

# HEDONIST / SHEDONIST

## The Rose Elf: An Interview with Librettist, Composer David Hertzberg

By Lauren Johnson June 3, 2018  
Photos: Kevin Condon

If you've yet to hear about New York Opera Fest, now is the time to tune in. Presented by Unison Media and Brooklyn's famous Green-Wood Cemetery, *The Angel's Share* concert series kicks off this week on June 6th with the world premiere of *The Rose Elf*, a new opera created by David Hertzberg, directed by R.B. Schlather, and starring award-winning mezzo-soprano Samantha Hankey in the titular role.



*The Angel's Share* will feature a series of musical performances taking place in the Green-Wood catacombs, an area of the cemetery constructed in the 1850s and usually closed off to the public. Each of the performances will begin at dusk with a pre-concert reception including food, drink, and a whiskey tasting, with stunning views of the Manhattan skyline and the New York Harbor at sunset. With whiskey generously provided by Virgil Kaine Lowcountry Whiskey Co, Five & 20 Distillery, and Prizefight Irish Whiskey, it's no wonder the series took its name – The Angel's Share – from the distiller's term for the whiskey that evaporates in the barrel during the distillation process, a byproduct essentially given off as an "offering" to the angels.



First up on *The Angel's Share* roster is *The Rose Elf*, a new opera created by David Hertzberg and adapted from the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen – who in turn adapted it from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In a recent interview, *The Rose Elf*'s librettist/composer David Hertzberg explained that he was originally inspired to create the story because of his interest in the morphology of fairy tales. "I love how these kinds of images and stories and narrative trends disappear and reappear in different cultures, but with slightly different veneers," Hertzberg explained. "I love the grammar, I love the stoic pre-literary qualities, I love what that might suggest about how we think, how we perceive. And I'm especially drawn to it as a composer, because it's very analogous to how I think about the internal logic of music."

In Hans Christian Andersen's version of *The Rose Elf*, in which those who had fortified themselves in a castle to escape the bubonic plague below were asked to tell stories for entertainment – Hertzberg explains that "*The Rose Elf* is about this elf who lives inside of a rose and witnesses a sort of incestuous love-triangle tragedy, and gives the work an overtone that's like 'Don't do bad things, because someone's always watching you.' This lurid and strange material just seemed ripe for an opera. In my adaptation of the story, the elf is this erotic, sensual, gender-fluid figure who lives for pleasure inside of the rose. Played by the marvelous Samantha Hankey, for whom I specifically wrote the role, the elf witnesses this terrible tragedy, this sort of incestuous ménage-a-trois, and is ultimately effected and transformed by it. The pleasure of the rose ultimately consumes the elf – in one scene she is actually smothered inside of the scalding rose as it is pressed to one of the lover's chest while she is inside of it."

Neither Hertzberg nor *Rose Elf* director R.B. Schlather knew that this sensual and erotic work was going to be performed in the catacombs – but were elated when the opportunity presented itself. *The Rose Elf* was workshopped in Philadelphia under the Opera Philadelphia Composer in Residence Program (supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), and it was there that Hertzberg, Schlather and Hankey began to look for a home for it.



According to Hertzberg, it was actually after a coffee meeting between Samantha Hankey and Unison Media president Andrew Ousley that the show found its home.

Ousley – who had formerly programmed the extremely successful *Crypt Sessions*, which debuted at the Church of the Intercession in Harlem in 2015 – was in the process of collaborating with Green-Wood cemetery to put on *The Angel's Share* series, and was looking for works to showcase. He asked Hankey if she had any shows or recitals she'd like to include in the series, and *The Rose Elf* was the first thing that came to her mind. She put Ousley and Hertzberg in touch and the rest was history. "It was so fated, the space is amazing, it's stunningly beautiful, architecturally incredible," Hertzberg explained. "It felt like such an amazing way to explode the sort of erotic claustrophobia of this piece. It's terrifying, it's beautiful, it's literally underground, and this piece is about the horrors from underground, it's about the stoic, cyclic unity of nature. And it just felt so perfect."

To be one of the first to experience this one-of-a-kind world premiere performance of *The Rose Elf*, as well as to enjoy the incredible skyline, food, and whiskey tasting preceding each performance, [click here](http://hedonistshedonist.com/blog/rose-elf-greenwood-catacombs-opera/).

<http://hedonistshedonist.com/blog/rose-elf-greenwood-catacombs-opera/>