



David Hertzberg, *composer*



Hertzberg Wins New Opera Honor For *Wake World*



Maeve Höglund as Lola in the Opera Philadelphia world premiere of David Hertzberg's 'The Wake World.'
(Production photos by Dominic M. Mercier)

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BREAKING NEWS – Described as “hallucinatory” and “psychedelic,” *The Wake World* cast a spell over audiences and critics last September when it received its premiere as part of [Opera Philadelphia's O17 Festival](#). Now the enigmatic and enchanting opera by [David Hertzberg](#), who wrote the music and libretto, has captured the second [MCANA Award for Best New Opera](#), presented by the [Music Critics Association of North America](#). Established in 2016, the award recognizes musical and theatrical excellence at a time of heightened interest in presenting contemporary opera.

“*The Wake World* was incredibly original in terms of the story and the musical language,” said [Heidi Waleson](#), opera critic for the *Wall Street Journal*. “It was like an opium dream in music. It’s a magical story about a woman entering into an erotic and ecstatic awakening.”

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Rihab Chaieb as the Fairy Prince and Maeve Höglund as Lola.

“It’s *Bluebeard’s Castle* with a happy ending,” declared [John Rockwell](#), former critic and arts editor of *The New York Times*. “The libretto was over the top in its lurid language. It made Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* sound like someone reading from the telephone book. The music is lush and tonal. The chamber orchestra sounds much bigger than it actually is.”

Waleson and Rockwell, members of an awards committee of highly regarded experts, chose *The Wake World* over a group of finalists that received their world premieres in North America in 2017, including [William Bolcom’s *Dinner at Eight*](#), [Mason Bates’ *The \(R\)evolution of Steve Jobs*](#), and [Annie Gosfield’s *War of the Worlds*](#). This committee of MCANA members also included [George Loomis](#), contributor to the *Financial Times*; [Arthur Kaptainis](#), writer for the *Montreal Gazette* and *Musical Toronto*; and [Alex Ross](#), classical music critic of *The New Yorker*.

“It is a throwback but doesn’t feel at all nostalgic,” remarked Ross of Hertzberg’s opera. “It’s a strange, fevered dream — a cultural time travel. The piece is infused with its own personality. We have a lot of cautious, carefully calculated operas these days. It was refreshing to have something where the composer went bananas. He unleashed everything in his arsenal and went gloriously and unabashedly forward.”

Just 28 years old, Hertzberg completed *The Wake World* during his final year as the resident composer of Opera Philadelphia. The three-year program, which ends this June, enabled him to attend performances at opera houses here and abroad, including two in France. While in Aix-en-Provence, he received a phone call from Opera Philadelphia, asking him to write a new opera for the following year.

“The company wanted the opera to be inspired by the artwork at the [Barnes Foundation](#),” said Hertzberg. “The

Barnes is a stunning, dazzling, totally singular, inimitable collection. Opera Philadelphia wanted the performance to take place at the Barnes. They also wanted the choir featured in a prominent role. So I had to figure out how to do something that was meaningful to me and incorporated all of these things in a seamless way.”

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After returning to the United States, Hertzberg toured the Barnes Foundation with a docent who explained the eccentric ensembles of art pieces that were collected and assembled by [Albert C. Barnes](#), a businessman who made a fortune before the [Crash of 1929](#).

“The walls of the Barnes are totally crazy,” said Hertzberg. “There are floor-to-ceiling displays of totally disparate collections of art work with these scary pieces of metal work that look like hieroglyphics. I think they look like astrological signs, all symmetrically arranged. It’s like creepy and beautiful. It has a ritualist, zealot-vibe.”

He felt the experience at the Barnes aligned very well with the writings of [Aleister Crowley](#), the British poet, occultist, poet, and magician. Years earlier, Hertzberg had read one of Crowley’s bizarre stories and recalled its over-the-top style that almost made no sense.



Jessica Beebe as Luna in 'The Wake World' at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

“I had been thinking a while about the morphology of fairy tales,” recalled Hertzberg, “the recursive grammar of stories [and] the way that they repeat across cultures. It felt like the way music is organized or the way that I feel or understand music. Somewhere in the abstract syntax of story there may be something that tells us about the way we hear music. We also think about words. It’s like aesthetic monism. I’ve always been attracted to that.”

Hertzberg sequestered himself in a studio apartment in Los Angeles to concentrate on the story for the opera. After puzzling over a vortex of associations, he found the dramatic through-line, taking the title of Crowley’s “The Wake World” and writing a story of a young woman (Lola) and her poetic muse (Fairy Prince) in a journey of self-discovery.

“What I wrote was influenced by the premise, color, and flavor of Crowley’s story,” said Hertzberg, “But it doesn’t follow the Crowley story in any way. In mine, the Fairy Prince is always two steps ahead of Lola. She can’t be with the Fairy Prince until the end. It’s a smoldering internal journey. So I had to invent the story from the ground up.”

Hertzberg completed the libretto in October and put the project aside for the next two months so that he could finish a chamber symphony for the [American Composers Orchestra](#). He then wrote the music for *The Wake World* with Rossini-like speed from January through April, with two workshops. He orchestrated it in May and handed it to Opera Philadelphia in June.

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Maeve Höglund and James Osby Gwathney, Jr. in 'The Wake World.'

The 80-minute opera requires two principal singers, a chamber choir, and only five instruments — violin, trumpet, horn, a Fender Rhodes piano, and percussion. According to Hertzberg, the thick sonic texture was achieved through the 16-voice chamber choir. Whenever they sang wordless passages, their sound blended seamlessly with the instruments.

“In the places where there might be orchestral interludes in a normal opera,” noted Hertzberg, “there are four choral episodes. They have a progression to full-throated singing.”

Soprano [Maeve Höglund](#) and mezzo-soprano [Rihab Chaieb](#) were praised for their performances as Lola and the Fairy Prince, respectively. [R. B. Schlather's](#) unique staging in the courtyard of the Barnes Foundation allowed the audience to sit or walk practically alongside the performers.

One might be tempted to think of *The Wake World* as a site-specific opera, but Hertzberg feels it can easily be staged in almost any venue, including traditional opera halls. “The opera could be realized in a different way,” he said. “I’d love the piece to be performed by a larger choir. That would be terrific.”

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