*The Death of Klinghoffer:* An EngagedParticipant’s Guide



Powerful drama involves more than creative artists, talented performers, and passive audiences. How it helps us hear and see is part of the greatness of art. Often enough, art conveys experiences and histories that touch upon the special experiences of audiences in different ways. Important learning moments as well as moments that can create greater empathy and working alliances, between people of these different backgrounds, end up being lost because there is no opportunity to pause and to ponder.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most intractable and dangerous conflicts to plague a world afflicted by violence in so many of its dark corners. Its volatility is illustrated not only by murderous battles with increasing number of victims – soldiers as well as civilians. The fact is that it is so difficult to discuss between Palestinians and Israelis, even between those with the best of intentions. Even within each community, there are such radical polarizations that communicative people impose upon themselves silence to avoid arguments that are unproductive and that alienate even those discussants who consider themselves friends.

It is no wonder, therefore, that to attempt a work of art that would help us view both sides of the dispute in any new perspective is a bold effort. The creators of *The Death of Klinghoffer,* an opera depicting the events of the 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and murder of one of its passengers, now being presented at the Metropolitan Opera House, have sought to do just that. The work has not been without controversy, particularly given the extra measure of de-humanization involved in terrorism, and the fact that public, untaxed money is being used to support this performance. Has the staff and board of this Temple of High Culture adequately fulfilled its duty to consider public sensibilities and to protect the MET and Public Art, more generally, from loss of influence and support? It becomes a responsibility and civic duty of citizens of all backgrounds to examine the judgment behind staging this opera.

We welcome you in joining us in an unusual exercise of careful listening and deep interpretation. This selection of passages from *The Death of Klinghoffer* is designed to involve a broad range of people of different experiences and identities in examining the stated humanizing and the peacemaking aspirations of this artistic work while discussing the extent that it fosters and achieves this goal.

*Part One: Hearing the Voices of Exiled Palestinians and Jews in the Operas’ Choruses*

The opera begins with two choruses, the *Chorus of the Exiled Palestinians* and the *Chorus of Exiled Jews,* reproduced below. Compare the two choruses and reflect on the voices they represent.

|  |
| --- |
| *Chorus of the Exiled Palestinians*  (Click for audio: [♬](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FTafFgwoCg&list=PLkzyBE-GRz604O9z4aYatvd-KRjapQaDE))  My father's house was razed in 1948  When the Israelis passed over our street  The house was built of stone with a courtyard inside  Where, on a hot day, one could sit in shade  Under a tree and have a glass of something cool  Coolness rose like a wave from our pure well  No-one was turned away. The doorstep had worn down  I see in my mind's eye a crescent moon  Of that house, not a wall in which a bird might nest  Was left to stand: Israel laid all to waste  Though we have paid to drink our water,  And our wood is sold to us,  We thank the only God  Let the supplanter look upon his work  Our faith will take the stones he broke and break his teeth. |
|  |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| *Chorus of the Exiled Jews* (Click for audio: [♬](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HQ4rZMZihE&list=PLkzyBE-GRz604O9z4aYatvd-KRjapQaDE&index=2))  When I paid off the taxi, I had no money left, and, of course, no luggage  My empty hands shall signify this passion, which itself remembers  O Daughter of Zion, when you lay upon my breast I was like a soldier  Who lies beneath the earth of his homeland, resolved  You said, "I am an old woman; I thought you were dead.  I have forgotten how often we betrayed one another,  My hide is worn thin, covered with stars and wrinkles;  Now only doctors gather at my bedside,  To tell what the Almighty has prepared for me  A woman comes in to keep the place looking occupied"  Let us, when our lust is exhausted for the day,  Recount to each other all we endured since we parted  There is so much to get through; it will take until night  Then we shall rise, miraculously, virgin, boy and bride  To me you are a land of Jerusalem stone; your scars are holy places  There, under my hands, the last wall of the Temple  There the Dome of the Rock  And there, the apartments, the forest planted in memory,  The movie houses picketed by Hasidim, the military barracks,  the orchard where a goat climbs among branches.  Your neighbor, the one who let me in,  She was brought up on stories of our love. |

These questions may be helpful in guiding your reflection.

1. What do ‘Israel’ and ‘Jerusalem’ represent to each of the voices? Physical places? Metaphors for the human condition? Forces for good or evil?
2. Are there echoes of the Israel-Palestine conflict in both choruses? Whose voices are heard and whose verses are silent?
3. Would Palestinians, when this opera was first staged, and Palestinians today feel that the tragedies and complexities of their personal lives and the frustrated national aspirations of the Palestinian people are well represented and explained by the Palestinians Characterized in this opera?
4. On the other side, how would Israelis and diaspora Jews who support Israel feel about Mr. Klinghoffer and other Jews whose voices we hear in this opera being capable of explaining to their Palestinian captors, and ultimately, to future audiences who would attend this opera, the thousands of years of triumphs as well as tragedies endured by Jews, but all connected with the actual and uninterrupted settlement of Jews in the Land of Israel. Could Klinghoffer explained the contacts between Jews and Palestinians, and the rising population of both groups, particularly towards the end of the 19th century, after WWI under the British Mandate, through 1948 and the avoidable wars that resulted in more losses and hatred on both sides with Palestinians kept in horrible refugee camps for generations while Jewish refugees in Arab countries were made homeless. Could Mr. Klinghoffer, Mrs. Klinghoffer or any of the frightened Jews explain any of this to their accusers and gain the respect of the Italian Captain whose memoir provided ideas and dialogue to the composer and librettist?
5. Leon Klinghoffer, the title character of the opera and the sole fatal victim of the Achille Lauro hijacking, was an American Jew and a lifelong New Yorker. He grew up in slums, suffering from antisemitic attacks and discrimination, as many Jews of his generation did? Is this Jewish experience of millions of Jews represented at all in the choruses?
6. ‘Faith’ and ‘love’ are often juxtaposed in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious language. How does the ‘faith’ of the *Palestinian Chorus* contrast with the ‘love’ in the *Chorus of the Jews*?
7. Both choruses convey a sense of ‘betrayal.’ How is this ‘betrayal’ different in each? How does the factually inaccurate title of this artistic work in which a brutal murder is described as “The death of Klinghoffer,” encourage an audience to believe that the voice of the artists who create this work want to provide accurate voices and humanize the real characters in this violence. A man who could not defend himself physically, even verbally, is deprived of his last dignity of having the last moments of his life called by the right name.

The terrorist ‘Rambo’ offers his attitude toward the Jews in an extended dialogue with Klinghoffer, saying:

|  |
| --- |
| (Click for audio: [♬](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMuPqINYFIo&index=18&list=PLkzyBE-GRz604O9z4aYatvd-KRjapQaDE))  You are always complaining of your suffering  But wherever poor men are gathered they can find Jews getting fat.  You know how to cheat the simple, exploit the virgin,  Pollute where you have exploited, defame those you cheated,  And break your own law with idolatry. America is one big Jew. |

and

|  |
| --- |
| (Audio continues from above)  Are you English? Your Balfour Declaration  Led to the partition and the dissolution of the Palestinian nation.  Where English is spoken you will find perversion an all kinds of filth  Not practiced by stealth late at night, but on the street during the day.  You wink at sodomy. You laugh at blasphemy.  You give no charity to the oppressed. What did your watch cost? Is it gold?  How many mouths could be filled if this were sold. |

to which Klinghoffer responds only with

|  |
| --- |
| (Audio continues from above)  You're crazy. This was to be our happy time together. |

In contrast, “Rambo’s” wife described her husband’s own account of the same episode:

|  |
| --- |
| “Klinghoffer made so much noise onboard that he frightened the living daylights out of the four young men. Panicking, they shot him and then threw him overboard.” |

1. How do “Rambo’s” accusations compare to traditional libels expressed toward the Jews? What claims is he making about ‘the West?’ How do these claims related to Klinghoffer’s identity and responsibility as an American Jew?
2. Whose view is truly represented by this fictional speech? Is the attribution of these words to ‘Rambo’ fair to Jews? To Palestinians? How does their inclusion seek to re-enforce or dissipate prejudice?
3. Does Klinghoffer’s failure to respond point-by-point to “Rambo’s’ accusations make the dialogue one-sided, or is “You’re crazy” the only appropriate characterization he can make?
4. How would you compare the young and able-bodied hijackers with Klinghoffer's age and disability?

*Part Two: Examining the Background of the Story*

The biblical narratives of Passover, Sarah and Haggar, Jacob and Esau, are reflected in each of these events. Compare these stories in the Bible with their expression in the opera.

|  |
| --- |
| *Genesis 16:7-14 (JPS)*  And the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. And he said: 'Hagar, Sarai's handmaid, whence camest thou? and whither goest thou?' And she said: 'I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai.' And the angel of the LORD said unto her: 'Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.' And the angel of the LORD said unto her: 'I will greatly multiply thy seed, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.' And the angel of the LORD said unto her: 'Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son; and thou shalt call his name Ishmael, because the LORD hath heard thy affliction. And he shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the face of all his brethren.' And she called the name of the LORD that spoke unto her, Thou art a God of seeing; for she said: 'Have I even here seen Him that seeth me?' Wherefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. |

|  |
| --- |
| *Death of Klinghoffer, Act Two* (Click for audio: [♬](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWYJhzrAn3k&index=15&list=PLkzyBE-GRz604O9z4aYatvd-KRjapQaDE))  When Hagar was led into the wilderness with some bread  And a bottle of water and her son the lord consoled Abraham, saying:  "Of this child too I will make a nation."  It may be for this reason that our father turned  And set his face toward the tents. It was early in the day.  the breast.  She was like one who walks across a room in a shuttered house  Naked and unwatched. She was newly manumitted.  For a long time after the bottle was empty  (That she kept it indicates that she was not without hope)  Hagar had milk for her son, and he nodded on her shoulder.  For a long time after the boy looked at her and began crying she carried him.  When he was so weak that she had to bend her head to hear him  She said, "My son will die as a free man on his own land,"  And put him down, and turned her back.  Then the angel struck open the abandoned well. |

1. What claims are being made for Hagar and Ishmael by each account?
2. Is it appropriate to import the biblical stories of Genesis into the present-day Israel-Palestine conflict? How has this strategy (used by all sides) been helpful or harmful?

Mamoud’s dialogue with the captain explains his motives for the attack in terms of his families’ death at Sabra and Shatilla:

|  |
| --- |
| (Click for audio: [♬](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgKtBDLCYM4&list=PLkzyBE-GRz604O9z4aYatvd-KRjapQaDE&index=9))  It was not I driven away but my mother  Who could not remember what happened to her.  She only said, "There was a raid. My uncle carried me out in his coat."  "He never thought we would be more than a day."  She said God would restore threefold all we had called ours.  She was killed with the old men and children  In camps at Sabra and Shatila where Almighty God  In His mercy showed my decapitated brother to me  And in His mercy allowed my to close my brothers' eyes and wipe his face. |

To which the captain responds:

|  |
| --- |
| (Click for audio: [♬](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knadHg5K6OE&list=PLkzyBE-GRz604O9z4aYatvd-KRjapQaDE&index=10))  I think if you could talk like this, sitting among your enemies,  Peace would come. Now from day to day evil grows exponentially,  Laying a weight upon the tongue. Violence speaks a single long sentence  Inflicted and endured in Hell, by those who have despaired. |

1. How are Sabra and Shatila important to the motives of the hijackers in the opera? Mamoud explains his motives to the captain and seeks the compassion and approval of this authority figure. Does it matter whether Mamoud's version of the event is accurate?[[1]](#footnote-1)
2. Bassam al-Ashker, the real-life person represented by Mamoud in the opera, was born in Tripoli, not Sabra, and already active in the PLO prior to the massacre. Does this fact change your impression of the opera’s perspective and message?
3. What responsibility do the composer and librettist, in trying to “humanize” and provide voices for the different sides in this conflict have to clarify such issues in what is presented as credible testimony?

*Part Three: Reflection*

1. The opera’s composer and librettist have made the claim that the work “humanizes all sides.” Do you think it accomplishes this?
2. Is *Klinghoffer* a good lens for viewing the Israel-Palestine conflict?
3. Do the events of the Second Intifada, September 11 the 2014 Gaza war, or President Obama’s September 10th condemnation of terrorism have any bearing on the public performance of this dramatization at the present moment of a historic event?
4. Many Palestinians and Muslims reject terrorism unilaterally. Nonetheless, some young people, in particular, have chosen extreme and dangerous ways of responding to the same identity problems that plague so many young people by joining militias or terrorist groups. Do portrayals like *Klinghoffer* make terrorism glamorous? Conversely, do they contribute to stereotyped negative images about the American Muslim community?
5. What responsibility do citizens have to respond to an artistic work like *Klinghoffer* and to the institution that stages it and what types of initiatives should they take? What is the responsibility of the artist and producers when staging a work like *Klinghoffer* with public monies? How can this opera be placed in a context of bringing many and different stakeholders who have been and will continue to be threatened and wounded by terrorism and enable people from different national, ethnic, and religious groups to create new alliances, not only through the cold logic of “my enemies’ enemies are my friends” but because of the common cause and universal principles that these people discover in hearing the accurate and pervasive voices of the oppressed and learning the deceptive language of the oppressors?



1. The Sabra and Shatilla massacre was in fact perpetrated by Lebanese and other Palestinians, and not by the Israel Defense Forces. Israelis were so shocked by the massacre that a special commission of investigation under a former Supreme Court Justice was convened. Judge Goldberg ruled that there were no Israelis who participated directly but, in an important analysis of what is entailed in “indirect responsibility,” accused Gen. Ariel Sharon, the top military officer in Lebanon of not offering adequate protection to Palestinian residents of Sabra and Shatila and suspended him from any public service for a decade. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)