

In Sickness and Health

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Wednesday

It's a gray day and Grace and I are once more a little sleep-deprived, in part because the kids dragged us into an argument about who was supposed to wash the dishes. That argument lasted until well past midnight. We thought everything had been worked out and a couple of the kids were going to coöperate on the job. But it looks this morning like the only thing they coöperated on was keeping everyone up late and avoiding the actual work, which honestly is not that onerous.

This morning Grace and I were discussing what we might do next. We might take away their allowance and pay the one Potts kid who routinely does chores without complaint to do the dishes. In my opinion the productive sibling should get a minimum wage of fifteen dollars an hour for his dishwashing time, with a minimum billable time of one hour. We'll see if that motivates them.

When I arrived at work, I discovered the office's Internet connection was down. Much of what I need to do today involves Internet access. In fact, since we use a remote e-mail server, without Internet access I can't even send an e-mail from one room to the next. So I spent time wandering around looking for people so I could answer their questions in person, but couldn't find them. Maybe they got fed up and went out for a coffee. If so, I don't blame them; it's a good day for that.

Yesterday I managed to get an updated build of my bootloader and firmware to the team in China, and fortunately this one worked for them, with the exception of some known bugs that I am planning to work on next. This was a relief because I didn't want to fall on my face with broken code again. From my end it seems like a heroic struggle to personally develop and maintain numerous complex pieces of software. Anyone besides me is probably wondering why Paul's stuff seems broken so often; people generally don't notice when it works. They have no idea how many different pieces have to function perfectly for a little circuit board to power up and do the things it is supposed to do. That seems to be the nature of most engineering work.

Saturday Night

It's Saturday night and I'm sitting at a table at a hotel with a ridiculously long name, the "Marriott Hotels and Resorts Ann Arbor Marriott Ypsilanti at Eagle Crest." Veronica is here for the U-Con Gaming Convention. As a minor she's allowed to be here and participate, but she has to have an adult chaperone on-site, and so here I am. I've got another two hours or so. Joy brought her for a while this morning, and we'll probably bring her back her tomorrow afternoon as well.

It's a bit odd, bringing my daughter to a convention. In 1984, when I was sixteen, I attended Disclave with my friend Art in the Washington, D.C. area. I still have my badge. Veronica's badge for this con looks an awful lot like my old badge for Disclave, except that it has a ribbon with her pronouns on it. The ribbon was optional — they had some pre-printed ribbons with "she/her" and "he/him" and "they them," and they also had blank ones available that just said "my pronouns are," with a blank space to write in your own.

This afternoon Grace and I attended a live streaming showing of Akhnaten. I'm going to go on about this at some length below, but I need to work my way through the rest of the week before I'll feel ready.

Sickness and Health

We've had some sickness in the household this week. The cold that Grace we were fighting last week has lingered. On Thursday morning Grace gave me a ride, since I still wasn't driving my car because of the wobbly suspension, and we stopped at a Middle Eastern place near my office, called Star's Cafe, for breakfast.

Grace had a Turkish coffee and juice. I wasn't sure what I wanted, and so asked the cook what he recommended for breakfast. He offered to make me an egg sandwich. That turned out to be something like a chicken shawarma sandwich, except made with two or three wonderfully squishy fried eggs, pickles, tomatoes, and enough hot sauce to make me break a sweat. It was completely delicious, and fairly low-carb, and so filling that I didn't feel the need to eat anything else until late in the afternoon. But then I had a rather sudden bout of nausea. I didn't vomit, but had to run to the rest room several times.

After work Grace came to pick me up, and I took the wheel and dropped her off at a class, and drove home to eat dinner with the kids. When it was time to go back and pick Grace up, I tried driving my car. The temperature had finally been consistently well above freezing for a while, and I wanted to see if the car would behave better after thawing out. I figured since there was very little traffic, it was a better time to try driving a car that I didn't feel confident about.

Last Thursday, I wrote:

It looks like sliding around on the ice and snow on Monday resulted in some damage to the front end of my car. The tires seem fine, but it is shimmying a lot when I get it up to highway speed. So I drove home on surface streets last night and asked Grace to give me a ride to the office this morning. I am hoping that maybe there is just some ice build-up somewhere that I can't easily see or clean out, and maybe after it gets warm enough to melt the ice the problem will go away.

Fortunately, as I found out Thursday night, the problem actually did go away! So there must have been some ice build-up that I couldn't see. Don't get me wrong — it's a sixteen-year-old car, and I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to keep it; the front end could definitely use some attention. Michigan roads are *hard* on cars. But it's not shimmying horribly when I get it up to speed. It just has the usual rattles and noises. So that is a relief.

I had one more round of digestive trouble late that evening at home. I figured the eggs, which were soft, the way I like them, but which gross out Grace, might have given me mild food poisoning, since no one else was having any similar symptoms.

Friday

Friday morning was hard. We had some challenges with the kids, and didn't really get to bed until about 2:00 a.m. We had to set the alarm for 6:00 a.m., because Elanor had a 7:00 a.m. appointment at a sleep clinic, and we had been trying for months to get her an appointment. So Grace managed to get up and out with Elanor at about 6:30, and I tried to sleep for a little longer, but Malachi, who seemed to still have a mild fever from the cold, would not chill out, snuggle up with his dad, and go back to sleep for another ninety minutes or so. He spent a lot of that time complaining. He did finally go back to sleep, so I got Sam to come and keep him company while I got myself up and out.

I felt all right on Friday, and wasn't too useless at work thanks to a large coffee, and then after work I made my usual run to Costco. I thought we were done or at least mostly done with the sickness, aside from the lingering cold symptoms. But then Friday evening, we were getting ready to watch *Godzilla Raids Again* after dinner, and one Potts child started throwing up. And then later that night, another one did the same.

Godzilla Raids Again (1955 film)

So, unfortunately, I didn't watch the whole thing, and so I don't have a review of *Godzilla Raids Again* this week. But I can tell you that there were giant monsters in it and one of them is Anguirus, who holds the special distinction of being the first monster ever to fight with Godzilla in a film. (Later, with a whole string of "versus" movies under his belt, Godzilla comes to seem like a washed-up mixed-martial-arts fighter who will show up at any old shopping mall or used

car dealership opening to wrangle with anyone who shows up to take on the King, but that's later). I can also tell you that the fight scenes are surprisingly scary. This is due in part, apparently, to an error — some shots were filmed at the wrong speed. The director went ahead and used the footage anyway, and the result is that in some scenes, the monsters move very slowly, which helps to convince you that they are very large, but then the film immediately cuts to fight scenes that show the monsters moving much faster. This has the effect of throwing the viewer off balance a bit — do the monsters move ponderously and slowly, or as fast as Jackie Chan? And in this film, Godzilla's connections to the atom bomb are made explicit; I think that at one point, a character actually refers to Godzilla as the “bastard spawn of the atom bomb,” or something like that.

I've mentioned that I'm trying to get through to my Christmas vacation without taking any more sick days, so of course I was worried that one of the kids had brought home a norovirus, or a rotavirus, or something similar, likely picked up at choir or a religious education class.

Saturday

This morning everyone seemed to feel OK. So we're still not entirely sure what was going on, but right now our working theory is that several of us got mild food poisoning eating some ground beef that Grace bought at Wednesday's grand opening of the Aldi store on Carpenter Road just a short distance from our home. She made a pasta sauce with it for Wednesday's dinner. It didn't taste great. I didn't think it tasted spoiled, though. We're not entirely sure it was the beef; it certainly didn't help that the kids bought a bunch of junk food at the grand opening as well and had been gorging on that.

We have another couple of packages of that grass-fed Aldi ground beef in the refrigerator but now we're eyeing it suspiciously.

Aldi

Grace and I don't agree on Aldi — I've never liked it, and she likes it. I used to go to the one in Saginaw to try to save some money on groceries. Their wines were never very good, so after trying a few different kinds, I quickly stopped buying them. But more importantly, I'd go through each aisle examining packages and cans and reading ingredients and would wind up leaving, having found only a couple of things that I felt I could, in good conscience, feed my family. It seemed like everything had nasty ingredients — the crackers contained hydrogenated fats, the chocolate had PGPR in it, the cheese had natamycin in it, and many, many things contained high-fructose corn syrup.

The only thing I wanted to take home was some peppered bacon, and it wasn't worth going in to buy that when a real local butcher shop, Ted's Meat Market, made their own bacon just up the street, and at Ted's I could also get things like ground venison and elk. Grace tells me that Aldi pays better than most

grocery stores, although they still don't have a floor of fifteen dollars an hour. And I don't like the way that they have structured their locations to require fewer employees: they have no people to bag groceries, or bring in carts, and no meat department, and no deli.

Over the past few years Aldi, has taken hydrogenated fats out of their food, and started carrying things like grass-fed beef. There's now one that is located conveniently near our home. So I'd like to give them a chance again, even though they are a German-owned company and so their stores siphon money not just out of the county or state, but out of the country.

What I really want is something I'm not likely to get — I'd like to see locally-owned businesses open up stores near our home. There's no nearby cafe, or breakfast joint, or Middle Eastern hole-in-the-wall, restaurant or even a decent pizza place.

Anyway, the effect of this little incident is that Grace is reconsidering her positive opinion of Aldi, while I'm considering giving them another chance. But you might want to be cautious of their grass-fed ground beef, at least until we figure this out. We don't eat a lot of red meat. We will still buy some steaks on rare occasions, maybe every couple of months, and Australian lamb once in a while, but we mostly don't eat ground beef at all, preferring ground bison when we can get it, or ground venison or elk when we can get them. I'm not sure ground beef is the kind of thing you want to buy at the cheapest possible price.

I feel like I have a lot to say about my work this week — I struggled with some bugs in my code, and came up with some solutions, that software folks might find interesting, but most other people probably won't find interesting. I might add some notes if I seem to have time tonight or tomorrow, or maybe I'll write about them in a future newsletter. But meanwhile, I want to write a bit about some books.

Books

I've been reading bits and pieces of several different books this week, as time has allowed. In fact books are piling up, so I really need to do some sorting and boxing things up.

A Colony In a Nation by Chris Hayes

I finished reading *A Colony in a Nation* by Chris Hayes. It's not bad. If I were more excited about it, I'd write a longer review. I think it would make a good introduction to some of the major racial and carceral justice issues of our time. The colony is an imperfect metaphor for the state of people of color in America, but it's a helpful one, because it allows us to compare the state of blacks in American communities to the state of colonized peoples worldwide, and any leftist worth his or her salt should be always trying to understand the struggles

of oppressed people in our own communities as part and parcel of the struggles of oppressed people the world over; America isn't exceptional.

Grace has my copy of *A Colony In a Nation* now, which means that it is unfortunately getting chewed up by babies, but that's pretty much inevitable for any book that Grace reads, since she spends half her days and most of her nights with babies climbing on her and going after anything in her hands.

***Red Moon* by Kim Stanley Robinson**

I've been meaning to read this for some time, as I'm a big fan of Robinson's work. It's now out in a trade paperback edition, so I could no longer resist. This is not really, as the title might suggest, some sort of sequel or prequel to *Red Mars*, the first book of Robinson's Mars trilogy, a terrific trilogy about the colonization of Mars. Robinson seems to set his works in universes which are not quite the same, but might be tangentially related, or represent alternate histories of one another. In this work, the "red" in *Red Moon* refers to the colonization of the moon by China, in about thirty years' time.

This novel is a fast-moving story right off the bat, unlike the sprawling Mars trilogy with its large cast of characters and many locations. The story opens with a scene that is like the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey* on fast-forward; I think it's a deliberate homage to that story. In *2001*, Heywood Floyd is traveling in a shuttle to the moon. It's a majestic, relaxing experience, set to the music of Strauss. The flight to the moon is presented as so routine that Floyd sleeps through part of it. His only real anxiety during the sequence is shown in a funny scene where he nervously reads the extensive instructions for the zero-gravity toilet.

In *Red Moon* the protagonist is also on a shuttle to the moon, but the trip has an entirely different feel. The shuttle is hurtling towards the moon at shocking speed. Passengers have been warned that watching out the window might be terrifying. The shuttle will be caught and decelerated using a fly-by-wire system that catches the ship in a sort of reverse-railgun, so that it doesn't have to burn fuel in order to brake.

The *novel* also doesn't burn any fuel in order to brake. We meet the characters very quickly and within just a few pages, someone has been murdered, and our protagonist has been spirited away, creating a diplomatic incident and a mystery.

In portraying the Chinese characters, Robinson has to walk a fine line. I'm fascinated by Chinese culture, and by imagining what Chinese culture might look like, transplanted to the moon. Robinson himself is a hiker and environmental writer and he's been to Antarctica. In *Red Moon* he seems to have created a Chinese point-of-view character, a poet, feng shui consultant, and social media star who has also traveled all over the world. This character has also spent time in Antarctica, and in the story, we learn that after his time there, he gave up writing poetry.

It seems like Robinson has created an imagined Chinese version of himself. Why has he done this? I think it was a deliberate, strategic move to help him create a character who is both familiar and exotic, while at the same time trying to avoid insulting caricatures. I'm not far enough along in the book to decide whether I think this strategy is entirely successful or not. But so far I really like Robinson's portrayal of a near-future moon colony and the people who inhabit it. Chinese, American, or otherwise, they don't seem to be very far away, and so this is another example of how the best science fiction is also always about our own times and our own hopes and fears.

Books On Deck

I've got a few more books piled up to read. Some have come in the mail, and some I picked up at Nicola's Books. I haven't managed to get into any of these but I'm looking forward to reading them. Maybe I can get through at least one or two of them during my Christmas break. They are:

***Raymond Chandler: Stories and Early Novels* (Library of America)**

I've been reading some classic detective novels and I'm eager to read *The Big Sleep*, first published in 1939.

***Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* by Danny Goble**

I ordered this from Alibris on a whim after a brief conversation on Twitter.

***How Long 'Til Black Future Month?* by N. K. Jemisin (Orbit Books)**

Jemisin is a Hugo Award-winning fantasy writer; she actually won the award for best Novel in 2016, 2017, and 2018. No one else has ever achieved three back-to-back Hugo awards for best novel. It's shameful that I haven't read her work, but I've been very hesitant in recent years to jump into trilogies and other series, and I've also become very, very picky about fantasy; I've found that I almost always prefer something old and obscure to new work. But I do want to see what the fuss is about. So, a collection of her short stories seemed like a perfect opportunity to check out her writing without making a major commitment.

***The Dead Mountaineer's Inn* by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, translated by Josh Billings**

This is an unusual work — a novel by the famed Strugatsky brothers, authors of *Roadside Picnic* and many other justifiably famous works of Soviet-era science fiction. Originally published in Russia in 1970, it is only now getting an English translation and publication. I am expecting this to be quite an intriguing work,

as it sets itself up as a detective novel, but then proceeds to bust right out of the genre.

Sunday

The rest of Saturday was mostly uneventful, although it was busy, since we had to run Veronica back out to her convention, and we got home late. This morning we managed to get everyone to Mass on time, then we had coffee and donuts, and came home for some bacon and bagels. I fried up a package of pepper bacon from Aldi. It wasn't the same as the pepper bacon that I used to get there, which had the Grandessa brand. This bacon was very disappointing — almost flavorless, like a low-sodium bacon, although it wasn't low sodium. It was much worse than the Costco bacon we usually buy. So as far as I'm concerned, the case for ever going back to Aldi keeps getting weaker and weaker.

The day then mostly proceeded to disappear, as they often do, into a blur of miscellaneous chores.

I was planning to sit down and write my actual review of *Akhnaten* while Veronica was at her church youth group meeting, but when we got there this evening, the building was dark and locked up. So we're back at home. I won't have peace and quiet, but... here it comes.

Akhnaten (Opera by Philip Glass)

As Staged by the Metropolitan Opera, 2019, Live Video Stream to Theaters November 23rd, 2019

Last October, I received a copy of the Philip Glass boxed set called *The Complete Sony Recordings*. I wrote about it at the time in my blog:

It's going to take me a while to fully unpack and appreciate the 4-disc *Einstein on the Beach*, the 3-disc *Satyagraha*, and the 2-disc *Akhnaten*, as well as the *thirteen* other discs in this collection. But I'm sure I'll be writing about it at length over the next few weeks. It's a really impressive collection, and fortunately comes with a cool little book to help me wrap my head around all these works; it includes the librettos.

I feel like I've been, in a sense, preparing my whole life to listen to the operas of Philip Glass. I first heard *Glassworks* when I was sixteen. It impressed me right off the bat, and I listened to it a lot back then. But now I don't think I really *heard* everything that made *Glassworks* so beautiful. Forty-five or so years later, an amateur musician myself, I feel like I'm finally ready to really *hear* it, and the rest of his work.

I quickly became fascinated with *Akhnaten*. In the November 10th blog post I wrote:

This afternoon I'm listening to *Akhnaten*, Philip Glass's opera. *Akhnaten* comprises discs 14-15 of *The Complete Sony Recordings*. It's a relatively short opera, or at least the recording is relatively short, compared to 3 discs for *Satyagraha* and 4 discs for *Einstein on the Beach*. It's not really understandable without the translated libretto, as most of it is sung in Egyptian, Akkadian, and Hebrew. But the music is gorgeous, and it has a powerful spiritual feel to it, even if the details of the story are not very clear. (It has something to do with the origin of monotheism, I think). One wild aspect of the music is that I realized only after reading the notes that I was listening to a male singer's voice. Paul Esswood, who sings the title role, is a countertenor, singing in a vocal range that roughly matches a female contralto or mezzo-soprano range. His performance is pretty amazing.

A couple of weeks later, I wrote:

To soothe my mind, I've been listening to *Akhnaten*. I've mentioned it before, but this is such a beautiful work. Act I, Scene 3, called "The Window of Appearances" is just an unbelievable piece of music. I find myself listening to it again and again, along with the duet "Akhnaten and Nefertiti."

I was particularly struck by the ending of the opera and the way it jumps seamlessly from Akhnaten's time to the contemporary world:

That leap across time, which reminds me of the "smash cut" between the prehistoric past and the era of spaceflight in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is essential to *Akhnaten*, and it doesn't happen between pieces, but across a long musical section in the track "The Ruins." At the start of the track the narrator recites text from Tutankhamen's tomb. In the recording, he is panned slightly to the left of the stereo sound-stage, as he says, with spacious reverberation:

The new ruler, performing benefactions for his father Amon and all the gods, has made what v

I'm reminded of "Ozymandias" by Shelly:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...

In the opera, as the scene progresses and the orchestra plays, the ruin of Akhetaten appears, and the narrator becomes a twentieth-century tour guide. In the recording, the narrator's voice becomes quieter, and moves in the stereo sound-stage, so that it is heard almost entirely in the right channel, and the reverberation is gone. His voice has become "smaller." He does not stay in the right channel, though; his voice gradually moves, as if the tour guide is walking on the stage:

There is nothing left of this glorious city of temples and palaces. The mud brick buildings have long since crumbled and little remains of the immense stone temples but the outlines of their floor plans.

After “The Ruins,” there is a wordless piece called “Epilogue,” in which the ghosts of Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and Queen Tye sing together, producing a series of pure, sustained chords that seem nearly inhuman in their precise tonality. We feel as if we are hearing the voices of angels, or demigods. Even the vibrato of the singers seems to be synchronized perfectly. The libretto says:

At first they seem not to know that they and their city all are dead and now a part of the past. They become aware of the funeral cortege of Akhnaten’s father (Amenhotep III) moving across the background. They form a procession of their own and, as the opera ends, can be seen moving off toward the first funeral group still on its journey to the heavenly land of Ra.

And at that point, listening, I’m pretty much speechless as well.

And then last December, I wrote:

On the drive in after breakfast, I played the concluding part of Act II, Scene 3, and Act II, Scene 4 of *Akhnaten*, the Philip Glass opera, and tried to share some of my fascination with this opera with Grace. I’m still listening to it, and listening to no other music. The more I listen to *Akhnaten*, the more I find to be fascinated by: the complex rhythms of the “Dance” section, and the introduction and recapitulation of motifs in “Hymn,” as simple, plaintive melodies are taken up again and again by different instruments and woven into the evolving piece, and the eerie-sounding, narrow, near-dissonant harmonies between voice and instruments — not to mention the stunning beauty of the voices themselves. I would dearly love to see this work performed one day.

For a while I had the CDs in my car and I would just leave them in the player, so that every time I set out on a drive, going anywhere — to work, to the store — I would hear *Akhnaten*. I thought that I would get sick of it after a while, but I didn’t. It remained fascinating. So I listened to the whole thing many times, and became extremely familiar with the music — but not the words, as most of the opera is sung in ancient languages.

Naturally since I was listening to the opera, so much, I also became fascinated with what is known about the real historic figure. In my blog last year I wrote:

Yesterday Grace and I attended the live stream of *Akhnaten* in the movie theater just a few miles from our house. It was a glorious experience. I’m keenly aware that it certainly wasn’t the same experience as attending the live performance

— in some ways, better (we had a close-up view of events on the stage, and got to see interviews with the singers and conductors), and in some ways, worse (we didn't ever get a real sense of the experience of being there, in the audience, live). But it was the experience we were able to have, as we certainly weren't going to be able to make it to the Metropolitan Opera.

***Akhnaten*, Paul's Impressions**

We barely made it on time — I had to have a large coffee before a three-hour performance! When we got into the theater, we found that it wasn't sold out, but there was a decent crowd there. And they were almost all quite old — not just my age or a bit older, but quite a bit older. I have known for a long time that audiences for classical music skew older, which is a problem for the future of classical music, but I wasn't sure that the older fans of opera would turn out to hear a work by Philip Glass. So that was interesting.

There were three acts, with two intermissions between them, for which I was grateful.

The *palette* was interesting. I expected an opera that was relatively abstract and distant in time, set in ancient Egypt, about a king who worshipped the sun, to feature brighter colors. In the gorgeous "Hymn," in which Akhnaten sings directly to his God in English, he appears on a bare stage before a giant sun (a fabric balloon), lit in pure colors. And in his duet with Nefertiti, they appear on the bare stage together in red gowns. But in most of the scenes that take place on and around the main set, everything is quite dark, with a lot of dark greens and browns.

There is juggling throughout the opera, which goes along with the constant use of repeating arpeggio figures in Glass's score. The jugglers throw small white balls and clubs, and wear body suits that appeared to be covered in cracked, dried mud, or perhaps bandages, or maybe scabs. They are moving constantly into different formations, sometimes walking in procession, sometimes crawling on their hands and knees, and sometimes inching across the stage like worms. You could tell it was live because there were quite a few dropped balls. In fact, one juggler seemed to be having a really bad day!

The costumes are *quite* a mixed bag. Some of them are simple and gorgeous. Some of them are just baffling, as if the costume designer went rummaging through a huge storage unit and pulled out a random assortment of items, and called it "edgy." I think the more "bonkers" costumes are actually somewhat distracting, which is unfortunate, although as I've had more time to think about them, I can start to come up with theories as to what they represented.

The music was excellent. During the prelude, there was just a bit of roughness to the timing, as if the musicians hadn't quite settled down and relaxed into working their way through the hours of arpeggios and repeating figures they have ahead of them. But they quickly settled down and did a fantastic job. As

I mentioned before, I'm very familiar with the Sony recording, and this live performance was very close to the recording in quality.

The singers were *amazing*. I didn't hear a weak performer among them. Anthony Costanza sounds as if he could be from another planet, a planet of amazing singers, as far as his countertenor voice goes — it's astonishing, eerie, and yet very human and moving. J'Nai Bridges plays Nefertiti, and she's very good as well. Her performance is especially impressive considering this is her debut with the Met. There was an unfortunate microphone problem during her first duet with Costanza, and we could barely hear her voice alongside his. I was especially disappointed, since this is one of my favorite moments in the opera. But the crew got it sorted out in later scenes.

I have only one mild criticism of the performances — I felt that Zachary James, who plays the narrator, or scribe, and whose parts are spoken, not sung, was indulging a tendency to over-dramatize some of his lines. He also had a little technical glitch at the end, when his costume seemed to be rubbing on his microphone.

The Scribe: the *Other* Amehhotep

I found myself a bit confused about what the producers were trying to do with that narrator character called “The Scribe” in the libretto. The printed program we received describes Zachary James as playing Amenhotep III, Akhnaten's father, who is dead at the beginning of the opera. This would make him the *spirit* of Amenhotep III. But that seems wrong, as he is describing Amehnotep III in the third person, and later seems to know all about current events. In the book that came with my *Complete Sony Recordings*, there's a short essay by Philip Glass. It mentions The Scribe, and calls him, in a parenthetical note, “Amenhotep, son of Hapu.”

That's a different Amenhotep — not Akhnaten's father, but a member of his administration:

Amenhotep, son of Hapu... was an ancient Egyptian architect, a priest, a scribe, and a public official, who held a number of offices under Amenhotep III of the 18th Dynasty.

I'm gonna go with Phil on this one. “The scribe” is Amehotep, son of Hapu, not Amenhotep III, at least until he transforms into a modern-day tour guide at the end of the opera. I think the printed program simply gets this wrong, as does the Metropolitan Opera's web site. Oops!

There were interesting bits and pieces and interviews during the intermissions. We heard from the jugglers, from the priests, from Queen Nefertiti, from Akhnaten, and from the Scribe. We got close-up views of some of the costumes (we saw them more closely than the audience in the theater saw them). These interview segments took place in front of backstage events — for example, in the background of one interview, we see the stage crew lowering the sun, folding

it up, and stuffing it into a giant basket. We also see the movable sets from behind. So there is a lot of interesting detail here for theater nerds. I think these segments were partially pre-recorded, but they were slotted smoothly into the show.

I've asked Grace to help me out with this review.

Akhnaten: A Conversation with Grace

Paul: thank you for going with me — I know you were sick, and coughing, and not feeling your best. At first I felt like I was dragging you to this showing, but you made it clear that although we don't really agree on a lot of music (and don't really have to agree), you were actually excited to go to the opera. Can you say a bit about how you came to love opera? Because although I've been to a lot of musicals and attended a handful of light operas, and listened to a number of recordings of operas, I don't think I've ever sat through a full-length live "heavy" opera before (even live in the same sense that this one was live).

Grace: I think that many of your readers know that I grew up in the Northeast — and going to shows, either in NYC or closer to home, was a thing for us, in way that I don't get the impression it is in other parts of the country. All ten of us would never go to a show at the same time, but some of my fondest memories were special evenings out with my parents, and they enjoyed the opera among other things. My mother was a huge, I mean *huge* Pavarotti fan, so we often just listened to opera for fun growing up. And lastly, my older brother was an opera performance major in college, and we were housemates... so let's just say I learned a number of operas by heart in those days.

Paul: you said something like "you've tried to play recordings of Philip Glass for me before, and I just could never get into his music." But yet you also said you loved this performance. I think many people don't like Glass's music, and for decades he's almost a shorthand for "overrated," or perhaps "overly abstract," or "self-indulgent," or "pompous." But yet I keep hearing from people that they love this performance. Can you say a bit about that distinction? Has the performance changed your impression of Glass's music?

Grace: It really did. And honestly that surprised me — I was fully expecting to fall asleep based on my experiences of Phillip Glass. But the visual and visceral presentation of this performance was deeply engaging. I want to say it was meditative — but I suspect for folks that don't practice: that's doesn't tell you enough. Imagine a vivid, lucid dream state. This production evokes that state. And the music on its own does not do that for me. I suspect the performance stripped of the music wouldn't be very engaging — at least for me — either. As far as Glass's music, yes and no. Yes it's changed my impression: I honestly didn't think it was good for anything — I can see now that it very much is! But on the other hand, I probably won't start listening to his recordings. I really needed the intercession of some incredibly talented people to bring it to life for me.

Paul: I didn't really know what to expect the staging to look like, given that the lyrics are quite abstract, and aren't tightly connected to specific actions happening on the stage. We had a musical prelude, in which we were watching projections of dark shapes and patterns, that looked like dim figures from Egyptian myth slowly moving, under layers of dirt or decay on the screen, along with some bright abstract shapes. Can you describe what we saw next when the prelude ended, and what you thought of it?

Grace: Uh-oh. I'm never good at pop quizzes! The opening staging was very... industrial? Three levels and with action of different sorts on each level: Egyptian motifs on the top level, I think the spirit of Amenhotep was on the second and centered on the bottom level, Amenhotep's body was being prepared for burial.

At first, I was agitated, waiting for "the action" to start. Then I recalled the host's reminder at the very beginning of the broadcast: this is an abstract performance. Then I was able to just relax and take it in.

Paul: I want to talk a bit about the costumes — of course! First off, the three priests. There was a white guy wearing elaborate face paint, and an Edwardian tail coat, carrying an umbrella, and then on top of his top hat there was what looked like a skull sprinkled with glitter. Then around his neck, a big heap of garish costume jewelry chains, in addition to his watch chain. He was the father of Nefertiti. Then there was a black man wearing what looked like a dark green wool military uniform from — the Boer war, perhaps? And he had something like a turban on his head, with a snake on it. He also had a lot of costume jewelry. And then there was a priest that looked much more Egyptian, with a big goat-skull sort of hat and more of a *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* sort of vibe going on. What did you think of these three costumes and how do you think they worked in the opera?

Grace: So the first guy you describe was dressed as a voodoo witch doctor. As in literally dressed like the Disney character from *The Princess and the Frog*. It was... an interesting choice, and by interesting, I mean bigoted. They seriously dressed an Egyptian high priest... like a witch doctor. The second guy was dressed like Idi Amin. Another curious reference for an opera set in pre-Christian Egypt. The last guy seemed closer to the era at least. It was a strange costume — but at least seemed evocative of the setting. I was able to ignore these costumes by the third act. There is one, small, redeeming thing about these costumes. I say it's small, because I don't think this benefit required these costumes. But — it's a powerful visual to see the three of them lined up behind the throne: religion, military, and the aristocracy; and we can see that the occupant of the throne changes — but those things remain the same.

Paul: I think that's an good insight, and might explain some things about the priests' costumes. But how about the costumes for the group of women, including Akhnaten's mother Queen Tye? When I first saw their makeup and costumes, I felt like I was having a flashback to a 1980s Eurhythmics video. Can you tell us what was going on there?

Grace: The women’s costumes were not nearly so offensive. Wild, weird, abstract? Certainly. Especially Queen Tye, she really was channeling the Eurythmics. I was taken particularly by the staining on her gloves: she was holding Amenhotep’s heart in her hands, waiting for the priests to come and weigh it against a feather — judging whether he could be admitted to the afterlife. However — in all the action — she is the only one with blood on her hands. Queen Nefertiti’s costume was actually quite tasteful and evocative of the period. The six daughters were hauntingly “mummified.” I thought it was well done.

Paul: Yep, that was some disturbing foreshadowing!

Next up is Akhnaten. When he first appears, apparently for most of the shows, he pops out of his cocoon or mummy wrappings or whatever they are naked as a baby bird, completely plucked and waxed. When we see him, he’s got a jockstrap on. But then when he is crowned, they put a dress on him and it’s quite something. Would you describe the dress?

Grace: I probably wouldn’t call that a jock-strap — more a loin-cloth? The dress was 100% Marie Antoinette. Straight out of the late 18th century. And I don’t think that was a mistake — I think the close-up exposé of the 40lb dress was a mistake, but the dress? I’m here for it. I think it was intended as a meditation on how grotesque opulence and royalty are when you look closely. It was pink, similar to fair-skinned flesh, several sections of it were covered in doll heads, undulating, sequined, covered in pearls in many sections. It went over a hoop that was anchored on Constanza’s shoulders, and I do not think it would have been possible for him to dress himself. But it was intended to be seen from the stage. I don’t think it was designed to be taken in up close, and the more grotesque aspects of it, I think, were meant to be almost subliminal, perhaps causing the audience to double-take. I found the comparison Akhnaten’s reign with the court of Louis XVI quite insightful.

Paul: Yes, now that I’ve had a day to think about it, I’ve come to understand it as a representation of what Akhnaten has to “put on” when he assumes the kingship — he has to put on a gown representing the bloody history of the Pharaohs. I think the dead babies might be a reference to the Biblical story of the deaths of the firstborns, but I don’t know for sure. And there was another great detail — in the third act, as Akhnaten is lying in state where Amenhotep III lay in the first act — although, thankfully, we don’t have to watch him getting his heart removed and weighed — we see the very young King Tutankhamen, his son, wearing a miniature version of the same freakish, disturbing hoop skirt, along with his sad little leg brace.

I asked you this in the car, but I want to bring it up again. Some of these bizarre costume elements give a real Anton LaVey, Church of Satan vibe — they seem literally satanic, like their famous/infamous statue of Baphomet. I think we were in agreement that this was deliberate, but weren’t entirely settled as to “why?”

Grace: I don’t presume to know the personal thoughts and feelings of the costume director or any of the folks involved. But it really doesn’t seem like the

costume director was sloppy, at all. I really got the sense that he was taking every detail in careful consideration. Like where Akhnaten and Nefertiti declare their love for each other — their costumes literally depict the mixing of their bloodlines — it's mesmerizing. So when he dresses the priests as these near comic African caricatures, and one of them in what seems to be satanic garb — what's he trying to say? Whatever it is, it's not a kind commentary on Africans or the diaspora.

Paul: There is juggling throughout this production. In fact, in most scenes, most of the people on the stage are jugglers. Any thoughts on the juggling?

Grace: Not gonna lie — I was horrified to think what I'd signed up for when they mentioned juggling before it started. But it really works. It's an excellent parallel to the rhythm of the music. It's almost like dancing. It was slightly distracting at the very beginning, but after you settle in to the abstractness of it, it just works.

Paul: I know you appreciated the singing in this performance. What were your favorite moments? And did you feel that there were any weak performances, or less-favorite moments?

The Hymn to the Sun. It was beautiful, just marvelous. My preference for that song is likely connected to my preference for more traditional opera, but I really think this is an aria anyone that enjoys music could enjoy. I thought the performances were all very good. One criticism. I feel like J'Nai Bridges was poorly directed. Her performance was wonderful, but her chemistry with Constanza is just poor. It was disappointing. There are several moments where I expect them to connect emotionally, and they just don't.

Paul: I agree. That song is just so gorgeous. And it's the only song in the opera that is actually sung in English, so I'm going to quote a bit of the lyrics:

How manifold is that which thou hast made
Thou sole God
There is no other like thee
Thou didst create the earth
According to thy will, being alone,
Everything on earth
Which walks and flies on high

And I think we'll stop there for tonight. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts on the opera!

Grace: it's my pleasure. Thanks for a great afternoon out.

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