



THE BOARDS

STOP, FRISK, SING

By Sarah Larson
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In a parlorklike practice room at South Oxford Space, in Brooklyn, on the Friday night of Labor Day weekend, the new-music ensemble Two Sides Sounding rehearsed an opera scene called “Stop and Frisk.” Its librettist, Daniel Neer, who is white, conceived of the piece during the Bloomberg administration; at rehearsals, the recent events in Ferguson were on everyone’s mind. The piece, part of the BEAT Festival, will make its début at a farmers’ market in East New York this Saturday. (A ticketed performance will follow next week, at the Brooklyn Historical Society.) “Stop and Frisk” is the first scene of a three-part opera in progress called “Independence Eve,” which takes place on July 3rd in three different eras and consists of dialogues about race relations, set on a park bench. The small audience included Neer; the composer, Sidney Marquez Boquiren; the director, Ted Gorodetzky; and Two Sides Sounding’s artistic director, Eleanor Taylor.



The practice room had yellow walls, French doors, and yellow upholstered chairs, three of which had been pushed together to make a park bench. Jorell Williams, an African-American lyric baritone in a gray polo shirt and jeans, sang into a cell phone, “Will the cops be there?” He sang, “I’m nervous as hell, not sleeping, anxious.” He looked sad. “Happy Fourth to you, too,” he sang, and hung up.

Brandon Snook, a Caucasian “light lyric tenor slash leggiero tenor,” as he later put it, came onstage. He wore an orange checked oxford shirt and khaki shorts. The pianist, Mila Henry, pounded out some minor notes. “Hey, buddy, sorry I’m late,” Snook sang, elongating the words. Even during the recitative lines, both singers’ voices were as loud as bagpipes, reverberating off the walls. Snook, standing, sang at length about a baseball game, while his friend sat behind him, distracted. “Holiday weekend coming up—the world’s our oyster,” Snook sang.

Williams leaned in and looked at Snook. “I’m suing the city,” he sang.

Snook was taken aback. He sang, “You’re what? You’re what? You’re what?”

“Suing. Those cops,” Williams sang, his voice growing to fill the room.

“You’re obsessed with this,” Snook sang. He encouraged him to shake it off, and to get some wings and some beers with him. Williams looked annoyed.

Gorodetzky interrupted them. “Let’s hold for a second before this aria,” he said. Williams smiled, instantly lighthearted, and began making metronome noises with his tongue. Gorodetzky went on, “This is where the real awkwardness begins. With ‘the world’s our oyster,’ really try to get that jocular attitude—play it up, to contrast with ‘I’m suing the city.’ ”

Williams stood for his aria. “I know you’re trying to cheer me up, Joe—but you can’t understand how this feels,” he sang. “Treated like a criminal in front of my neighbors—do you know what that does to a soul? That night I experienced a whole different world, and I’m not sure I can ever come back.” The piano played a creeping, tense melody. Williams sang, “I came home from work—dressed in a suit. Walked past three cops in the lobby. They saw me and nodded—one even said ‘Hi.’ ” He sang that he had gone upstairs and changed into sweats to shoot hoops at the gym. “When I got to the lobby, those very same cops grabbed me and asked who I was. They had a ‘reasonable suspicion,’ they said, and told me they knew I had drugs. . . . I was stripped and searched because of my skin.”

Snook sang that the situation sucked, but asked if he might have provoked the cops somehow, by acting “strange.” His friend handled this suggestion better than most people might have. A minute later, they sang a fond but bitter duet about their shared youth—baseball games, frat parties.

“A fantasy world,” Williams sang.

“A fantasy world,” Snook sang.

The scene was unresolved, but not without hope. At its conclusion—“Later”—the small audience applauded.

Boquiren had a note about the duet. “The tension is the fact that you’re singing the same text, the same melody, but you’re not in the same world.”

Neer wanted them to enunciate. “I have some diction-police things,” he said. “ ‘Kick the can,’ ‘judge’s robe,’ ‘first a bill, then a law’—it’s super-beautiful legato singing, but you can truncate a bit to get those consonants. *Drug-z.* ”

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Gorodetzky said, “And ‘Leave me the fuck alone’—don’t be afraid to be too big with that.”

Like their baseball-playing frat-brother counterparts, Williams and Snook are old friends; they were apprentices together at Des Moines Metro Opera, in Iowa, six years ago.

Gorodetzky said, “Just one thing about the section in the duet where you did both look at each other. It seems like there’s a mix of camaraderie and confusion.”

“You smiled at each other,” Neer said.

“That was because I dropped a line,” Williams said. Everyone laughed.

“All of a sudden, it got very chummy,” Neer said. ♦

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Sarah Larson, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2007.

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