

Elmer Gantry

a new American opera

narrative description

Elmer Gantry as an opera

The evening that Bob Aldridge brought me the idea of writing an opera based on *Elmer Gantry*, neither of us had any inkling of what we were getting ourselves into. We, like everyone else, knew of Elmer as an archetype – the womanizing, hypocritical religious figure who attains great heights before being exposed and disgraced. Every year, the newspapers are full of stories about the latest real-life Elmer. On that first evening, we watched the movie of *Elmer Gantry* together and we thought we had something straightforward on our hands: the entertaining story of a memorable, outsized character set in an intriguing milieu. We felt sure it could be the basis of a good, conventional opera. We had no idea of how deeply the story would come to resonate with our personal biographies.

Both Bob and I come from devout backgrounds, albeit very different ones. His dad is a retired minister from North Carolina; mine is a Holocaust survivor who had an orthodox Jewish upbringing in Czechoslovakia. Bob grew up playing guitar in church services; I spent a year after high school on a religious kibbutz in Israel, praying three times a day.

We began our project blithely enough, but as we raced back to Sinclair Lewis' great novel and began absorbing it in all its sweep and caustic humor and glorious detail, the challenge began to seem much more complex. For it became clear that Lewis had written the great American novel about religion in our country. Religion, nothing less -- that hugely influential, deeply personal aspect of life that has such enduring power to both unite and divide human beings, and which is found in so many guises, put to so many purposes (good and bad) and overall, lived with such intensity by Americans. Written in 1927, the book looks back to the turn of the 20th century, to the period in which modern evangelism moved from the frontier to the city by adopting the strategies of that other unstoppable force of the time, American business. The fateful linkage between religion and business has continued down to our day and will be a fact of life in America for many generations to come.

Just reading the novel and writing an adaptation of it clearly wasn't going to be enough. We knew we had to see for ourselves. And so, for several summers we traveled through North Carolina, going to small-town churches and attending traveling tent revival meetings. It was during our trips to the South that we began to sense how we could bring our personal histories to bear on our subject and make *Elmer Gantry* an opera unlike any seen before. Naturally, we arrived at these revival services with a highly skeptical view shaped by our knowledge of all the contemporary Elmers of our country: the Falwells and Robertsons, the Swaggarts, Bakkers and Haggards. And yet, from the first moment we sat in those churches and those tents, we found ourselves swept up by the beauty and fervor and yes, the *sanctity* of evangelical Christianity -- as it is actually lived and practiced in day-to-day worship by people across America.

Little by little we came to realize that our *Elmer Gantry* would be focused differently from Lewis's. We were determined to be true to his biting satire of religious wrongdoing, but at the same time to dramatize the underlying, deeply moving power of American religion itself. We resolved to bring audiences to the heights of both folly and

glory within a single evening -- sometimes within a single moment. To communicate to our audiences the emotional depths we ourselves had experienced in revival meetings, Bob envisioned not the typical operatic sound-world, but one drawn from American roots music – gospel, Appalachian folksong, brass band music. I began to write original hymn texts that could both seem like the real thing and work dramatically to illuminate key points in the story we were telling.

As we worked, *Elmer Gantry* became much more to us than just the viable stage vehicle we first imagined. For one thing, it's hard to imagine that any two collaborators have ever had more sheer fun than we did in writing *Elmer Gantry*. We came to feel that through Elmer and Sharon and Eddie and Frank and Lulu, and through this wonderful musical language of gospel, we were finding and addressing important aspects of our own selves, our heritages, our beliefs and our many foibles. May all that we discovered make our opera truer, funnier and more meaningful!

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librettist