

Thea Skaff in dialog with librettist Claudia Stevens.

Q: You and composer Allen Shearer have accomplished something unique and very impressive: an operatic adaptation of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*. How did you come up with the idea?

A: One day as I was soaking in the bathtub I thought up a humorous operatic scene involving three characters from the novel--the sisters Dorothea and Celia and their clueless uncle. This would become the opening scene of *Middlemarch in Spring*. This led quickly to the conception of a full-length opera based on the story of Dorothea Brooke. I knew right away which characters from the novel would be included, and the arias, duets and ensembles they would sing fell into place quite naturally.

Q: How long did it take you to create the two-hour work and what was that process like?

A: It took Allen nearly four years to compose the score, which is for six singers and a chamber orchestra of eleven players. Workshops of various scenes, accompanied by small groups of instruments, helped us get a sense of the dramatic arc of the opera and to refine the characters. Allen is also an operatic baritone, and he bravely took on two of the roles in workshops. As the score developed I made many revisions of the libretto, sharpening the language and creating an operatic form out of a literary one.

Q: Did the fact of your being husband and wife affect the dynamic?

A: Yes, of course. It was possible for us to work together at every stage of the work's development, brainstorming over breakfast, talking endlessly about *Middlemarch* during long, rambling walks. We found ourselves living as intimately with the characters as with each other, taking on the personalities of our own dramatic creations: the platitude-spouting Uncle Brooke; Casaubon, the insecure and jealous academic; Sir James blustering, Celia chattering, Will Ladislav protesting.

Q: What about the main character, Dorothea Brooke? Was she difficult to convey in the opera?

A: The character of Dorothea stands alone, unique in literature and in the opera. She moves us and she frustrates us. Her idealism is both inspiring and foolish. In some ways she remains mysterious.

Q: How is Dorothea a mystery? And how did you deal with that quality of mystery in the opera?

A: Dorothea is a visionary who believes the world must and will be improved but doesn't quite know how. The glorious music Allen has given her, as well as the visual design of the opera, reflect her passion and give us glimpses of her visions. Occasional projections of the mystical, as well as erotic, art of William Blake reflect Dorothea's spiritual and psychological journey. They begin as fantasies about absolute goodness, truth and beauty and later evolve into anguished visions of subjugation and suppressed desire.

Q: Can an audience of today relate to Dorothea's experience?

A: Absolutely! Here is someone who aims very high and is disillusioned. Is she triumphant or a noble failure? The jury is still out. But everyone can identify with Dorothea, suffering through her mistakes, failures and disappointments, and I know the audience will cheer her on at the end of

the opera.

Q: If George Eliot were alive today, do you think she would be pleased with your adaptation? How did you know you were the ones to undertake it?

A: I hope she would be pleased. *Middlemarch* has been called 'the greatest novel in English,' and its setting as an opera is long overdue. But the task is a daunting one: condensing a huge and complex work of fiction into a two-hour opera, while preserving the underlying values and themes. I was able to draw on my long involvement in theater, as playwright, dramatic performer and musician. Much of my text is original. I am also a nineteenth century scholar, so I felt ready to adapt the language and sensibilities of George Eliot's novel with a text that would be fresh and accessible for a contemporary audience. Allen has created a score that mirrors and embodies Eliot's creation. While his music is 'modern' in feeling, it has all the lyricism and underlying harmonic richness to evoke the characters and sensibilities of the novel.