



# dwb (driving while black)

Libretto by Roberta Gumbel  
Music by Susan Kander

ROBERTA GUMBEL, soprano | NEW MORSE CODE

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## FORWARD

*Dwb (driving while black)* was scheduled to premiere on March 19, 2020 at Baruch Performing Arts Center, New York. One day before the start of production week, the Covid-19 pandemic closed the city. In May, Ted Altschuler, Director of BPAC, called me with a crazy idea: “Can you make a video of the opera somehow, safely, during Covid, that BPAC can premiere virtually?” A bare-bones bunch of courageous people answered “Yes!” to that question. Opera Omaha joined the presentation. Lawrence Arts Center in Lawrence, Kansas opened their shuttered theater for us. In late August and September, performers, audio engineers, lighting technicians and video artists all traveled there, and in small groups, distanced and masked, on a wide stage, safely rehearsed and recorded the opera. The original digital run opened on October 23<sup>rd</sup> and was extended from seven days to ten due to popular demand. Thank you, Ted, for your commitment to *dwb*. Thank you, Kurt Howard and Opera Omaha, for joining and supporting us. Thank you *dwb* team, for being incredible. — Susan Kander

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

When I was studying for the driver's license test, my parents sat me down for an important discussion about car safety: what to do when you are pulled over by a police officer. As they went through the list of instructions, I'm sure I rolled my eyes. To me, the car represented freedom, and that was all I could see. I could not yet see the numerous times I would be pulled over for being in the wrong neighborhood. I could not yet see the danger that exists when you are black and in motion in America. But my parents did.

Susan Kander and Roberta Gumbel's *dwb (driving while black)* provided a window through which to revisit that crucial conversation, this time from the vantage point of my parents. In its swift 45 minutes, we spend 16 years with a black mother, feeling her growing fear as her black son moves towards driving age. The anxieties of being black and behind the wheel are given voice: in the gorgeous

words sung by the mother, in the atmosphere created by the percussionist and cellist, and in the retellings of real stories of discrimination.

To me, the car represented freedom. In the age of cell phone cameras, we've watched numerous black people murdered by police officers inside their cars. When I see a police car in my rearview mirror, the sense that I will be the next name on that growing list overwhelms me. I imagine the press conference: what they will ask of my parents. In *dwb*, the car becomes a place of joy, fear, mourning, and danger. It is a vehicle for healing, our shared experience set to beautiful music. — Chip Miller

## LIBRETTIST'S NOTE AND SYNOPSIS

“Singers are storytellers,” says Roberta Gumbel, “but rarely do we get the opportunity to help create the stories we are telling.” The Black Lives Matter movement and a constant barrage of news stories are daily reminders of the challenges and fears that accompany raising my African American son in this country. Writing the libretto for *dwb* and performing my own words set to Susan Kander's unique and passionate score was a cathartic experience.

*Dwb* weaves two strands—one personal, one external. In the central narrative, a baby boy is born to happy parents; the mother relates to the child first in its seat facing backward in the back of the car, then facing forward, then eventually sitting next to her in the front seat. This is how Time is marked; the car is ever the center of their lives. Threaded between these scenes are contemporary news bulletins or first-person stories introduced in spoken words by the musicians. These have a different instrumental color and texture from the narrative scenes, as if a channel has been switched. The Singer sheds her role as Mother and, taking on different characters (young, old, male, female) presents specific but familiar events. These describe the dangerous world beyond the Mother's control, and the increasing anxiety building up in her mind as her “beautiful brown boy” approaches age sixteen and his much-desired independence. How does she summon the courage to hand him the keys to her car and let him go?

## COMPOSER'S NOTE

Roberta Gumbel and I waded into new waters in many ways with this piece. Her first libretto; my first collaboration with a librettist other than myself; my first work with the ground-breaking duo New Morse Code for whom the orchestrational possibilities embodied in one cellist and one percussionist are, at least in their hands, vast. The percussion centers on the vibraphone because it offers so many different timbres and durations and easily provides a harmonic bed. Beyond that are twenty more instruments the percussionist will hit, swipe, rub, blow, shake, and kick. The cellist's part goes beyond the cello, including toy piano and tambourine, and includes a brief stint in the percussion area. One scene is almost entirely scored on the human body, a twenty-first century reference to juba or ham-boning. Though *dwb* is nominally a one-woman show, the instrumentalists dramatically engage in the telling as both equal partners and witnesses to these stories that happen among real people every day. — Susan Kander

## THE COMPOSER



The “eloquent...wrenchingly powerful” (Gramophone) music of **Susan Kander** has been heard across the United States and in Europe, China, Russia, Australia, and South Africa. She has received commissions from a variety of ensembles including Minnesota Opera, Opera Theater of St. Louis, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Columbus Opera, National Symphony Orchestra, Kennedy String Quartet (Kennedy Center), the Copland Fund, The Cecilia Society, Bach Aria Soloists, as well as choral groups and individual musicians. Her chamber music has been recorded on the MSR, Navona, and Loose Cans labels. Her publisher is Subito Music Corp. Susan Kander is a Fellow of the MacDowell Colony and lives in New York.

## THE LIBRETTIST/SOPRANO



“Silver-voiced”( *New York Times*) **Roberta Gumbel**, soprano, has appeared with opera companies in Kansas City, Houston, Indianapolis, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Memphis, and toured the United States and Europe in companies of *Porgy and Bess*, including the renowned Houston Grand Opera Production. Broadway productions include *Showboat*, *Ragtime*, *Baz Luhrmann’s La Boheme* and *In My Life*. Off Broadway, she performed in Deirdre Murray’s *Running Man* which USA Today named one of the best shows of 1999. A versatile performer, Roberta has been a frequent soloist with Wynton Marsalis and Jazz at Lincoln Center. She is currently on the voice faculty at the University of Kansas School of Music. Her long association with composer Susan Kander began in 1996 with the Lyric Opera of Kansas City’s commission of *She Never Lost a Passenger*, in which Roberta premiered the principal role of Harriet Tubman. She subsequently sang Ms. Kander’s *Partite Americaine* in Merkin Hall, New York City, and recorded Kander’s *A Cycle of Songs* (Loose Cans Music). She is excited to be not only the Singer of *dwb* but also its librettist.

## THE DIRECTOR



**Chip Miller** is a director and producer, currently in the role of Associate Artistic Director at Portland Center Stage at the Armory. They were previously the Artistic Associate / Resident Director at Kansas City Repertory Theatre. **Directing:** *Hedwig & The Angry Inch*, the world premiere of *Redwood* (Portland Center Stage at the Armory), *School Girls*; or, *The African Mean Girls Play*, *Welcome to Fear City*, *Sex With Strangers*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, (KCRep); the world premiere of *Becoming Martin* by Kevin Willmott (The Coterie); *dwb: driving while black* (Lawrence Arts Center); *4:48 Psychosis* (The Buffalo Room). Chip has developed work with many

artists including Kevin Wilmott, Kara Lee Corthron, Brittany K. Allen, Catherine Trieschmann, Darren Canady, Andrew Rosendorf, Susan Kander & Roberta Gumbel, Michelle T. Johnson, and Michael Finke. They have developed work at The William Inge Theatre Festival, NYU's New Plays for Young Audiences, Portland Center Stage's JAW Festival, The Midwest Dramatists Center, KCRep's OriginKC New Works Festival, The Living Room Theatre, and Musical Theatre Heritage. **Education: BFA:** New York University, Tisch School of the Arts.

## THE PERFORMERS



**NEW MORSE CODE** (Hannah Collins, cello; Michael Compitello, percussion) is the confluence of two magnetic personalities who have taken up the admirable task of creating a hub for the performance, commissioning, and promotion of new music. NMC is best described as two musicians of extraordinary depth and skill untethered by their instrumental constraints. Their 2017 debut album, *Simplicity Itself* on New Focus Recordings, was described by i

careifyoulisten.com as “an ebullient passage through pieces that each showcase the duo’s clarity of artistic vision and their near-perfect synchronicity,” while Q2 Music called the album “a flag of genuineness raised.” Their projects have received support from Chamber Music America and New Music USA. In 2019, they released the title suite of Matthew Barnson’s portrait album, *Vanitas*, on innova recordings and collaborated with Eliza Bagg, Lee Dionne, and andPlay on *and all the days were purple*, Alex Weiser’s Pulitzer Prize-finalist work on Cantaloupe music. Hannah teaches at the University of Kansas and Michael teaches at Arizona State University. They currently serve as assistant directors of Avaloch Farm Music Institute.

## LIBRETTO

### dwb (driving while black)

for singer, cello and percussion

Libretto by Roberta Gumbel  
Music by Susan Kander

ROLE: Singer/Mother – African-American mezzo or soprano

ENSEMBLE: Cello and Percussion

TIME: Now

PLACE: Here

NOTE: The opera is a collage made up of “Scenes” interrupted and punctuated by “Bulletins.” Scenes involve the Mother; Bulletins involve the Singer.

*Lights up. Stage holds only four chairs, 2x2, like a car. Percussion set-up is on stage left; Cello set-up is downstage of Percussion.*

#### Prelude

*Driving music, hell for leather. Singer is Off Stage. As music calms, she enters as Mother.*

Mother: Oh honey, do you think he looks more like you or like me....?

### Bulletin #1

Percussionist: (spoken) Scene: Miami Beach swimming pool.

Singer: Young lawyer. Tall, brown and handsome. Ready for a swim.

“Oh Boy: could you get me a cushion? Please?”

(spoken) ...I don't work here, ma'am.

### Scene One

Mother: (*standing by the car, looking fretfully into back seat*) Scary! He's so tiny in that big plastic seat! Did you read the directions? Did you hear it click? The seat belt? Did you? You did? I hate his facing backwards – I need to see him. I need to see him! How will I comfort him?

Perc/Cellist: Hush!

Mother: How will he know where I am?

Perc/Cellist: Shh!

Mother: I need to see him!

### Scene Two

*Mother sits in back seat of the car.*

Mother:

Shh

You, my beautiful brown boy

Beautiful brown boy

You are not who they see

My father told me, every morning,

You are not who they see.

I'm gonna tell you, every morning,

You are not who they see.

### Scene Three

*Mother moves to driver's seat, sees baby's face in rear view mirror.*

Mother: Peekaboo! I see you! Who's a big boy!? Great big boy! Yes, we can sing The Wheels on the Bus one more time!

### Bulletin #2

*Singer gets out of car.*

Cellist: (spoken) Scene: A suburban apartment complex.

Singer: Young man in hoodie. 911 says stay calm. Man with gun with misguided fear. Dead young man in hoodie.

### Scene Four

*Mother goes to back door of car.*

Mother: French fries and spilled milk! On my car seat! Ah!

### Bulletin #3

Singer: (spoken) Scene: Kindergarten.

Cellist: (*now a five-year-old, sings*) It's ok, Mommy. It makes sense that they call me her name. We look ...sss (*searching for big word ...got it! Proud!*) similar!

### Bulletin #4

Percussionist: (spoken) Scene: Curbside for carry out.

Singer: Short young man with dreadlocks out with his girlfriend, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, cuffed! and sitting on the curb as police realize he's just not the tall, bald man they're looking for.

### Scene Five

Mother: You are not who they see! Not who they see! Who they see! Who they see! What? No! We can't sing The Bear went over the Mountain one more time!

### Scene Six

*Mother sings a wordless keening vocalise.*

### Scene Seven

Mother: No! No! Strike me with your anger but not your hands! Strike me with your drama but not your hands! Do you think you could have saved your father? You could not! The doctors and their chemo couldn't. You couldn't. I thought I could and I could not. Strike me with your rage and tears, your tears and your rage but not your hands!

How can I tell you that this worst, worst thing in your life is happening at the same time as the worst thing in mine?

If I let my rage surface, I'll incinerate before your eyes!

I'll hold you when you let me; I'll stand by you when you won't let me.

How can I set you on a path  
On a path in this world  
In a world that doesn't live up to its promises  
Its promises and dreams?  
A world that doesn't live up to its dreams and promises?  
How can I set you on a path... in a world  
This world  
This, this...  
*Mother gets into the car.*

Yes, Sweetheart. For now, we'll sing This Land is Your Land... for as long as I can take it.

### Bulletin #5

*Perc. sets chair near Cellist. Both exhale together audibly and sit, then accompany Singer with a scored series of claps and percussive body sounds.*

Singer: (*Exhales audibly*) New in town, I was walking in the park near my home. I saw someone streak past and wondered—

Perc/Cellist: Huh?

Singer: —why? Police cars rumbled across the grass in pursuit but they stop for me! Handcuffed and on the ground! Deaf to my utterances of innocence. I'm afraid as they discuss taking me down to the creek: "There, no one can hear." I'm very afraid. Radio call says the perp had been found. Cops say they have me, another one! Thrown in the paddy wagon, sightless, afraid. It stops. Doors open. I hear "Who's he? He wasn't with us." (*Exhales audibly*) I'm put out of the wagon. Cop says, "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time." Paddy wagon disappears. I don't know where I am. Shaken I make my way home.  
I'm twelve.

### Scene Eight

*Perc. returns to Perc. area. Singer, becoming Mother, sits straight in driver's seat.*

Perc/Cellist: (*like children, noisily wave notebook paper*) Hey! Hey look! Hey look!

Mother: You got a B+ on your test!? That's fantastic! Of course, your Dad would say "B's ...are for Butt-heads." But I say: "Let's get ice cream!"

### Scene Nine

*Mother in the car, grooving wordlessly to herself. A car honks.*

Mother: Sorry, I'm not Vicki. She's the other mother of color in the class.

### Scene Ten

Mother: Don't make me stop this car! That's it! When we get home, you go straight to your room! And I'll go to mine! ...Get out of the car. Get out of my car. Don't you

ever speak to me like that. You can walk home. I said get out of my car. And don't stop anywhere along the way!  
...Oh God, God...does he even know the way home?

#### Bulletin #6

Cellist: (spoken) Scene: A car by the side of the road.

Singer: Officer, I'm showing you my hands, see my hands, my hands at all times, see my hands; but I want you to know, just know, I have a gun and permit –  
*Singer freezes. Cellist and Perc. mime, in silence and slow motion, large whipping gestures with bow and drumstick.*

Shots fired as a young man dies with his child in the backseat.

#### Scene Eleven

Mother: You are not who they see!

*Short reprise of "Beautiful Brown Boy" lullaby.*

Mother: (spoken) You know I still think you're the coolest kid on the planet! Have a good day! I love you!

#### Scene Twelve

*Mother drives, her son in the passenger seat. Suddenly she stops.*

Mother: Get out of the car. Get out. Don't argue with me, just get out. *(She also gets out, walks around car, indicates for her son to go around and sit in the driver's seat.)* Go. Get in the car. *She sits in passenger seat.* Move the seat, adjust the mirrors. Seat belt! Okay. Okay. This is serious! Put your foot on the brake! Turn the key – don't take your foot off the brake!

*(To herself)* Not yet, not yet. Is this car a ticket to freedom or a time bomb? You're ready for this, but am I?

*(To son)* Now put it in drive – don't push the gas! Not yet! Not yet. Just coast. Yes.

*(To herself)* That smile melts my heart.

*(To son)* Now just a little. A little! Both hands on the wheel! With your license comes freedom, privilege, independence.

*(To herself)* And with this privilege comes terror.

*(To son)* Gently!!

#### Bulletin #7

Singer: A congressman pulled over seven times for driving a nice car.

A neighbor calls 911 about a man! – a man! – parked! parked! in front of his own house. His own house!

#### Scene Thirteen

Mother: Nothing new, but new to you. It's not a question of if, my son, but when.

Every time you leave, I'll try to let go a little more.

Every time you leave, I'll be waiting for your key in our front door.

Your key.

Our front door.

#### Curtain



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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