

CHARLOTTE JACKSON - Librettist / GORDON BEEFERMAN - Composer

THE RAT LAND

Our opera chronicles the disintegration of a troubled and eccentric “fin-de-Cold War” family. The plot centers on their adolescent daughter coming of age as best she can amidst the American Grotesque. Caught between her nightmarish home life and a near-psychotic fantasy world of her own devising, she faces grown-up problems of violence, isolation, madness, sex, loss and death. However, our stylistic approach is not melodrama, but tragi-comedy: pity and fear are leavened here by a healthy dose of graveyard humor.

SCENE: A cross-section of a small suburban home in the American Midwest. As the action progresses the house becomes more squalid and dilapidated.

CHARACTERS:

THEODORE (The Father): A household autocrat; formerly employed in the Cold War-era military-industrial complex, now unemployed and a chronic invalid -- or malingerer.

LOUISE (The Mother): A middle-aged matron in serious denial; her life is about keeping up appearances, as much for her own benefit as for that of her Church, bridge club, etc.

KAREN (The Daughter): About 14 years old, shy, withdrawn, and disfigured, she blends acute observation with a fantasy life bordering on schizophrenia.

ANDRÉ (Her older brother): About 17 years old, he works evenings at a local casino, but secretly aspires to be a dancer. He conceals both a drinking problem and his homosexuality.

GARY (Her younger brother): A twelve-year-old autistic savant. Initially mischievous and funny, he turns increasingly violent.

LESLIE: A schoolmate of Karen's.

MRS. SCHWAB: A nosy neighbor.

MR. BEAME: Drunken city housing inspector.

SYNOPSIS-IN-BRIEF:

Prelude: A mysterious apparition that hints obliquely at a possible past scene of incest between Karen and her father.

Scene 1: The Dinner Table. Merriment between the siblings is interrupted by the dinner hour; the meal ends in a tantrum by Theodore. Later, in a nocturnal tête-à-tête, Karen reveals her fantasy world and its deities -- her pet rats -- to André, while André alludes to his secret life at the casino. However, they part in mutual distrust and bewilderment.

Scene 2: Karen's Birthday. The same month. Karen finally brings home a friend, Leslie, only to have Theodore terrorize both girls in a sick parody of a birthday party. Louise

rises to the girls' defense in a rare moment of assertiveness, but not in time to keep Leslie from fleeing. Karen consoles herself by preparing to transport herself to the North Pole to meet the Wise Rat, whom she looks to for salvation.

Scene 3. The Possession. Six months later. Andre rehearses a failed dance routine and seeks comfort from his Oedipally besotted mother, and the two begin plotting to poison Theodore with alcohol. Karen confronts her father with rebellious new opinions and a punk-ish teenage image. He attempts to strangle her; she imagines he is possessed by "demons" and attempts to exorcise him. A nosy neighbor, Mrs. Schwab, shows up with an environmental petition against Theodore's former nuclear plant: the family rallies, as if by tacit agreement, and puts on a "show" of their most outrageously antisocial behavior, abusing each other and the visitor. After the neighbor's flight, André announces he is running away with a lover, to live a dancer's life. Gary, who has witnessed the strangling scene, assaults Karen in an attempt to reenact it; during this, Karen's Rat Deities escape.

Scene 4. The Inspector. Two months later. Following "The Betrayal" by André, Karen stops attending school or socializing altogether; she fears mockery of her defect and also possession by the Enemy of her kingdom. Meanwhile, Louise has begun feeding alcohol to Theodore. He has become a drunk and his health has deteriorated; his attempts to reconnect with family members fail. A moment of true rapport with Karen is interrupted by the arrival of a Mr. Beame, the bumbling housing inspector, to whom Mrs. Schwab has reported the rat infestation. Gary shocks him with naive cheekiness; Karen attempts to expel the intruder who threatens her "people," while Louise desperately plies this rare visitor with liqueurs and flirtation. Theodore rages like his old self, but suffers a collapse to his booze-weakened system and is carted off to the hospital.

Interlude: Karen standing over her father's bed, like the apparition in the Prelude but with the roles reversed; we understand that Theodore is in a coma and she is unplugging the life support.

Epilogue: Karen, now in college, returns to her home. She has no disfigurement now. She has a final hallucination in which her remaining family members appear to her as members of the Rat Kingdom. Karen confronts her mother (in her guise as Rat Queen) with the horrors of her childhood and her experience at her father's deathbed. Mother and daughter share a moment of honesty and mutual witness to the past. Then the mechanical household routines start up, and Karen realizes she must bid farewell both to her family home and her imaginary world.