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Contents

SUSANNAH

The Production

Fast Facts	3
65 Years of <i>Susannah</i>	4
Synopsis	5
Full Synopsis	6
The Principal Characters	9
The Composer – Carlisle Floyd	10
Musical Highlights	12
Cultural Connections	13
Finding Rural America in <i>Susannah</i>	13
Appalachian Dialect	15
Other “Susannas”	16

Historical Connections

“Ain’t It a Pretty Night?”	17
McCarthyism and the Cold War	18
Revival Meetings	19



Susannah, 2006, Virginia Opera.

Fast Facts

- Carlisle Floyd wrote *Susannah* while he was a professor at Florida State University.
- *Susannah* is based on the apocryphal tale of ‘Susanna and the Elders.’
- *Susannah* received its premiere performance at Florida State University’s Ruby Diamond Auditorium February 24, 1955.
- *Susannah* is the second most-performed American opera, after George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.
- Famous Susannahs include Phyllis Curtin, Renée Fleming, and Patricia Racette.
- *Susannah* was staged at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels.
- The most well-known songs from *Susannah* are Susannah’s arias “Ain’t it a Pretty Night” and “The Trees on the Mountain.”
- The setting for *Susannah*, the fictitious town of New Hope Valley in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee, is representative of many religious rural communities in the American South.
- The music of *Susannah* features recognizable elements of Appalachian folk song and Protestant hymns.
- *Susannah* was one of the first operas in the 20th century to explore feminist themes.
- The “revival” scene in Act 2 was influenced by memories and experiences from the childhood of the composer, whose father was a rural preacher.
- In 1997, Floyd rescored *Susannah* for a smaller orchestra for a production by the Kammeroper in Vienna. This production set the opera in a puritanical Lutheran community, to be more familiar for the Austrian audience.



Eric Johnston (Little Bat) and Lillian Sengpiehl (Susannah Polk), *Susannah*, 2006, Virginia Opera.

65 Years of *Susannah*



Phyllis Curtin (*Susannah*) and Norman Treigle (Olin Blitch), *Susannah*, New York City Opera (1956). Photo by Leo Friedman.



Susannah sets from Metropolitan Opera (1999) adapted from paintings by American artist Thomas Hart Benton.



St. Petersburg Opera (2017); first commercially available DVD recording of *Susannah*.



Semcentennial anniversary production of *Susannah* at Florida State University's Ruby Diamond Auditorium (2005).

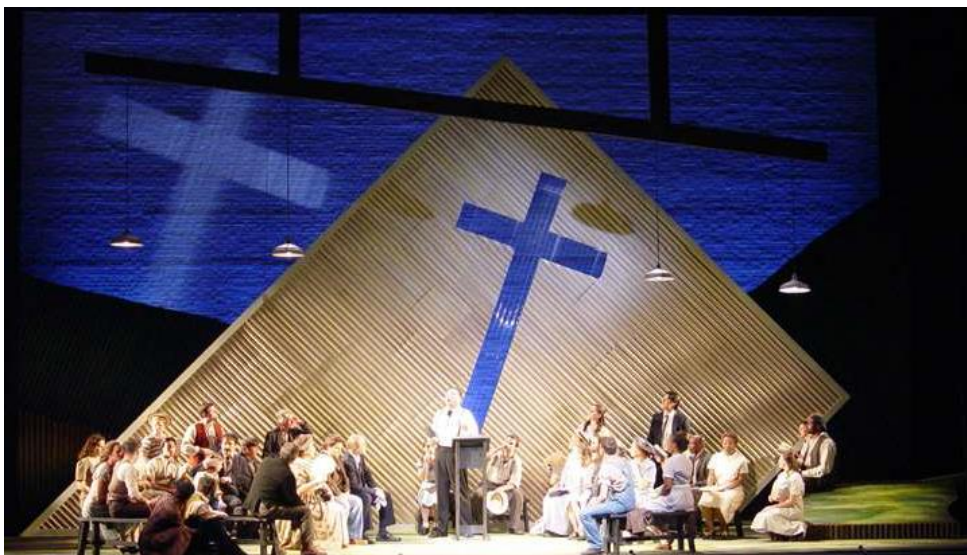
The plot of *Susannah* in two minutes:

At a square dance held at the church in New Hope Valley, Tennessee, the wives of the church elders gossip about the young and beautiful Susannah Polk. They are jealous and distrusting of her, and scornful of her brother Sam. The elders discuss the need to find a creek for a baptism ceremony before the arrival of the new preacher, the Reverend Olin Blitch. Blitch arrives at the dance, meets the elders, and dances with Susannah. After the dance, Susannah and her friend Little Bat talk and laugh about the dance, and Susannah imagines what life would be like outside the valley. Little Bat leaves when Sam returns home from hunting.

The next morning, Susannah is bathing in the creek, espied by the elders who come across her while searching for the creek. Her nakedness fires their lust, which turns to shame, then quickly to haughty indignation. When Susannah arrives for the church dinner later that day, she is turned away by the elders and their wives. Hurt and confused, Susannah returns home, where Little Bat approaches her and timidly explains that she has been shunned because she was seen bathing naked; a wickedness in the eyes of the elders. Further, he confesses that he has been coerced into falsely claiming that she seduced him.

Later that week, Sam tells Susannah that the others expect her to confess and publicly repent; Susannah angrily refuses, knowing she has done nothing wrong. At a revival meeting, Blitch calls for members of the church to step forward in public displays of contrition. Singled out from the congregation, Susannah flees the church, returning home, where she collapses, exhausted. Blitch has followed her to hear her confession and lead her to repent. She again refuses, denying that she has any reason to do so. Blitch, recognizing his own weakness in Susannah's vulnerability, forces himself upon her.

A repentant and conflicted Blitch, having realized that Susannah was an innocent, uselessly tells the elders that they are wrong about her. That evening, as the congregation gathers for the baptism ceremony, Sam finds out that Blitch sexually assaulted Susannah, and sets off to the creek to shoot the preacher. A shot rings out; a mob approaches Susannah's house blaming her for pushing Sam to kill Blitch, and threatening to force her to leave. Susannah stands her ground, holding off the crowd with her rifle. Her accusers disperse, leaving Susannah alone, ostracized from the community, her life shattered.



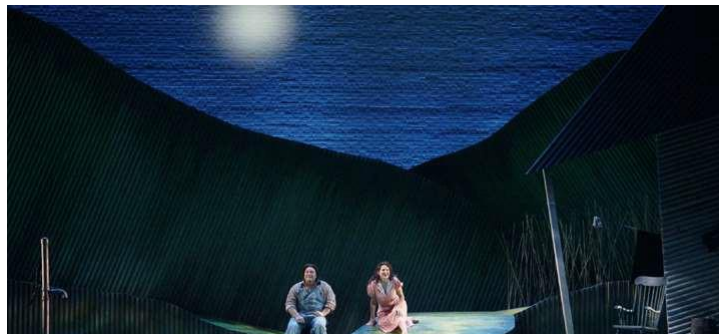
Susannah, 2006, Virginia Opera.

Act I**Scene 1**

One Monday night in mid-July, the folk of the mountain community of New Hope Valley, Tennessee, gather in the church yard for a square dance. Most of the village is present, including the elders of the church and their wives. This celebration kicks off a special week long event for the church: a revival, to be led by a visiting preacher. While the men and women all take turns dancing with different partners, it is clear that the men are drawn to the square of one particular woman: the young and beautiful Susannah Polk, who stands out from the crowd in her brightly colored dress. The elders' wives cast disapproving glances at Susannah and gossip among themselves. When Elder McLean goes to dance with Susannah, his wife jealously harps on the young girl's beauty and manner of dress, sourly remarking "That pretty a face must hide some evil." A moment later, a stranger joins the dance. He is the Reverend Olin Blitch, arrived at New Hope Valley a day early to think, fast, and pray, in preparation for the revival. He is introduced to the elders and their wives, who are thrilled to receive him. His eyes are drawn to Susannah; Elders Gleaton and McLean tell him she is a poor girl, raised by her older brother, Sam, who they say is always drunk. Blitch responds sympathetically, saying he will pray for their souls; Mrs. McLean sharply mutters "She'll come to no good, mark my words." After a short time, the reverend goes off to join the dancers, and eventually finds his way to Susannah, and dances with her. As the scene closes, Mrs. McLean repeats her ill portent: "She'll come to no good, mark my words."

Scene 2

After the dance, Susannah is accompanied home by her friend Little Bat, the son of Elder McLean and Mrs. McLean. It is obvious that Little Bat admires Susannah, although he is nervous to be around her house because his parents have instilled in him a distrust for Sam. They talk and laugh about the dance; Little Bat marvels at how pretty Susannah looks, pointing out that he saw all the men at the dance (including the preacher) courting her. Susannah naïvely dismisses his observation, joking about Blitch's poor dancing. Looking up at the sky reflectively, she sings of the stars and the cities beyond the mountains, wondering what life is like outside of the valley ("Ain't it a pretty night?"). Soon Sam returns from hunting; Susannah is excited to see her brother return, but Little Bat jumps up and scampers off. Sam asks Susannah about the dance, and she tells him what a good time she had. Before they retire for the evening, Susannah convinces Sam to sing "Jaybird" for her; a silly song from her childhood that always makes her feel happy.



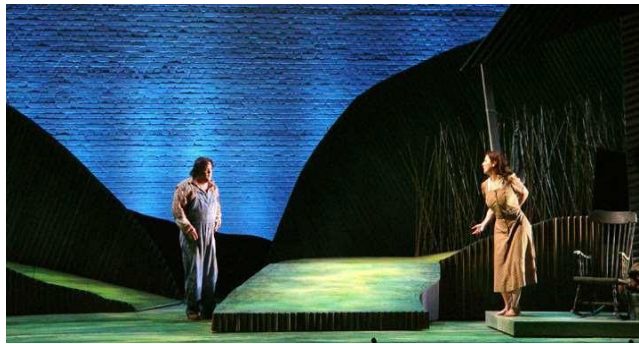
Eric Johnston (Little Bat), and Lillian Sengpiehl (Susannah Polk)
Susannah, 2006, Virginia Opera.

Scene 3

The next morning, Susannah goes to the creek near her house to bathe. The elders arrive on the Polk's property, searching for a part of the creek that would be suitable for a baptism ceremony. They soon find the creek, and they also see Susannah. At first they are surprised, but their surprise transforms to lust as they continue to watch her. As they realize what they are feeling, the elders become ashamed, and horrified. Indignantly they make a show of being outraged, proclaiming that Susannah is a wicked girl for exposing herself for all to see, that she needs to be brought to repentance, and that everyone in the valley must be told of her transgression. As the elders retreat into the forest, Susannah is heard innocently singing "Jaybird" to herself, unaware that she has been seen.

Scene 4 and 5

That evening, Susannah arrives late for a dinner at the church, only to be turned away by the elders. Confused, she returns home, where Little Bat finds her. He is visibly troubled, as he tells Susannah that the elders saw her bathing in the creek; that they have been spreading rumours about her, and that they coerced him into claiming that she seduced him. Furious, she screams at Little Bat to leave and never return. Sam, who had been sleeping inside the house, comes outside. Unable to comfort Susannah, he patiently observes that "people want to believe what's bad." Realizing that nothing can be done, Susannah sobs quietly and begs Sam to sing "Jaybird" for her again.



Eric Johnston (Little Bat), and Lillian Sengpiehl (Susannah Polk) *Susannah*, 2006, Virginia Opera.

Act II

Scene 1

Later that week, Susannah has grown fed up with the rude and inappropriate way the men in town have been treating her since the church dinner. Sam reminds her that the congregation expects her to make a public confession, and suggests that she go to the revival meeting that evening, since he will be away hunting and doesn't want her to be alone. Susannah is reluctant to go, refusing to make any kind of confession when she knows she has done nothing wrong, but eventually acquiesces, saying that if things get bad she will simply leave.

Scene 2

That evening at the church, the pews are filled with people attending the revival meeting. Blich preaches about sin and repentance; he calls for members of the congregation to step forward to publicly confess their sins and receive forgiveness. As the choir sings, Blich singles out Susannah. Swept up in the collective intensity of the revival, she stands and moves towards the preacher as though in a trance. A hush falls over the congregation, and Susannah snaps suddenly into awareness. Rejecting the call of the reverend, she runs from the church, fleeing into the night.

Scene 3

At home once again, Susannah sings to herself a song that her mother taught her when she was little (“The trees on the mountains”). After she has finished singing, Blitch approaches the house. He followed her home from the church, to talk with her and to pray with her for the forgiveness of her sins. Once again, Susannah denies that she has done anything wrong, and that the elders lied when they claimed that she seduced Little Bat. The preacher refuses to believe her; he ignores her insistence, convinced that she is guilty of all the rumours he has heard. It is clear that Blitch, having failed to bring Susannah to confess, feels the weight of his role as a spiritual leader. Giving in to his baser desires, and armed with the knowledge that she is alone, he draws close to Susannah. No longer interested in talking or praying, he suggests to her “let’s go inside.” Too exhausted to refuse him, Susannah leads him into the house.

Scene 4

The following morning at the church, Blitch kneels alone before the altar. Feeling a deep sense of shame for having sexually assaulted Susannah, he calls out to God and confesses his weakness, pleading for the forgiveness of his sin. He now knows that Susannah was a virgin and innocent of the accusations that the elders had made against her. When the congregation gathers at the church (including Susannah, who sits by herself apart from the others), he tells the elders that God spoke to him of Susannah’s innocence, and they should ask Susannah to forgive them for how they have treated her. Shaking their heads in disbelief and disappointment, the elders and their wives take their leave of the preacher. He hesitantly approaches Susannah, and pitifully starts to explain that he will make it up to her, asking her to forgive him. Susannah responds: “Fergive? I’ve forgot what that word means.”

Scene 5

Hours later, Sam returns home from his hunting trip to find Susannah distant and distraught. When he learns that Blitch assaulted her, he takes his gun and heads for the creek, where the preacher is performing baptisms. A shot rings out, and moments later Little Bat rushes out of the woods, calling for Susannah. He tells her that Sam shot the preacher, and that the townsfolk are saying that she put him up to it. He warns her that they are coming to drive her away from her home and out of the valley. The church Elders, now an angry mob, surge towards the porch where Susannah stubbornly stands. She whirls inside the house, and reappears with a rifle, brandishing it at the mob. Cowed by her sudden defiance, the villagers disperse back into the woods, exiling Susannah alone with her rage.



Susannah, 2006. Virginia Opera.

Principal Characters

Name	Description
Susannah Polk	A young woman, beautiful and naïve. Lives with her older brother.
Sam Polk	Susannah's older brother, a hunter.
Reverend Olin Blicht	A preacher, recently arrived at New Hope Valley.
Little Bat McLean	Susannah's friend, the son of Elder McLean.
Elders	McLean, Ott, Hayes, and Gleaton are the leaders of the church.
Elders' wives	Influential women of the church, led by Mrs. McLean.



Susannah, 2006, Virginia Opera.

The Composer

Carlisle Floyd (June 11, 1926 – September 30, 2021)

Carlisle Floyd was one of the foremost composers and librettists of opera in the United States in the 20th century. Born in 1926, Floyd earned B.M. and M.M. degrees in piano and composition at Syracuse University. He began his teaching career in 1947 at Florida State University, remaining there until 1976, when he accepted the prestigious M. D. Anderson Professorship at the University of Houston. In addition, he was the co-founder with David Gockley of the Houston Opera Studio, jointly created by the University of Houston and Houston Grand Opera.

Considered the “Father of American Opera,” Floyd’s operas are regularly performed in the US and Europe. He first achieved national prominence with the New York premiere of his opera *Susannah* (1953–54) by the New York City Opera in 1956. In 1957 it won the New York Music Critics’ Circle Award and subsequently was chosen to be America’s official operatic entry at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair.

His second opera, *Wuthering Heights*, premiered at Santa Fe Opera in 1958, and continues to have life decades later—a critically acclaimed recording, released by The Florentine Opera in June 2016 on Reference Recordings, was listed in *Opera News*’ 10 Best Opera Recordings of 2016.

Based on the Steinbeck novella, *Of Mice and Men* (1969) is another of Floyd’s most performed works throughout the world. It was commissioned by the Ford Foundation and was given its premiere by the Seattle Opera in 1970.

Bilby’s Doll (1976) and *Willie Stark* (1981), were both commissioned and produced by the Houston Grand Opera, the latter in association with the Kennedy Center. A televised version of the world premiere production of *Willie Stark* opened WNET’s *Great Performances* series on the PBS network in September of 1981.

Cold Sassy Tree (2000), received its premiere at Houston Grand Opera in April 2000. Subsequently, it has been performed by Austin Lyric Opera, Central City Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Opera Carolina, Opera Omaha, San Diego Opera, Utah Opera, and Atlanta Opera.

Prince of Players, premiered in March 2016 at the Houston Grand Opera and [had] three subsequent productions, plus a professional recording produced within the first two years of its premiere.

Floyd’s non-operatic works include the orchestral song cycle *Citizen of Paradise* (1984), which received its New York premiere with world-renowned mezzo-soprano Suzanne Mentzer. *A Time to Dance* (1993), his large-scale work for chorus, bass-baritone soloist, and orchestra, was commissioned by the American Choral Directors Association.

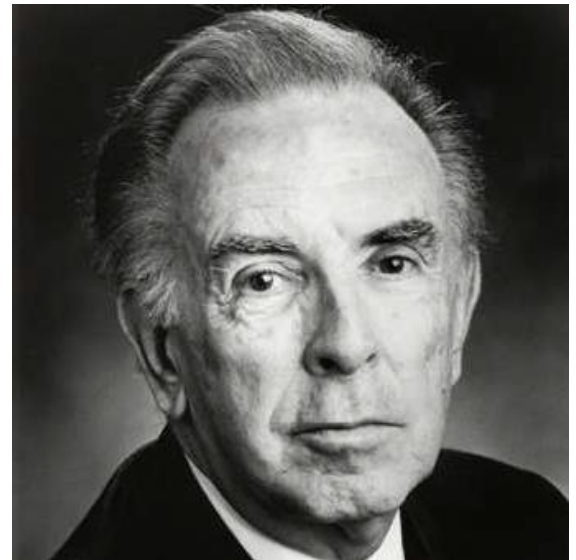


Photo by Jim Caldwell

The Composer

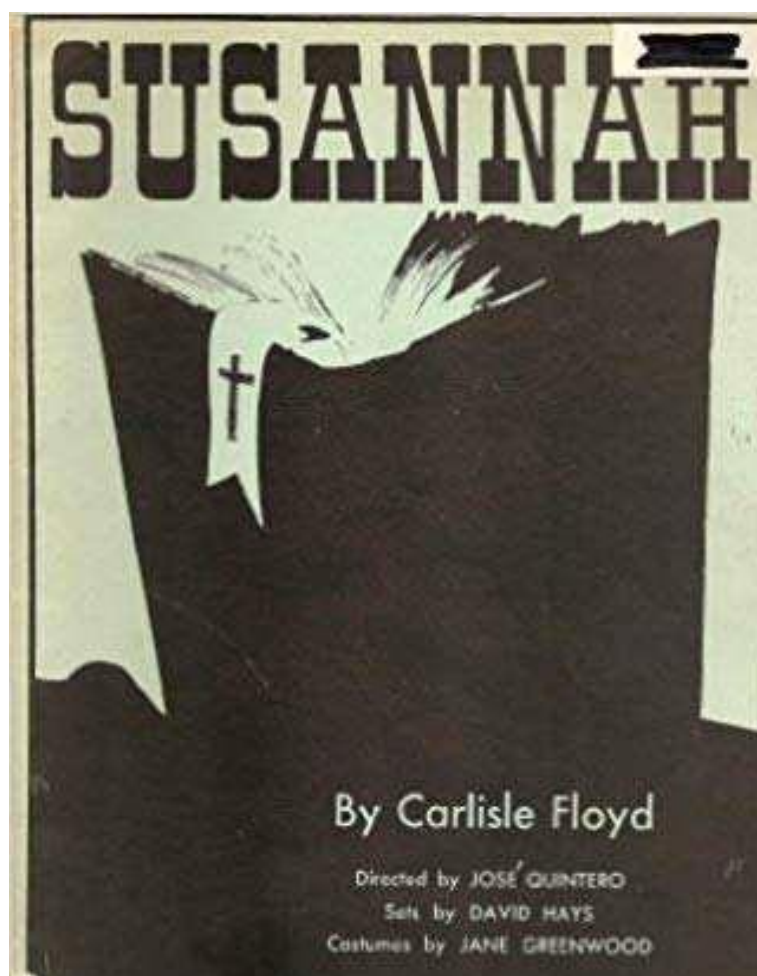
Among the numerous awards and honors Floyd received they include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1956); Citation of Merit from the National Association of American Conductors and Composers (1957); National Opera Institute's Award for Service to American Opera (1983); and the National Medal of Arts in a ceremony at the White House (2004). In 2008, Floyd was one of four honorees—and the only composer—to be included in the inaugural National Endowment for the Arts Opera Honors. Additionally, he served on the Music Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts from 1974–80 and was the first chairman of the Opera/Musical Theater Panel.

In 2001, Floyd was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He also was inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame (2011) and the Florida Artist Hall of Fame (2015). He holds six honorary doctorates.

During the 2015–16 season, Floyd partnered with Opera America to produce “Masters at Work,” a live, interactive webcast exploring the making of an opera.

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“With a commitment that rivals Smetana’s in Bohemia or Britten’s in Britain, [Floyd] has striven to create a national repertory ... He has learned the international language of successful opera in order to speak it in his own accents and to enrich it with the musical and vernacular idioms of his own country.”



Musical Highlights

Listen to some of the most memorable music from *Susannah*

“Ain’t it a Pretty Night?”

Renée Fleming, *Susannah*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hl_Hs4PNT-c



Renée Fleming (Susannah), *Susannah*,
Lyric Opera of Chicago, 1993.



Patricia Racette (Susannah), *Susannah*,
San Francisco Opera, 2014.
Photo by Cory Weaver

“The Trees on the Mountains”

Patricia Racette, *Susannah*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAJ-hrsDYNo>



Norman Treigle (Olin Blitch), *Susannah*,
New York City Opera, 1971.
Photo copyright Beth Bergman

“Folk elements appear all the way through the piece, including the hymns in the revival meeting, although they’re all original, both words and music. I use them to suggest immediately the flavor of a place and also what’s going on.”

-Carlisle Floyd, 1991

Act II “Revival Meeting”

Norman Treigle, Olin Blitch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWoSClBdh2Y>

Finding Rural America in *Susannah*

The characters in *Susannah* demonstrate values that are important to communities in the American South. Their actions, for better or worse, are generally motivated by strong ties to their family or community, or from a deep-seated sense of the burdens and rewards of faith. These attitudes provide a glimpse of what life was like in the rural South in the first half of the 20th century.

Susannah Polk

Susannah is carefree and innocent. She dreams of life beyond the valley; she has a fondness for nature (stars, fireflies, sound of crickets, smell of pine straw, rabbits, flowers, etc.). Even when she imagines what life is like outside of the valley, Susannah reflects upon the things she would miss about her home. Susannah is also stubborn and independent. She refuses to back down from what she knows is true, and what she knows is right.

Susannah is hurt when the elders' false accusations drive her apart from the community. Little Bat's involvement in perpetuating those lies cuts deeper; he was her friend, and she learned that she cannot count on him. She relies on her older brother Sam for support and stability; his absence the night she is sexually abused by Blitch is nothing short of a complete betrayal of her trust.

Susannah's refusal to confess and seek the community's approval must be seen in light of the importance of faith, community, and belonging that is entrenched in the mindset of the American South. To willingly choose isolation over acceptance represents a break from everything familiar and comfortable.

Sam Polk

Sam is the quintessential frontiersman. As an accomplished hunter and trapper, he relies on his own skills and wits, and lives by his own code. He wishes to avoid becoming involved in other people's trouble. As fiercely independent as he is, he is equally loyal. Sam centers his entire identity around caring for and protecting his little sister Susannah. When he realizes that he has failed her, he seeks atonement through vengeance, knowing that it will sever his already strained ties to the community of New Hope Valley.

Reverend Olin Blitch

Olin Blitch is the iconic Southern spiritual leader. He is charismatic and confident; he quotes scripture in conversation and captivates the congregation with his evangelical showmanship. Although an outsider to New Hope Valley, Blitch belongs to the community through his position of authority. As much as he is pained and conflicted over recognizing his abuse of Susannah, his shame is compounded as he must continue to fulfil his obligations to the community as their religious leader, knowing that he himself can claim no moral high ground.

Finding Rural America in *Susannah*

Little Bat McLean

Although it is not explicitly stated to the audience, we know that Little Bat is a young man with an intellectual disability (Floyd's libretto describes the character as "a shifty-eyed youth, not too strong mentally"). He is motivated by curiosity, and sometimes by fear. Little Bat values his friendship with Susannah— he doesn't keep secrets from her, even though it is painful for him to tell her the truth about his complicity in her ostracism. That complicity arises from his strong family bonds – he is unwilling to speak out or act contrary to his parents' wishes. The fact that he comes to warn Susannah as the townsfolk converge on her home to capture and execute Sam again underscores the importance of his friendship with Susannah, even though it is by that point broken.

Elders & Elders' Wives

The congregation of New Hope Valley is comprised of people who are religiously conservative, and suspicious of people whose lifestyles or circumstances differ from theirs. They look to their religious leader (Blitch) for action and instruction- insofar as it affirms and aligns with their very specific and firmly held convictions. They are preoccupied with ensuring that the reality of their community (and everyone in it) conforms to those beliefs and attitudes, and are intolerant of any perceived (whether real or imagined) deviation from that conformity. When Blitch tells them they were wrong about Susannah, they turn away from him. When the elders recognize their own lustful thoughts towards Susannah, they blame her rather than confront their own shame.

Their actions are cruel and selfish, but it is clear that the elders and their wives are motivated by the absolute imperative of belonging to and being accepted by the community. In their collective worldview, there can be no self apart from the community, and the community cannot tolerate non-conformity. After falsely accusing Susannah of indecent behavior, they insist that she confess publicly, to be reconciled to the community. They earnestly believe that they are acting in the best interest of the community, and do not once consider that Susannah might opt instead to remain isolated.



Susannah, Florida State University, 2005.

Appalachian Dialect in *Susannah*

While all of the text in *Susannah* is in English, it may sound different than the English you speak. *Susannah* is written in a verismo style, meaning that the characters, language, and plot are rooted in reality as much as possible – everything in the opera must be believable. Operas in this style often employ colloquial language, and *Susannah* is no exception. To create a believable opera set in America’s Deep South, Carlisle Floyd chose words and a dialect that are uniquely Appalachian. Some of the more noticeable characteristics of this dialect include:

Vowels are formed towards the back of the mouth rather than the front: “can’t” sounds like “cain’t”; “get” sounds like “git”; “forgive” sounds like “fergive.”

The “s” sound that ends some words may be replaced with an “n” sound: one might say “her’n” instead of “hers.”

Participles and gerunds ending “-ing” are pronounced as though they ended “-in,” as in huntin’ or preachin’.

The letter “a” is often added as a prefix to verbs; such as a-bathin’, aspyin’, or a-prayin’. As with any dialect, some words have a colloquial usage. Examples in *Susannah* include:

Afore – before	Mite – small amount
Allers – always	Out’n – out of
Brickbat – a piece of brick; also an insult	Plum – completely, absolutely
Chitlins – fried pig intestines	Reckon – to suppose
Crick – creek	Seed – saw
Jaybird – a blue jay; also someone who talks too much	Spell – length of time
Jest – just	Sum’mers – somewhere
Mighty – very	They’s – there is or they are
	Twarn’t – it wasn’t
	Varmint - vermin

Floyd’s mastery of this dialect is playfully displayed in the silly “Jaybird” song in Act 1 of the opera, into which he sneaks some clever wordplay:

“Oh, jaybird sittin’ on a hick’ry limb, He
winked at me an’ I winked at him.
I picked up a brickbat An’
hit him on the chin.
‘Looka here, little boy, don’t you do that agin!’”

Taken literally, it could describe an easily imagined and somewhat comic scene; a blue jay sitting on a branch catches a youth’s attention, and the youth throws a rock at it. Startled, the bird squawks angrily at the boy. Read a bit differently, knowing that in the Appalachian dialect a “jaybird” is someone who talks too much, and a “brickbat” is an insult, it describes an interaction between a youth and a person who is heckling him.

Other “*Susannas*”



Susanna and the Elders, by Artemisia Gentileschi (1652)

Floyd’s *Susannah* is loosely based on the Apocryphal story of *Susanna and the Elders*, which dates back to the second century BC. In that tale, a young Hebrew woman named Susanna is spied bathing naked in her garden by two elders. The lecherous elders approach Susanna, saying that unless she has sex with them, they will say that they saw her fornicating with a young man in the garden, a transgression for which she would be put to death. She denies them, and the men publicly accuse her of adultery. At Susanna’s trial, the elders are examined regarding their accusation. Their testimonies disagree on key details and their falsehood is revealed. Susanna is declared innocent, and the elders are executed for their deception.

Also told in the *One Thousand and One Nights* as *The Devout Woman and the Two Wicked Elders*, this story has been portrayed by artists in a variety of media throughout the centuries.

The Lothair Crystal (9th century): A depiction of the story (12 scenes with Latin text) is engraved in quartz set in gilt copper.

Famous painters have also depicted the story; it was a popular subject among Baroque masters including Rembrandt, Rubens, and Artemisia Gentileschi.



Susanna and the Elders,
by Robert Colescott (1980)

The 20th century saw more stylized depictions of Susanna by Picasso in his cubist style, by American regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, and by African-American surrealist Robert Colescott.

Other composers have set the story, as well, including a cantata in French by Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre (1708), the oratorio *Susanna* by Georg Friderick Handel (1749) and one act of Jerome Moross’s Broadway triptych *Ballet Ballads* (1948).

Ain't It a Pretty Night

"Ain't in a pretty night.

Just think, those stars can all peep down

An' see way beyond where we can

They can see way beyond them mountains

To Nashville and Asheville an' Knoxville

I wonder what it's like out there,

Out there beyond them mountains

Where the folks talk nice, and the folks dress nice

Like y'see in the mail order catalogs."

Susannah is set in the 1920's, when Sears was the most widely circulated mail-order catalog in the United States. While retail stores became more and more common in cities, they were less accessible to rural communities. Many items that were not locally available could be purchased through the mail, including all the latest fashions in clothing, luggage, tools, furniture, appliances, toys, and gifts.



Sears Catalogue, 1930 (Fall), page 44



The cities that Susannah names in her song can be found on this map.

Nashville and Knoxville are major cities in Tennessee; Asheville is to the east (in North Carolina), beyond the Appalachian Mountain range.

McCarthyism

Though he did not make conscious efforts to reference McCarthyism in the creation of his opera, Floyd believes that it did touch his work. When asked if he specifically intended the opera to serve as a political statement, Floyd said: "I'm too practical a man of the theater; it just struck me as right. But I did write the work during the McCarthy years, and I lived through the terrors. At Florida State an accusation was tantamount to guilt. We faculty had to sign a pledge of loyalty or lose our jobs. It affected me and informed me emotionally. And there it is in the opera. But I can't say I put it there."

What is McCarthyism?

"Shortly after WWII a phenomenon known as McCarthyism began to emerge in American politics. McCarthyism was the practice of investigating and accusing persons in positions of power or influence of disloyalty, subversion (working secretly to undermine or overthrow the government), or treason. Reckless accusations that the government was full of communists were pursued by Republican-led committees with subpoena power and without proper regard for evidence. The two Republicans most closely associated with McCarthyism were the phenomenon's namesake, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and Senator Richard Nixon, who served as Vice President from 1953-1961, and then President from 1969-1974. Both men were driven by personal insecurities as much as by political gain. Government employees, the entertainment industry, educators, and union activists were the primary targets of McCarthyism. Their communist (or leftist) associations were often greatly exaggerated, and they were often dismissed from government jobs or imprisoned with inconclusive, questionable, and sometimes outright fabricated evidence. Most verdicts were later overturned, most dismissals later declared illegal, and some laws used to convict later declared unconstitutional."

- Michael Barnes, *The Cold War Home Front: McCarthyism*



A hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee

Among the influential American artists who were investigated by Senator McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee during this unstable period were notable composers, authors, and filmmakers including Aaron Copland (*Appalachian Spring*), Arthur Miller (*The Crucible*), and Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*).

Revival Meetings

Act 2, scene 2 of *Susannah* depicts a revival meeting at the church in New Hope Valley.

What is a revival meeting?

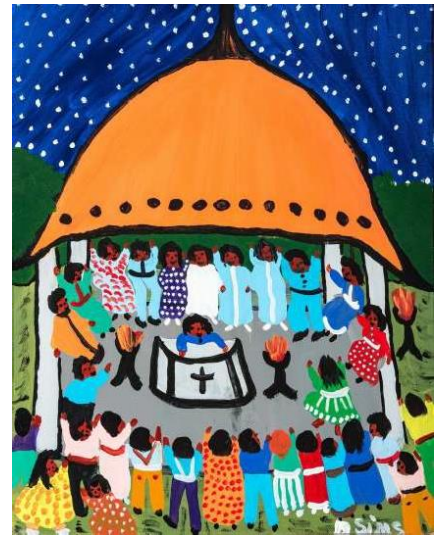
Revival meetings are associated with fundamentalist Christian denominations, primarily in Baptist, Methodist, and Mennonite churches. A revival meeting is a series of religious services held to inspire active members of a church and to convert new members. They are held over a period ranging from several days to several weeks, although some have lasted for months. In Mennonite communities, the purpose of the revival meeting is primarily to promote the spiritual activity of church members, rather than to convert nonbelievers to the faith. Typically, a visiting preacher is brought in from outside the church to engage the congregation with impassioned sermons.

Why was it important to the community?

“Commonly held in the late summer just before cotton picking began, the open-air or tent meetings would attract farm families from miles around . . . Revival meetings served both spiritual and social functions. Families would share food and eat together after church. These occasions offered farmers the opportunity to visit with neighbors and friends and exchange personal news.”



Tent revival in Winnipeg, 1957.



Tent Revival. Bernice Sims (1926-2014)

- Steven L. Piott, *Daily Life in the Progressive Era*

As an important part of rural life, particularly in the American South, revival meetings have been depicted in literature, art, and media that were inspired by rural experiences.

Literature: Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*

Music: Charles Ives, *Orchestral Set No. 2: The Rockstrewn Hills Join in the People's Outdoor Meeting*

Film: *Elmer Gantry* (1960)

Works Consulted (General)

Content in this guide was developed by Manitoba Opera for their 2019 production of Susannah and compiled accumulatively. It includes information from the following sources accessed since 2000:

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