essay that he did in response to [musicologist Richard] Taruskin. Because it was like somebody got it. By the time I became a teenager, Zionism had more or less replaced the devotional life of Reform and Conservative Jews in the U.S. The pronunciation of the prayers was switched from Ashkenazic to Sephardic, and suddenly all the old people couldn't sing any of the songs, because their stresses and cadences changed. The old people were silenced. That is one of the things that I remembered that stayed with me in writing *Klinghoffer*. It was saying something about the importance of the old, and not just in Judaism. It's the old people who want to have a happy time, to go on a cruise, to go to the buffet and eat the giant shrimp. It's the young people, who never get a stomach-ache, who don't have cancer or arthritis, who are absolutely leaping for death. So, there is a big thing going on with the old and the young in *Klinghoffer*.

**JW:** I think of you very much as both Christian and Jewish. Do you see it that way, or can you not see it that way? Is that an impossibility?

**AG:** John and Peter were both, at the time, in the habit of saying "our librettist is Jewish." And I was Jewish all the way through the writing of the choruses. And then, before I started on the other parts, I was received into the Church of England, which is a major jump. And it's not that I wasn't anything before: I was quite a good Reform Jew. I was well brought up, and I had a good Jewish education, and was confirmed (Reformed Jews have confirmation). But you can't ever cease being Jewish, if you're Jewish. I read as Jewish to Jews. And, of course, to Gentile Christians as well.

**JW:** Do you think the fact that the conversion happened midway through writing *Klinghoffer* makes itself felt in the work?

**AG**: I've wondered about that. But I don't think so. I think that the particular moral heart of the opera is the same, and would be the same. *Nixon in China* is full of New Testament allusions. All these people are taking the Gospels aslant, making hymns and carols slightly sideways. There is, of course, a lot more Judaism than Christianity in *Klinghoffer*. But I don't think I've given any of the Judaism a Christian glaze. Is it something you notice?

**JW:** No, not particularly. But I was interested in your thoughts about this major change that took place in your life between the writing of the choruses and the rest of the libretto, because one of the questions about *Klinghoffer* is the structural relationship between the choruses and everything else.

**AG:** Part of Peter Sellars's idea for the opera before we started was the way in which, if you go to a cathedral you see a tympanum above the West Door, with the main man in the center, surrounded by ranks of saints and angels. And what I got from that was an idea for the opera as being distanced from the realistic, from the two docudramas which, by then, had been produced about the *Achille Lauro* hijacking. I wanted to do something that was not like those things at all, and the tympanum gave me the sense of how it could be done.

**JW:** The structure of the opera has been described in a range of ways. It has sometimes been compared to a passion play. I know Peter Sellars has talked of it in more political terms, and he also described it to me as a memorial. Then there's Greek tragedy, with the interplay of choruses and actors.

**AG:** I've never used the term passion play for the opera. Memorial would be more like it, but that's not the only thing it is. As for tragedy, it's closer to a tragedy than it is to anything else, and where I would put that tragic element, is in Mrs. Klinghoffer's final aria. It ends there with Mrs. Klinghoffer rejecting comfort, with her rejecting forgiveness—and she is a dying woman, don't forget—with her expression of her love for her husband, her guilt at not knowing about his death at the time, and her fury at the captain, which is partly, of course, her projected anger at the killers. It's her awareness of her husband's vulnerability: remember, he was mostly killed because he was an inconvenience, because he was in a wheelchair. They could not get him up onto the pool cover, where everyone else was sitting in the baking sun. So he was an inconvenience. He was the odd man out. And an American and a Jew.

**JW:** Staying for a moment with literary analogies, you mentioned performing *Dantons Tod*, and Peter Sellars announcing the opera as *Klinghoffers Tod*. When I interviewed Peter, he also talked about *The Death of Tarelkin*, the play by Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin that he'd worked on. Are those kinds of echoes helpful? Were they in your mind?

**AG:** Well, I have my own echoes, and Peter has his, and he's read so many things I haven't read. Frank O'Hara's poetry is always useful for me. Brecht is always useful for me, the plays but even more so the poems. There's a poem Brecht wrote ["Zeich meines Reichtums"] that is one of my talismans. It begins "For seven weeks of my life I was rich." It's about buying a house, and it describes the house really lovingly, the different lights and different seasons and the wide banisters and whatnot. And then he describes how, they were forced to flee over the border. Then there's an epilogue where he talks about what compromises he would have made, and he hoped that there hadn't been too many of them; it ends "It was not a small thing, but there are greater." It describes something real, because the places we live—our houses, the books we surround ourselves with, the stairs we walk up, the pictures we hang on our walls, the friends we feed at our tables—are not nothing. They are life. And this is something that you see in the Klinghoffers. You see it also in the hijackers: in Mamoud's aria about radio stations, and in Omar's aria, this memory and imagination of a life and a home. And you get another form of that in the Aria of the Falling Body, which is simultaneously Klinghoffer and not Klinghoffer singing. It's Klinghoffer's body, the sounds it emits after death as it goes down into the water.

**JW:** And it's also a prayer, a kaddish.

**AG:** Yes, it's a kaddish because it begins with a magnification of the Lord's name. It's also related to those wonderful prologues to Jewish wills (and some Christian wills) which historically were a kind of spiritual and moral bequest to one's children: "study the laws they celebrated, knowing this house, the living and dead." But it's about the material things that make up a life, too: all these beautiful inlays that were so popular in late 19$^{th}$-century furniture-making, let the rain rain on them for a week, and the glue dissolves, and they all come apart. That's another thing that's going on there.

**JW:** That sense of a life dissolved is something that you get also in the Chorus of Exiled Jews, which has been criticized for having the Jews focus on money.

**AG:** There's hardly any money in it. It's just at the beginning, no money to pay the taxi, and in Rambo's aria. How do you not mention money these days? Or is it only Jews who are not allowed to mention money? I mean, the Palestinians talk about money, too: "though we have paid to drink our water and our wood is sold to us." One of the things that I did repeatedly is give Palestinians sections of Psalms and Lamentations.

**JW:** Yes, the stories of the Hebrew Bible run through the background of the opera, especially those family schisms, like Jacob and Esau, Ishmael and Isaac.

**AG:** This was before Mary Douglas had written her wonderful book *Jacob's Tears*. The Hebrew Bible is deeply concerned with the matter of sibling bloodshed. And that is because one of the things it is saying is that the people we kill are our kin. When Moses wipes out Midian, to the last woman and child, you have to go back and see that Moses' wife Zipporah is a Midianite, and the daughter of a Midianite priest. His son Gershom, whose name means "stranger," is half Midianite, mixed race. It is really disturbing. But the Hebrew Bible is not neutral about the taking of human life. Moses dies alone on Mount Nebo. And where you read in Joshua, "and then they put all those people to the sword," one of the things you're getting is: "This is a negative lesson for you. This is not how to live."

**JW:** And this all has an added edge, doesn't it, an added resonance against the context of Gaza and Iran.

**AG:** One of the things I said in another recent interview is that when I wrote *The Death of Klinghoffer*, I was not a Zionist, but I was not anti-Zionist. My parents weren't Zionists either. My father firmly believed that his place was in America. My mother's belief, I suppose, could be summed up as "where I live, there is my homeland," which is the motto of the Bundists. Consider all the homes we have seen being deliberately destroyed over the past few years.

**JW:** Would you describe yourself differently now, if asked if you're a Zionist?

**AG:** I'd now describe myself as anti-Zionist. I believe that the creation of the State of Israel was a calamity, for Jews, first, and for the whole world. Not just a calamity, but a catastrophe. I believe that you can be a good Christian or a good Jew, and be anti-Zionist. We should have learned from the Shoah not to behave like Nazis.

**JW:** How you think that the opera has changed in relation to changing political contexts over its 35 years?

**AG:** It is the nature of what we call the situation in the Middle East—the continuing calamity in the countries of the former Ottoman Empire—that there's always something dreadful and apposite occurring in the world, whenever this opera is produced. It had its première during the First Gulf War.

**JW:** It seems to me that both of your operas are prescient and evergreen, because, like all the best poetry, they are not just about what has happened, but what might happen, what could happen.

**AG:** One of the premises on which I wrote libretti, and it started with *Nixon*, was that we could not write it as a comedy. And actually, John and Peter had at first conceived of it as a satire. But I believed it was vital that it be written with every character made as eloquent as possible in who they were and what they had to say. That, along with John's gloriously beautiful and intelligent music, is why *Nixon* is such a good opera. And that's the thing with *Klinghoffer*, and I think it's the reason it's hated. Every character is a human being. They may do hateful things, but they are human beings. They may embarrass you deeply, like the Austrian Grandmother. But they are human beings. Once you start thinking that the enemy, the person who's hurt you, the person

who's murdered your family, is not a human being, then you are well on the way to having lost your own humanity. We maintain our humanity by acknowledging the humanity of the Other. That's the converse of Levinas's great statement about the bedrock of philosophy being the ethical encounter in the face of the Other, the human being that is not me. And the human being that is not me is, first of all, a human being made in God's image. And that is fundamental to *Klinghoffer*. And that's why the assholes hate it so much.