

Transcending Death Only To Watch Life Fray, All On An Opera Stage

By **Susan Brodie** - April 21, 2025



In the new opera 'Rainbird,' Chris DiMeglio captured Godfrey Rainbird's mix of resignation and determination to maintain the integrity of his existence in the face of circumstances he was helpless to control (he also played a mean trumpet). (Photos by Maria Baranova)

NEW YORK — After seven years of development, [Experiments in Opera's](#) world premiere of [Aaron Siegel](#) and [Mallory Catlett's](#) *Rainbird* in the black box theater at [Mabou Mines](#) in the East Village on April 16 was worth the wait. The intimate chamber opera built quietly to a searing end, propelled by a stunning text and supported by a spare but thoughtful score. A haunting meditation on death and community, the work delivers a gut punch without raising its voice.

Walking home one evening, Godfrey Rainbird, tourist office clerk and contented married father of two, is struck by a car and dies. Three days later, he miraculously returns to life. The unexpected revival disquiets everyone: "As long as Godfrey lives and works among people each one will be faced constantly with the fact of their own death," observes his wife Beatrice. Godfrey, recognizing his tenuous situation, is regarded with suspicion and pity. He loses his job, Beatrice grows distant, and the tight-knit community becomes increasingly hostile. The epilogue chanted by the ensemble alludes to an unspecified, unspeakable

tragedy now lost in the town's history, as a video pans through a beautiful seaside cemetery.



Gelsey Bell played Mrs. Rainbird to Chris DiMeglio's Godfrey Rainbird.

The libretto, assembled by director Catlett and Siegel, comes from [Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room](#), the 1968 novel by the brilliant and prolific New Zealand author [Janet Frame](#). The script, condensed from Frame's own words, mixes third-person narration, spoken or chanted over a musical accompaniment (instrumental or choral), with sung or spoken dialogue and sung ensembles. The language is simple and direct but eloquent, with bland relating of the facts alternating with characters' emotional revelation, either insinuated or direct. Early on, Godfrey's raw contemplation of what it might be like to be buried alive is followed by a comic but disquieting conversation about facing death between Godfrey and his oblivious nurse. The contrast in tone is both funny and horrifying. As the characters interact, the sinister truth of the story grows increasingly clear. I have rarely been so shaken by a contemporary work.

The playing area is set up in the middle of the room between two sets of risers, with the audience of about 100 on one side and performers on the other. [Peiyi Wong's](#) set elements — sections of picket fence, platforms, boxes — are manipulated by the performers to indicate different settings. [Olivera Gajic's](#) costumes invoke the 1950s. [Yuki Nakase Link's](#) precisely calibrated lighting clarifies visual transitions. On an overhead screen, video projections by [Andrew Denton](#) evoke both the beauty and the confining conformity of rural New Zealand.



Even the instrumentalists — among them percussionist Jess Tang — contributed small moments of essential characterizations.

Composer Siegel's transparent, minimalist writing underlays and knits together the narrative, profiling each character with a distinctive vocal style and accompaniment. The three instrumentalists (strings, keyboards, percussion) provide rhythmic and harmonic foundation for the text, whether recited, sung lyrically, or chanted. Singers improvise much of the solo monologues within the temporal architecture of the piece. The sense of a consistent rhythmic pulse, punctuated by silences, creates a musical arc that pulls the listener into the emotional momentum of the single 90-minute act. The shifting array of contrasting sonorities focuses the ear.

All of the singers were excellent, versatile performers coming from diverse performing backgrounds. In the dual role of narrator and Mrs. Rainbird, [Gelsey Bell](#) brought a pure soprano with exemplary diction and a clear sense of character. Alternating between speech and singing, she narrated the broad events of the plot like a bardic storyteller, then switched to the role of Beatrice, who grew increasingly manipulative over time while remaining outwardly serene and stoic. [Chris DiMeglio](#) captured Godfrey Rainbird's mix of resignation and determination to maintain the integrity of his existence in the face of circumstances he was helpless to control (he also played a mean trumpet).

As Godfrey's sister, Lynley, emigrating from London, [Katie Geissinger](#) brought a more operatic sound, suggesting the Londoner's out-of-place sophistication Down Under. [Shurmi Dhar](#) and [Jeff Tobias](#) added strong characterizations in smaller roles. Memorably, Dhar's portrayal of the nurse, accompanied by pulsing vibraphone, discussing death with the newly resurrected Godfrey, supported by herky-jerky toy piano, provided a rare moment of (black) humor. Even the instrumentalists — [Andie Tanning](#) on strings, percussionist [Jess Tsang](#), and keyboard player [Sugar Vendil](#) — contributed small moments of essential characterizations.



Gelsey Bell as Mrs. Rainbird and Katie Geissinger as Godfrey's sister, Lynley

Amplification levels rendered the text nearly incomprehensible, a serious drawback to such a language-driven work. The black-box setup, with ensemble singers relegated to risers at the far end of the room, created excessive distance between audience and players. Projected titles in addition to the video projections would be have been extremely helpful.

The online program (accessible via QR code) was devoted largely to acknowledgments of support, and therein lies the larger story of contemporary performance art. The dozens of names revealed a deep web of New York's avant-garde artists and organizations. Mabou Mines, where the opera was produced, is an artist collective and development space formed in 1970, whose founders include Philip Glass. The co-producing companies, [Restless NYC](#) and Experiments in Opera, credited connections to local organizations devoted to contemporary performance, such as the [Prototype Festival](#), the [Park Avenue Armory](#), [BAM](#), and off-Broadway theaters, along with dozens of individual contributors. Even as public support for the arts wanes, the creative spirit continues to thrive and find helpers for realization of its vision.

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Susan Brodie writes about music, the arts, and life from New York City and Paris. Follow her on Twitter @Susan Brodie and here at Classical Voice North America on her hosted column Toi Toi Toi!!

