

THE
NITRATE
HYMNAL

Bob Massey and David Wilson

The Nitrate Hymnal
by Aaron Landsman

"Why do we film our lives?" asks composer Bob Massey from his home near Washington, D.C. "It's clearly some primal impulse. A stab at immortality, a desire to leave something for posterity." It is a question this musical maverick and outspoken critic first asked when his grandfather gave him reels of old home movies chronicling 40 years of marriage to Massey's grandmother — from their honeymoon in 1941 through 1985. It is the same question that propels Massey's self-described "post-punk opera," *The Nitrate Hymnal*, created in collaboration with Missouri-based filmmaker David Wilson.

The Nitrate Hymnal uses Massey's home movies as the basis for the fictional tale of a couple who obsessively film their lives in an attempt to preserve them. Blending live action and projected image, the opera tells the story of an old woman in her last moments. As her grandson shows her film footage from her own past, she journeys backward in a reverie through the life that lies behind her. Beginning with her troubled later years, *The Nitrate Hymnal* ends at the point of the woman's honeymoon, an innocent frolic on the beach just weeks before Pearl Harbor, when her husband went off to fight in the Pacific, and both the couple and America were changed forever.

One effect of *The Nitrate Hymnal's* reverse chronology is that, as viewers, we are able to see the innocence of prewar America — embodied by the couple's honeymoon — without it being innocent any longer, because we have already seen the events that follow. Embedded in *Hymnal's* libretto and story are references to larger questions. "What if there was no America?" the old woman asks, as her past flickers on the screen before her. "Maybe it was just Frank Capra."

Massey describes *The Nitrate Hymnal* as "opera for people who hate opera. Hopefully," he says, "we can strip away all the fat and use the cool stuff." But the composer also says the music in the piece will be "more nuanced and complex than your average pop song, a hybrid of modern and classical sounds." Complimenting the sonic landscape and found footage will be Wilson's original video projections, using cut-and-paste prerecorded material with interactive live feeds. "With our projections," says Wilson, "we aim to push past the traditional stage uses of video as either background or clever, self-contained commentary. Part and parcel of the story, our images allow actors and their luminescent counterparts to interact in real time."

"A lot of the video is interactive," Wilson adds, "with live actors singing and interacting with projections. Actors will walk offscreen and vice versa, blurring the line between movie and stage, reverie and waking life."

Co-commissioned by the Washington Performing Arts Society and produced by Anti-Social Music, *The Nitrate Hymnal* is Massey's first foray into opera, but he has long been a pioneer of merged musical forms. A fixture in Washington, D.C.'s fierce, adventurous do-it-yourself music scene of the eighties, Massey is now at the center of the city's burgeoning post-punk movement. He is the curator of a local composer's salon called Punk Not Rock, a frequent contributor to magazines like *Spin* and *CityPaper*, and the leader of The Gena Rowlands Band, whose experimental tunes he describes as "basically late-night kind of sad pop songs, but it's all about movie stars." Massey is a true musical omnivore, listing as his influences everything from modern minimalist composer Arvo Part to the mood music of Joni Mitchell, to "obscure heavy metal bands from my hometown of Richmond, Virginia."

Though he and Wilson share a desire to break through accepted notions of form and narrative, Massey eschews the term "avant-garde." Embracing the ethos of the punk scene that helped shape him, Massey explains, "I don't want to make oblique music or theater. I want people to be moved, blown away, if possible."

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