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# Tracing the Development of Willie Stark and Its Place in American Opera

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TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF *WILLIE STARK* AND  
ITS PLACE IN AMERICAN OPERA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
the Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Music

in

The School of Music

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Highly praised American composer Carlisle Floyd (b. 1925), well known for his musical dramas *Susannah* (1955) and *Of Mice and Men* (1970), wrote *Willie Stark* (1981), commissioned by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and later Houston Grand Opera. Floyd's libretto and musical score was based upon Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-Winning novel *All The King's Men*. Despite the vast amount of publicity it received at the premiere, this opera has only occasionally been performed in the last 35 years. Chapter One discusses Carlisle Floyd's creation of *Willie Stark*. Chapter Two discusses the workshop performance of the piece. Chapter Three discusses the show's director, Harold Prince. Chapter Four covers the reviews of the Houston Grand Opera Premiere, the Kennedy Center Premiere, and the filmed version for Public Broadcasting Service's "Great Performances." Chapter Five addresses the revivals of *Willie Stark* after the premiere productions. Chapter Six concludes with assessments of critical reviews to offer possible explanations for the show's limited revivals.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Highly praised American composer Carlisle Floyd (b. 1925) is greatly respected for his operatic successes *Susannah* (1955) and *Of Mice and Men* (1970). In 1972, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts under the direction of Roger Stevens commissioned Floyd to create a new opera. At that time, Floyd was already engaged in projects with Houston Grand Opera (HGO), and the Kennedy Center commission eventually became a joint venture with HGO.

Floyd's original libretto and musical score entitled *Willie Stark* was based upon Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-Winning novel *All The King's Men*. Performers from the Houston Grand Opera Studio first debuted excerpts of the piece at the University of Houston in December 1979, but it was officially "workshopped" through a grant from the National Opera Institute in May 1980. The world premiere of *Willie Stark* took place the following year with Broadway's award-winning director Harold Prince on April 24, 1981 at Jones Hall in Houston. The production then traveled to the Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C., and returned to Houston for filming for the Public Broadcast System's (PBS) program, "Great Performances." Floyd called it a musical drama and it was well received by live and television audiences. National critics who saw the show in Houston voiced some concerns with the sets, score, and length, but adjustments were made before the Kennedy Center performances.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the extensive creative development of this opera and the considerable publicity it received, *Willie Stark* has only occasionally been performed since its premiere 35 years ago. In 2006 the Louisiana State University (LSU) Opera Theatre resurrected *Willie Stark*, drawing on the connection of the story's main character to the real-life former Governor of Louisiana and

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Holliday, *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd, The Authorized Biography*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013, 297.

founder of LSU, Huey P. Long. The university production was filmed and released on the Newport Classic Label. The LSU School of Music also hosted a symposium entitled *A Symposium: 360° of Willie Stark*, discussing the opera and its characters from interdisciplinary viewpoints, such as music, literature, and political science.

Questions arise from this work's history: did the unique Broadway influences on *Willie Stark*, such as doing a workshop performance or having a noted Broadway director, somehow negatively impact the success of this piece? Is it a hybrid of musical theatre and opera, and did that hurt its acceptance into 20<sup>th</sup> century operatic repertory? Did national coverage on television somehow prevent the work from being done by other companies? It is the effort of this dissertation to explore the background of *Willie Stark* in hopes of addressing these questions.

Chapter one will describe how Carlisle Floyd selected this subject for his opera, chose to adapt the libretto from the novel, set the piece musically and his efforts to use television as a medium for reaching the masses. Chapter two will explore the workshop hosted by the Houston Grand Opera through the National Opera Institute and discuss the archived handwritten comments from audience members. These comments also appear in full in this document's Appendix D.

Chapter three will focus on the addition of director, Harold Prince, to the production. A brief biography will be followed by his correspondence commenting about *Willie Stark*. Found in the South Caroliniana Special Collections Floyd Archives is a four-page letter describing revisions that Prince suggested for the piece after seeing a video of the workshop production. The comments propose considerable changes, and Prince indicates that Floyd and HGO General Director David Gockley might wish to use a different director than himself. Further, interview material written prior to the opening of the show will also be discussed, showing a good working



relationship with Prince, Floyd, and Gockley. Chapter four will discuss the actual premieres at Houston Grand Opera, the Kennedy Center, and PBS's "Great Performances," citing extensive publicity articles and reviews in periodicals.

Chapter five will discuss revival productions of *Willie Stark* and will move through the decades to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Willie Stark* and its production by Louisiana State University Opera Theatre in 2006. In conclusion, a synthesis of this research should offer more perspective into what might have prevented this work from becoming one of Floyd's biggest operatic successes. Appendix materials include excerpts of personal correspondence from the novel's author, Robert Penn Warren, to Carlisle Floyd, a list of characters in *Willie Stark*, program material and comments from the audience at the May 1980 workshop performance, and a complete transcript of the *360° Symposium* at LSU.

## GENESIS

Granted a commission through the Kennedy Center in 1972, Floyd began creating an original libretto about a Southern senator with populist and demagogue attributes. In its beginning stages, it was entitled *GrandBoy* but did not develop into the work Floyd had hoped.<sup>2</sup> Floyd discussed the project with colleague Julius Rudel and director of New York City Opera, who suggested he investigate the plausibility of adapting the novel *All The King's Men* instead. Floyd's original idea held several similarities to the Robert Penn Warren masterpiece, so it seemed to easily lead Floyd toward redirecting his project. He had, in the past, "explored the

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Heumann, "'Willie Stark': The 'Tryout' Treatment," *Performing Arts, The Houston Music, Dance and Theatre Magazine*, Vol. IV, no. 8 (April 1981), Floyd Archives, South Caroliniana Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

unique atmosphere of the South and its extreme eccentricities for decades.”<sup>3</sup> The leading character of Warren’s novel, Willie Stark, was based on a true person, Governor Huey P. Long of Louisiana, and Floyd could envision the dramatic tension that a character of this stature could create.<sup>4</sup> Floyd sought the rights to the novel from Warren, but they were previously optioned-out to a country-western Broadway adaptation. After a year of uncertainty, the rights were eventually relinquished and Roger Stevens helped obtain a buy-out in 1974.<sup>5</sup>

Floyd had intentions of working on the project immediately but had the task of juggling many professional obligations. He was given permission by the Kennedy Center to focus his efforts on completing his prior opera with HGO and Floyd debuted *Bilby’s Doll* in 1976. Relatively soon afterward, Floyd was appointed Distinguished M.D. Anderson Professor at the University of Houston School of Music, and left his Florida State University home of 28 years. Increasing his promotional opportunities, Floyd was asked to join David Gockley, General Director of Houston Grand Opera, to become a founding co-director of the Houston Grand Opera Studio, one of the first young artist programs in America.

Gockley and Floyd reportedly shared a common vision for opera; that it could be the best and most exciting kind of musical theatre. Floyd expressed,

I would like to know that what I do reaches the widest possible audience. That does not mean the same thing in my mind as pandering to the lowest common denominator of public taste, but I feel that the musical theatre is a popular art form. So what I have felt that I would like to create or leave as my creation is a very good popular art, not elitist art, but very good popular art as our very best movies are fine examples of popular art done very, very well.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Holliday, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Heumann, 273.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Floyd predicted that American Opera would soon emerge as a blend or hybrid of traditional opera and the Broadway musical.<sup>7</sup> Precedence was set with shows like Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* (1956), which was a Broadway production composed by a classical composer and conductor. He was interested blurring the lines between classical and musical theatre genres throughout his compositional life. He made efforts to take his first big success, *Susannah*, to Broadway but was ultimately unable to interest a producer.<sup>8</sup> Later in his life, Floyd was appointed head of the Opera-Musical Theatre Program committee through the National Endowment for the Arts to bridge the divide between opera and musical theatre, enlisting the support of important players in both genres.<sup>9</sup>

In 1976, after re-reading Warren's novel three times, he consolidated the monumental *All The King's Men* into a libretto structure that would work for operatic composition. In 1979 the title was altered from *All The King's Men* to *Willie Stark* because Floyd felt that the novel's title was too similar to the title of his 1970 opera *Of Mice and Men*.<sup>10</sup> Floyd also watched the movie version of the novel, although later Warren told Floyd that the movie version did not depict the same concept he had of Willie.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heumann.

<sup>8</sup> Holliday, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Heumann.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Heumann, "The Trial of 'Willie Stark,'" *Opera News* (April 11, 1981): 11, Floyd Archives. Floyd said that he did not want to be known as the composer of the "Men" operas.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore W. Libbey, Jr., "Capturing Warren's 'Willie,'" *The Washington Star* (May 8, 1981), Floyd Archives.

## FLOYD'S CHARACTERS

Set in a Deep South state capital in 1935, Floyd set the musical drama in the last ten days of Willie Stark's life, culminating with his impeachment trial verdict.<sup>12</sup> In the final production, four of the nine scenes were set at the Governor's office or mansion, and the other scenes were at Stark's home, Judge Burden's home, or the capitol grounds.<sup>13</sup> Floyd wrote the libretto with obvious Southern dialect, both spoken and sung, and many often believe it to be set in the state of Louisiana. The characters of Willie and Sadie have more prominent accents, while the characters Anne, Jack, and the Judge are more educated Southerners; Floyd choose to make their language more refined.

The fascinating character of Willie Stark is shown to be a well-liked populist governor who ruthlessly allows his quest for power to corrupt his morals. He has honest intentions for helping the impoverished public, but will stop at nothing to stay powerful. Whether that means blackmail to prevent impeachment or sneaking behind the back of his assistant to steal his fiancée. Near the end of Warren's novel and Floyd's adaptation, Willie questions if a man must sell his soul in order to get power, or does the end justify the means. This internal crisis of Willie Stark questioning his morality happens at the same time as the external crisis of his impeachment, creating a "crucible," as Floyd described it.<sup>14</sup> Warren's character was created with more emphasis on the myth and symbolism than fact,<sup>15</sup> and Floyd created a "messianic folk hero

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<sup>12</sup> Press release, ca. 1981, Floyd Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Carlisle Floyd, *Willie Stark: A musical drama in three acts* [libretto], Melville: Belwin-Mills, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Heumann, "The Trial . . .," 11.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Penn Warren, "All The King's Men: 'The Matrix of Experience,'" *The Yale Review* 51 (Winter 1964): 161.

and ‘good old boy’ moralist, who only momentarily reconsiders renouncing his philosophical determinism as the power of falling in love begins to transform him.”<sup>16</sup> Floyd further describes his title character:

He has charm, guile, thirst for power ... at the same time, he’s a man very true to his roots, charming but ruthless. I see Willie in terms of Greek tragedy. The flaw is his need for vindictive triumph. In grinding under his heel the people who have humiliated him, he is insatiable and brings about a series of circumstances that destroys him.<sup>17</sup>

Floyd’s libretto diverged from the original novel in several ways. He decided to set *Willie Stark* in the last ten days of the title character’s life in an attempt to limit the length, and Floyd openly admitted that his adaption could not possibly contain all of the action of Warren’s novel:

I’ve combined three characters really into one character, Jack Burden, who is the narrator in the book. Obviously a narrator isn’t used on the stage because we are seeing everything. We don’t have to be told what’s happening. The character Jack Burden is the most altered. The other three main characters, those of Anne, Willie, and Sadie, are quite faithful to the characters in the book.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Earl J. Wilcox, “The ‘Good Old Boy’ King: Carlisle Floyd’s Willie Stark,” *South Carolina Review*, 22, no. 2 (1990): 109. When asked if Willie had any similarities to American Presidents such as Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon, Floyd responded: “Probably, I would say more like Lyndon Johnson, except that Willie, first of all, has charm. I don’t think Lyndon Johnson ever had charm. The way I am presenting him is with enormous magnetism and charm, and wonderful humor. He robs you while he’s charming you. That is the whole point. His work is unmistakably about what he’s doing. Let’s say he does it very charmingly and with humor. It’s all done with wit. I asked Penn Warren if it was done with his sanction. He immediately protested the movie was not his idea of the book. The Willie Stark in the film was very grim, almost totally without charm and humor, totally ruthless. That to me is not the Willie in the book, and certainly not the Willie I’m using.”

<sup>17</sup> Heumann, “The Trial ...,” 11.

<sup>18</sup> R. L. Cowser, Jr., “Kingfish of American Opera: An Interview with Carlisle Floyd,” *Southern Quarterly*, 20, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 5.

Jack Burden's character in the opera incorporates aspects of the novel's character Dr. Adam Stanton, who is brother to Anne. The assassination of Willie Stark is also absorbed into Jack's character, whereas in the novel, a different gunman is responsible. David Madden, Pulitzer Prize nominee and Professor of English at Louisiana State University found the combination that Floyd created "brilliant."<sup>19</sup> Floyd explained his goal in creating the conglomerate character by saying, "In the opera Jack comes from a fancy social background but has taken on this association with Willie out of enormous, intense idealism. And this, of course, leads to tragedy."<sup>20</sup>

Floyd also substitutes the name of Judge Courtney Burden for the novel's Judge Montague Irwin, making the family connection to Jack Burden clearer. Notable characters from the novel, such as Dr. Adam Stanton, Cass Mastern, Willie's son, and Jack's mother, are not included in the opera. Also in the opera, Floyd chose to make the governor a widower in order to simplify the love story with Anne Stanton.<sup>21</sup>

David Gockley compared the piece to *Boris Godunov* because it intensely studied the psychological mind of a leader, and Floyd found a correlation with *Peter Grimes* and *Wozzeck* (they both address the theme of an outsider against the group).<sup>22</sup> Also, Floyd's *Susannah, Of*

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<sup>19</sup> *A Symposium: 360° of Willie Stark*, recorded March 22, 2007, Louisiana State University, 2 CDs. See transcript in Appendix E.

<sup>20</sup> Heumann, "'Willie Stark'...", 16.

<sup>21</sup> Wilcox, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Author Unknown, "The Arts: World Premiere: Carlisle Floyd and David Gockley on 'Willie Stark,'" *Inner View: A Journal of Opinion for Houston's Innerscity*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (April 1981): 2.

*Mice and Men* and *Bilby's Doll* fall into the same category of studying the outsider.<sup>23</sup> *Willie Stark* differs in the previously mentioned operas in that Willie dominates the society that ostracizes him; he is not broken-down by society but by the actions he himself puts into motion.<sup>24</sup> The composer explained,

Warren said to me recently, Willie was not created by the world around him; he filled an existing vacuum. Had the society in which he lived not been so delinquent in its regard for the underprivileged, there would have been no way for Willie Stark to emerge as powerfully as he did. Willie is an enormous force, a colossus be-striding the world into which he was born.<sup>25</sup>

When Willie is assassinated, it is not for his work against society, but it could have been; Jack is symbolic of the segment of society that wants to do away with Willie.<sup>26</sup> Floyd was interested in the juxtaposition of public and personal life of Willie's character.<sup>27</sup> "The final tragic irony is that, at the moment of his greatest political triumph, he loses his life as a result of these personally inspired events."<sup>28</sup>

## MUSICAL STYLE

Floyd says this music is "jazzier" than his other works and also uses conventions (such as "vamping") typically found in musicals. He considers himself a composer of "musical theatre,"

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<sup>23</sup> "The Arts ...," 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

not in the Broadway convention but in terms of combining drama and music. Floyd feels his creations “economically” help the art form survive. “We can’t support our opera with small audiences... or our musical theatre either. It’s too costly today.”<sup>29</sup> He does not adhere to a certain school of composition but admits that scholars feel more “comfortable” if they can classify a composer.<sup>30</sup> “I have qualities of music in mind as I write. I tend to compose by numbers, building toward certain big numbers and always toward the curtain. I sit at the piano, then listen to my inner ear and play what I hear on the piano, jotting it down on paper as I go.”<sup>31</sup> In the creation of *Willie Stark*, Floyd wrote the libretto by November 1977 and confirmed it with Robert Penn Warren before composing the music.<sup>32</sup>

Compared to his previous scores of *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men*, *Willie Stark* is less melodic and sweeping in nature. Although arias and themes do exist, large portions of the vocal lines are text driven with a syllable on each note. Floyd seemed to primarily put musical emphasis on carrying the dialogue forward, much like the operatic convention of *recitative*. However, like his other works, Floyd’s roles have demanding vocal ranges and the role of Willie Stark is no exception. Those who have sung the role comment on the high demands placed on the singer. The first creator of the role “Willie” was apprentice artist Louis Otey, who described it as an hour and twenty minutes long, high tessitura, and demanding to act.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cowser, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Holmes, “‘Willie Stark’ HGO to stage world premiere of Carlisle Floyd opera,” *Houston Chronicle* (April 19, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>32</sup> Holliday, 282-284.

<sup>33</sup> Heumann, “*Willie Stark...*,” 20.



Floyd spent a year and a half on the libretto and two and a half years on the music, throwing away as much as he kept.<sup>34</sup> *Willie Stark* conductor John DeMain said about the music, “Musically, Floyd has utilized a wide range of compositional styles. Traditional means, such as ‘leit-motiv,’ ‘singspiel,’ set numbers with connective recitative are incorporated with strong folk and jazz elements into a basically lyrical framework.”<sup>35</sup> Floyd is compared to Janacek, Britten and Barber in the way he succeeds at sustaining dramatic tension.<sup>36</sup>

Floyd believed that *Willie Stark* summed up his creative life for the last 25 years.<sup>37</sup> Utilizing a wider range of styles than ever used before, Floyd used the various styles to inject strong emotionalism into the drama, even using unconventional instruments such as banjos and harmonicas.<sup>38</sup> Floyd also commented that it was the first time he created four major characters in one opera, and the construction of this libretto was the most difficult task he has encountered in his career.<sup>39</sup> He wrote for only a 36-piece orchestra in hopes of not having to reduce it for smaller houses later, which he needed to do for a few of his previous works.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Holmes, “‘Willie Stark’...,” Floyd Archives.

<sup>35</sup> Press release, Floyd Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Ira J. Black, “On the Town: 27 April 1981 Willie Stark (H.G.O.),” *Klef Cultural Affairs*, Radio Announcement, Floyd Archives.

<sup>37</sup> “The Arts...”

<sup>38</sup> Black.

<sup>39</sup> “The Arts...”

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## FLOYD'S OPERAS ON TELEVISION

Floyd hoped to bring opera to the masses through television and made repeated efforts throughout his career to present several of his operas through this medium. The first opera of his that appeared on the Public Broadcast Service's "Great Performances" was *Markheim* in 1975. Presented by the University of Washington and Seattle's Channel 9, KCTS-TV, the university production was filmed in 1974.<sup>41</sup> Floyd made attempts to obtain the rights to film *Of Mice and Men* in 1977, but was unable to negotiate successfully after the death of John Steinbeck.<sup>42</sup> In 1978, Floyd considered having *Susannah* televised, as well, either with a production by Lake George or New York City Opera, but those plans also never came to fruition.<sup>43</sup>

The opportunity to produce *Willie Stark* for television was sponsored by the Exxon Corporation (supporters of Houston Grand Opera), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and produced by South Carolina ETV and WNET/13 in New York.<sup>44</sup> David Gockley had the idea to film the show without an audience and use camera angles on the actual stage, much like a sound studio.<sup>45</sup> Emphasizing the drama through this method of filming, Gockley hoped that *Willie Stark* would help break down the public misconceptions of opera, saying, "not every opera is an old work stylized with people screaming, but... opera could be contemporary and diverse."<sup>46</sup> Floyd

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<sup>41</sup> Holliday, 264.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>45</sup> "The Arts ...," 12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

hoped that when his production was televised, an unfamiliar viewer to opera would stumble upon the show and become engaged in it, challenging his or her original conceptions of opera.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, Floyd's *Willie Stark* is based on an American masterpiece and his work on the commission allowed him to continue to develop his musical style in new ways; it also helped him reach new opera audiences through the media of television.

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<sup>47</sup> "The Arts ...," 12.

## CHAPTER 2. WORKSHOP PERFORMANCE

Floyd considered it a great luxury to see his work performed before the professional premiere and hoped to repeat the opportunity before each subsequent opera he created.<sup>48</sup> HGO boasted that twice the composer received private showings within the Music Theatre Workshop, in which the composer was able to evaluate and revise his work while in the process of creation.<sup>49</sup>

In December 1979, the Houston Grand Opera Studio Music Theatre Workshop staged Act II of *Willie Stark*. Floyd worried that doing his composition in the workshop, as opposed to another candidate's, would look "incestuous."<sup>50</sup> However, Floyd's previous opera *Bilby's Doll* received poor reviews at HGO when it premiered in 1976, only to be praised after revisions at the Omaha Opera production. *Bilby's Doll* did not recover from the initial reviews. "The tryout problem is a real barrier to American opera. It means you've got to come out smelling like a rose the first time. It's a smash hit, or bust," said Floyd.<sup>51</sup> Bowing to the pressure on his next project, co-directors of the Studio, David Gockley and Floyd chose for the workshop Floyd's new work *Willie Stark*. The workshop was established through a grant from the National Opera Institute, acting much like a Broadway style preview process. The workshop opera's conductor, John

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<sup>48</sup> Cowser, Jr., 10.

<sup>49</sup> Press release, Houston Grand Opera, April 1981, Floyd Archives, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

<sup>50</sup> Heumann, "'*Willie Stark*' ...," 10.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

DeMain, reasoned that Floyd's opera had a great chance of success and might attract other established composers to participate in future projects of the workshop.<sup>52</sup>

John Ludwig, executive director of the National Opera Institute (NOI) called the workshop, "one of the most hopeful and exciting expressions of American opera endeavor."<sup>53</sup> Originally called the "Composer's Laboratory" and later renamed "Music Theatre Workshop," it was funded by the NOI with a \$65,000 grant to Houston Grand Opera, hoping to help composers and librettists develop stage worthy new works in conjunction with major opera companies. Houston was one company to receive the grant (Minnesota Opera, the other) and was especially selected because of Floyd's "clearly demonstrated ability" as both a composer and teacher.<sup>54</sup> An added plus was the availability of singers provided by the Houston Opera Studio.<sup>55</sup> The first productions of the Musical Theatre Program in 1978 -1979 were Timothy Lloyd's *Conjur Moon* and Henry Mollicone's *Starbird*.<sup>56</sup>

The director of *Willie Stark*'s 1980 workshop production was Richard Hudson, and Eugene Lee, who had just finished designing *Sweeney Todd* with director Harold Prince, designed the sets. The first performance (or open rehearsal, as they called it) on December 15, 1979 revealed some weaknesses; as a result, scenes were cut, arias were edited and/or moved. Floyd paid particular attention to changing all-sung pleasantries into spoken dialogue: "After a sung exchange of pleasantries over dinner was greeted with titters from the preview audience,

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<sup>52</sup> Heumann, "'Willie Stark' ...," 15.

<sup>53</sup> Heumann, "The Trial ...," 10.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Floyd admitted, ‘I was really squirming at that point. Anything that’s prosaic is better spoken.’<sup>57</sup> DeMain explained that he and Floyd spoke about the piece being “total theatre” or “total artform,” producing a large experience by combining the sets, orchestra, and voices, into a blended production.<sup>58</sup> A Wagnerian approach, Floyd desired “unity of musical theatre, when the music and the drama served each other.”<sup>59</sup>

The music changed daily in preparations for the second workshop performance. The singers evolved diligently and adjusted to all the changes with grace; they were also encouraged to offer suggestions. “Hilarity erupted in rehearsal when mezzo-soprano Diane Kesling, who had the part of Sadie, excused herself to visit the powder room and came back five minutes later to find that her music had been cut while she was gone.”<sup>60</sup> Some singers expressed concern, though, saying that they feared that their managers would hear them in roles not appropriate for them. In an effort to ease their worries, a warning preface was given at the performance asking the audience to abstain in judging the singers’ suitability for his or her role.

On May 25, 1980 the workshop performance included such distinguished guests as: the HGO Board; Roger Stevens of the Kennedy Center; Russel Patterson of Kansas City Lyric Opera; Robert Holton of Belwin–Mills Publishing; John Ardoin, critic and scout for PBS; and John Ludwig of the National Opera Institute. Heumann was allowed to attend in research for an article in *Opera News*, and Ardoin was a part-time critic but allowed to view the workshop as a

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<sup>57</sup> Heumann, “‘Willie Stark ...,’” 17.

<sup>58</sup> Author unknown, “Innercity’s DeMain to Conduct ‘Willie Stark’,” *Inner View: A Journal of Opinion for Houston’s Innercity*, Vol. 2, no. 4, (April 1981): 3.

<sup>59</sup> Holliday, 278.

<sup>60</sup> Heumann, “‘Willie Stark...,’” 17.

scout for the PBS special. Otherwise, press was not allowed at the workshop performance, causing relations with *Houston Post* reviewer, Carl Cunningham, to become strained.

<sup>61</sup>Cunningham's review of the world premiere the following year is cited in Chapter Four of this dissertation; he had mixed reviews for the opera when given the opportunity to comment.

Heumann had positive comments about the performance, "... Excuses proved to be unnecessary. Spontaneous applause interrupted the music at several points, and bravos greeted the singers at the final curtain."<sup>62</sup> Comment cards were requested from all of the audience members after the curtain went down. Strong compliments were given to the dramatic intensity of the piece, Floyd's music, in general, and the end chorus in the finale.<sup>63</sup> A few commented that they preferred Act I to the rest of the work, but a majority felt that Act I ran too long. Many liked Act II and III better than the first, with several especially favoring the Act II, Scene ii Trio between Anne, Willie and Jack (calling it the "warmest music" in the show). Some feared that the music was jagged and overly dissonant, at times, making the tension run too strongly throughout the entire work. It was mentioned that moments of humor helped to lighten the tension and that injecting a laugh or two more might be useful to the flow. Audience members appreciated the moments of lyricism found in the arias, but argued that there was not a "hummable tune" in the piece, unlike his other successful works. The minimalistic sets were praised, and a few greatly appreciated the flashback and newsreel sequences. A large portion of the audience found the Announcer element, especially the final radio announcement, to "not

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<sup>61</sup> Holliday, 291.

<sup>62</sup> Heumann, "*Willie Stark...*," 19.

<sup>63</sup> A complete listing of the comments found in the South Caroliniana Special Collections is found in Appendix D. of this document.

work” in the context of the finale. The reader appeared onstage, which some disliked and at times, the text was too long and read too speedily. Many other cuts were suggested throughout to keep the momentum going and redundancy down. Several criticisms asked for stronger characterizations of Willie, Jack and Anne. Some viewers considered the suicide scene with Judge Burden as “trite,” and a handful of small inaccuracies were pointed out (such as a flag at “half-staff,” not “half-mast,” and a copy of a letter seemed to be done with a modern copy machine).

In the weeks that followed, Gockley, DeMain, and Floyd reviewed the comments submitted and Floyd began the work of adjusting his show based on these suggestions. The comments were overwhelmingly positive observations, but many of the issues mentioned required cutting and reworking entire sections. Luckily, Floyd had three months before the mainstage production rehearsals would begin, during which time he made numerous revisions.



### CHAPTER 3. DIRECTOR'S OPINIONS

Carlisle! We have all just listened to 'Of Mice and Men' and sit stunned. It is awesome – THEATRICAL. We wish you were still here. Work well. See you late in September or after Pittsburg. Ever – Hal<sup>64</sup>

Hal Prince, Broadway's highly successful director of musicals such as *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Evita*, was recruited by Gockley and Floyd to direct *Willie Stark*, with assistance by Roger Stevens.<sup>65</sup> Previous Prince productions at the time included: *Pacific Overtures*, *Candide*, *A Little Night Music*, *Follies*, *Zorba*, *Company*, *Cabaret*, *Superman*, and *She Loves Me!* He produced *The Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, *New Girl in Town*, *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Side by Side* by *Sondheim*, and *Fiorello!* Prince also staged Puccini's *Fancuilla del West* for San Francisco Opera.<sup>66</sup> His next show after *Willie Stark* was set to open on Broadway in November of 1981: *Merrily We Roll Along*, a musical version of the play from 1934 by Steven Sondheim, and a light opera called *A Doll's Life*, to open in New York. Then he planned to work in the opera world again with Puccini's *Turandot* for Vienna State Opera, *Madame Butterfly* for Chicago Opera, and Mascagni's *Il Piccolo Marat* for the Metropolitan Opera with Mirella Freni and Placido Domingo.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> A fond postcard from Hal Prince to Carlisle Floyd, Floyd Archives, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

<sup>65</sup> "The Arts..." 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ann Holmes, "'Willie Stark' has no frogs, but it's got a famous Prince," *Houston Chronicle*, Section 3 (April 4, 1981): 8, Floyd Archives.

*Willie Stark* held poetry and spectacle for Hal Prince.<sup>68</sup> Prince spoke of reading *All The King's Men* several years prior, as well as seeing the movie, but chose not to re-read it for the production. Much like Floyd and Warren, he cited that it was impossible to do the entire novel version on-stage and decided to read more about Huey Long, instead.<sup>69</sup> "I'm involved in *Willie Stark* because I just love it. I'm crazy about it, and if it doesn't play, it's my fault," said Prince, who also served with Floyd on the National Endowment's advisory panel on opera/musical theatre.<sup>70</sup> His involvement on the committee has made him look for a broader definition of musical theatre and allow for overlapping the art forms.<sup>71</sup>

#### PRINCE'S LETTER TO GOCKLEY AND FLOYD

Hal Prince offered his first suggestions to Floyd in a letter in June of 1980 after watching a video of the May 25<sup>th</sup> workshop performance. On stationery from The Savoy London Hotel, Prince writes on June 23, 1980:

Dear Carlisle and David,

Here is your memorandum – as requested. Two things should be mentioned beforehand; My fears have grown because I can't seem to lick the scenery problem, because everything Eugene and I do tend to be too theatrical to have a dynamic which is not dictated by the sound of music. We attempt surprising changes material doesn't really call for. I believe fervently that material must dictate form - not the reverse. The problem at the moment is the material isn't dictating any concise form.

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<sup>68</sup> Ann Holmes, "'Willie Stark' HGO ...," Floyd Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Holmes, "'Willie Stark' has no frogs....," Floyd Archives.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. "When it comes down to it, it's going to be the opera houses that bring back *Sweeney Todd*," suggested Prince back in 1981. Prince's prophesy came true, as many opera companies today program *Sweeney Todd*, including New Orleans Opera in the 2016-17 season.

If you read the libretto you have no such difficulties with the exception of the radio announcer's monologues and the odd sentence. (I have pointed those out previously, and I know you noted them.) I could stage the play excitingly. It is the lack of character delineation, the sameness with which the characters speak/sing. And it is the lack of theatrical surprise in the transitions, which is making it impossible to do anything but a straightforward job.<sup>72</sup>

Prince's method to planning the production seemed to begin with reading the libretto as a play, and he found Floyd's libretto needed a few adjustments. He noticed a problem with character delineations, similar to those mentioned by the workshop audience members who voiced the same concern. He continued with some trepidation at the thought that his initial instincts were faulty:

The other problem grows out of the workshop this past Spring. When I say I believe in the radio announcer as the final image that is because it's not a gimmick but a true theatrical metaphor. The impact of Willie Stark's life on his times. You tell me it didn't work. Well, as far as I am concerned, it has to work. There is no conceivable way it can't work, providing I understand your opera and I'm the fellow to direct it. But of course I'm shaken that it didn't work. Indeed I wish to hell it hadn't been tried. Certainly my feelings about the piece do not require seeing that workshop. And was a workshop really valuable? I keep seeing the letter from Houston telling how well received it was. That causes me to think my involvement might be bad news.

Enough of this!

- 1) The radio announcer must be pompous, stylized - there must be less of him. Perhaps even less information, and perhaps he should alternate between being seen and being used as a voice-over. ("Somebody left the radio on.")<sup>73</sup>

The radio announcer was not an entirely successful device in the workshop performance, but Prince suggested some adjustments that made sense for the sake of time and style. In the final

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<sup>72</sup> Floyd Archives.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

production, he elicited the aid of radio great, Lowell Thomas, who made the style completely authentic to the time period of *Willie Stark*.

The next discussion highlighted a differing opinion from many audience members of the workshop performance who believed the message about Stark is that a man will sell his soul for the sake of power. Floyd seemed to center his libretto on a quote from Warren's book, "I wonder, if to get the power to do good, a man has to sell his soul."<sup>74</sup> Prince continued:

- 2) Willie the solitary man. That's our image, isn't it? The cost of obsession is aloneness. Your best aria – for me at least - is plaintive, lonely, lost, and exceedingly theatrical and moving. Which is why I think Eugene Lee's notion of playing Willie in the football stands is thrilling. A funeral in which the dead man is sitting in the stands in a place which turns out to be the football stadium – but alone.
- 3) And then he is wretched (sic) out of it by a real football team. The crowd materialized, making the stairs into bleachers, the players lift Willie on their shoulders and take him away up the vomitorium. 'Two, four, six, eight' isn't strong enough. It doesn't provide that transition. No energy.
- 4) The crowd spills down from the stands into Willie's office – making Willie's office, and Willie is delivered by the football players through the other vomitorium into his office. This is only one way it might be achieved – theatrically.<sup>75</sup>

The concept of Willie as a solitary man is poetic, and the image on an empty football stand is compelling, but perhaps not central to the story's theme. Though this one stray from Floyd's direction, Prince still had strong convictions that led to a better production. He continued by addressing the character delineations that were desperately needed from an outstanding director, such as himself:

- 5) I thought Sadie was funny, warm-hearted, hiding as best she can her loneliness behind life force. This Sadie screams. She's too angry. There's nothing to come. No buoyancy hiding her insecurity.

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<sup>74</sup> Heumann, "The Trial...", 12.

<sup>75</sup> Floyd Archives.

6) Jack is sanctimonious, priggish. (Page 26) Callow would be appropriate. An enthusiastic optimist.

7) And the judge (page 25) is not a true aristocrat. A Grand Seigneur is less pompous, the power inbred, so that when he falls it's from a hell of a height. But also more touching, because he had warmth and humor.

These are all victims but it is difficult to warm up to them because they are either complaining at the outset or stern or self-righteous. The difference is you want the judge to get his, you want Jack to lose his idealism.

Can you see that the problem for me is extra difficult because I'm not complaining about most of the written text. What I expected was a more dynamic, angrier political sound from the crowd. Warmth from the principals. Even the "We want Stark!" sounds polite. Energy missing.

8). Just to remind you, the musical interlude on page 17 is too long if I am supposed to fill it with some activity.<sup>76</sup>

Prince sees the need for more energy, different characterizations, and cuts in the show's length to keep the momentum flowing, just as the workshop audience suggested:

I urgently believe if the scenes are to move slowly, inexorably, there must be an insistent tension – creating rhythm to segue from one scene to another. Probably that can best be provided by an angry/jubilant/needful chorus. If anything, this difficult period suggests, many of the solutions exist in the area of how the chorus functions. ENERGY. That's what we can use to propel the thing. A bomb ticking off.<sup>77</sup>

The workshop viewers remarked that the drama and tension were high throughout, contributing much to the show's success. Some remarked that it was too intense, but Prince seems to lean into the theme of stress in order to keep the story compelling:

I know this is a tough letter to take. I also know I may be wrong – from your point of view – for what you want. But I'm right for me, for what I can provide. And so, if this is too much, of course I understand. Perhaps the workshop went better than I think it did. Or, more appropriately, people liked it more than I would have.

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<sup>76</sup> Floyd Archives.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Carlisle, I haven't gone into detail about the balance of the piece because my experience indicates, if you get the larger thing, the theatrical rhythm right, everything will fall into place.

Please forgive me if I seem insensitive. We are in the theatre for twelve-hour days, and I've done the show before, so it requires more discipline to make up for less enthusiasm. The office knows where I can be reached.

Best to you both, Hal Prince<sup>78</sup>

Prince seemed to express his best intentions for Floyd's work. For the most part, each of the suggestions he made in this letter pointed toward improving the drama in a way that was similar to how the workshop audience had suggested. Prince's straightforward nature in the letter did not threaten his working relationship with Gockley and Floyd. After Prince's letter was sent, a meeting of all three took place at Prince's summer home in Majorca in order to begin ironing out more of the details.

#### THE TRIO WORKING TOGETHER

Floyd, Gockley, and Prince found a great working relationship in each other. Floyd said that the three of them were all extremely precise and worked well together. The trio hoped that Broadway might embrace *Willie Stark* as a production, and Gockley reported: "Hal Prince has invited various producer types down here. They feel that anything he does has potential, and Prince is interested in this middle ground."<sup>79</sup> Hal Prince had praise for David Gockley and

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<sup>78</sup> Floyd Archives.

<sup>79</sup> Deborah Trustman, "Opera from the Heart of Texas," Floyd Archives.

described him as dynamic: “David goads the creative people into doing their best work. He forces them to not compromise. We’ve not been allowed to be polite to each other.”<sup>80</sup>

In casting, Floyd and Prince believed the characters in this show required more dramatic acting skills than other typical opera characters and selected the cast by considering acting and singing as equal prerequisites.<sup>81</sup> The casting of *Willie Stark* was done with a Broadway slant, said Prince:

On Broadway, characterization of individual people is more often left up to casting properly. One gets actors – or actor-singers in our case – who are intelligent enough to understand and bring an immense amount to creating characters. Therefore our casting was not taken from a list of fine opera singers, who usually do Verdi and Puccini. We obviously are not doing a packaged version of anything. We needed a completely different style. We went through extensive auditions, every bit (as) exhaustive as when we cast a Broadway show.<sup>82</sup>

Floyd said that Prince was much more interested in the visual aspect of the actors than was usually done in casting for opera productions; his colleague was not concerned with what repertoire singers had done in the past but rather who was best suited for the part. Prince, not knowing many of the singers that Floyd and Gockley would have hired, made casting decisions that were described as “fresh.”<sup>83</sup> Prince would ask the composer questions like, “What movie star does Anne look like?” in hopes of casting the role to the best of his ability. Gockley had high

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<sup>80</sup> Trustman, Floyd Archives.

<sup>81</sup> Cowser, 8.

<sup>82</sup> “The Arts...,” 5.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

praises for those selected in the Fall of 1980 and was happy to report the luxury of a five-week rehearsal schedule.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout the rehearsal process Floyd made several libretto and musical revisions based on Prince's suggestions, trusting in his theatrical perceptions.<sup>85</sup> In questioning the precision of text, Prince would ask to switch words such as "get a drink" to "fix me a drink," in hopes that it more distinctly defined the characters.<sup>86</sup> Gockley described the situation:

Prince, with Floyd, rewrote a great deal of the libretto, cutting the dialogue, making the story sharper, more resonant. Robert Penn Warren's novel has been simplified to a love story and a murder, and the characters say less and imply more. He had also persuaded Floyd to change some of the music, to reprise a big aria at the end of the second act. 'I'm treating this like a Broadway show,' Prince says.<sup>87</sup>

Floyd admired Prince's attention to detail, while constantly considering the big picture of the drama. Gifted at keeping the momentum of the story in perspective at all times, Prince's efforts focused on creating a definite beginning, middle, and end, especially in balancing the amount of detail work for each scene.<sup>88</sup> Prince was enthusiastic when things went well, and was well respected by his cast.<sup>89</sup> He was reportedly open to suggestions and consistently considered the music when proposing his own ideas.<sup>90</sup> The director also invited Floyd to attend each

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<sup>84</sup> "The Arts...", 5.

<sup>85</sup> Cowser, 7.

<sup>86</sup> "The Arts...", 5.

<sup>87</sup> Trustman, Floyd Archives.

<sup>88</sup> Holmes, "'Willie Stark' HGO...", Floyd Archives.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



rehearsal, particularly at the last hour of each session, to review what had been done.<sup>91</sup> “I never worked with a director so flexible,” said Floyd.<sup>92</sup> According to Floyd, all who worked with the director revered him.<sup>93</sup>

The inclusion of Harold Prince shaped the development of *Willie Stark* in many positive ways. His work on the piece brought stronger character delineations through the text, Broadway-style casting that emphasized acting, singing, and looking the part, as well as revising text and music of the score to create a stronger, well-paced arc for the overall storyline.

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<sup>91</sup> Holmes, “‘Willie Stark’ HGO...,” Floyd Archives.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4. DEBUT AND RECEPTION

In an article on January 15, 1981, the *New York Times* compared Floyd with other American composers, saying: “Carlisle Floyd is something of an anomaly among American composers in that he concentrates his energies almost exclusively on opera – and with a fair amount of success, judging from the number of productions his works receive on the regional opera circuit.”<sup>94</sup> His first and arguably one of the most popular American operas still today, *Susannah*, debuted 25 years earlier. *Willie Stark*, Floyd’s eleventh opera, premiered on April 24, 1981, as the final production of Houston’s 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season. A large amount of promotional interviews and press preceded the premiere, which created a “buzz” of anticipation regionally and nationally.

### PROMOTIONAL INTERVIEWS

Performer Timothy Nolan created the character of “Willie Stark,” and in promotional interviews before the performance, professed that he did not care for opera’s reputation for bad acting.<sup>95</sup> “Clutch and stagger” was the phrase he used, and in this performance he hoped to give a fresh interpretation of what an opera singer could communicate through American works like Floyd’s.<sup>96</sup> Nolan altered his singing style to accommodate for the big demands of tessitura and length in the role of Willie, which is 90 minutes of singing. He chose to lighten his vocal

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<sup>94</sup> Peter G. Davis, “Floyd’s Opera ‘Willie Stark’ To Have Houston Premiere,” NEWS OF MUSIC, *New York Times* (January 15, 1981), Floyd Archives, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

<sup>95</sup> William Albright, “Starring as Willie Stark: Lyric Baritone anticipates the Mount Everest of his career,” *The Houston Post* (April 20, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>96</sup> Davis, Floyd Archives.

mechanism in certain sections of the piece in order to pace his performance and add variety of timbres to his vocal color.<sup>97</sup> Nolan said that “Willie” reminded him of a Wagnerian opera role, saying, “It is the heaviest thing I’ve ever done.”<sup>98</sup> Nolan went on to describe the type of singing the role required, “Floyd has invented a whole new style of singing in English .... It’s brighter and more geared to the text than to the big, round, Italianate sound ... the only thing I can compare it to is Grimes’ last monologue in (Benjamin Britten’s) *Peter Grimes*.”<sup>99</sup> Nolan had some experience singing popular music before his career in opera and commented, “[I]n a way it is closer to country and western singing than to regular opera singing. The accent gives it that flavor.”<sup>100</sup>

Conductor John DeMain was also interviewed in the month of the premiere. DeMain was in his second season as Music Director of HGO, and previously served for two years as Principal Conductor/Artistic Advisor. Formerly the Music Director of Texas Opera Theatre (an offshoot of HGO) and conductor of the Exxon/Arts Endowment for two seasons, DeMain is a Juilliard graduate and winner of the 1972 Julius Rudel Award as assistant conductor at New York City Opera. In 1976 he conducted the Texas Opera Theatre’s *El Capitan* at the Kennedy Center and was music director for HGO’s *Porgy and Bess*. Recorded for RCA, *Porgy and Bess* received a Grammy and the *Grand Prix du Disque* of France. At HGO he served as music director for *Hello, Dolly!*, and conducted *The Merry Widow*, *Aïda*, *Othello* in English, *Madame Butterfly*, *Regina*, *Die Fledermaus*, and *Carmen*. While working with the Boston Pops, Lake George, and

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<sup>97</sup> Davis, Floyd Archives.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Wolf Trap organizations, DeMain was personally selected by Leonard Bernstein to be musical director of the Broadway revival of *West Side Story*. Of Floyd's previous works, he conducted *Of Mice and Men* for Michigan Opera Theatre in Detroit and *Susannah* at Lake George.<sup>101</sup>

When asked about Floyd's style, DeMain compared Floyd's melodies to those of Bartok's, but in an "Americana" style. Floyd used *Sprechstimme*, also similar to the American opera *Regina* by Mark Blitzstein.<sup>102</sup> *Willie Stark* made extensive use of sung recitatives.<sup>103</sup> "He delves into the subconscious of the American folk idiom and takes it farther ... it will be pungent, stringent, filled with intrigue – at other times expansive, vast, sonorous and lyrical."<sup>104</sup>

In promotional interviews with the composer, Floyd told the papers, "the entire period of writing and rehearsals [for *Willie Stark* is] the most exhilarating experience of my operatic life."<sup>105</sup> Three days before the premiere, Floyd reported that the production was doing well and ahead of schedule. He said that he might make a few word changes but nothing substantial.<sup>106</sup> He also said that working with Prince was rewarding; likewise, Prince praised Floyd's work: "This is one of the best American pieces ever written."<sup>107</sup> Floyd expressed his extreme excitement for the premiere, "Of course, anything like this is a very special occasion, but I can't think of

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<sup>101</sup> "Innercity's DeMain to Conduct 'Willie Stark'," Floyd Archives.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> William W. Starr, "S.C. Native Authors 'Major New Opera,'" (1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

anytime I've been more excited or pleased about the way things have gone before the opera opened. Still, you're always grateful for one more expression of good luck."<sup>108</sup>

The publicity manager for Houston Grand Opera said they were focusing on attracting local patronage to the opera.<sup>109</sup> A momentous occasion of a literary gathering was arranged at the University of Houston with 76-year-old Robert Penn Warren, and 90-year-old famous radio announcer Lowell Thomas. "Perhaps the world's best-known voice," said *The Houston Post*, Thomas' voice was broadcast throughout the opera as the radio announcer.<sup>110</sup> Another promotional event, a "Willie Rally" was staged nine days before the premiere in downtown Houston, "featuring the former Mayor of Houston, cheerleaders from a local high school, a Dixieland jazz band and a fiddler from a celebrated country-western band, The Light Crust Doughboys."<sup>111</sup> Crepe paper ribbons and red, white, and blue balloons decorated the proceedings as the jazz combo from the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts performed. Pom-pom girls and the crowd shouted, "We want Willie!"<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Starr, Floyd Archives.

<sup>109</sup> Betty Ewing, "We'll set the opera pace for the nation," *Houston Chronicle* (April 19, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth Bennett, "The radio voice in 'Willie Stark' belongs to still-vigorous Thomas," *The Houston Post*, Floyd Archives. In the article, Thomas was asked what he thought of news coverage in the 1980s: "It comes down on us like an avalanche. I sometimes think I'd like to go back to the period where you only got the news once a week instead of every hour or every few minutes. Why be smothered with it? What do you gain by this deluge of news pouring down upon you? I think it would make people jittery and nervous."

<sup>111</sup> Trustman, Floyd Archives.

<sup>112</sup> Ewing, Floyd Archives.

The balance of marketing to opera lovers and non-opera-going local audiences reportedly contributed to both success and difficulties for HGO.<sup>113</sup> The opera company built a national reputation by producing and exporting American opera, under the leadership of David Gockley, with shows in 1975-76 such as *Porgy and Bess* and Joplin's *Treemonisha*.<sup>114</sup> "A great deal is riding on 'Willie Stark,' said Gockley. "This is the first time the company is gambling that a new work – an opera, not a musical – might make it to Broadway."<sup>115</sup> With Broadway director Prince at the helm of this work, Gockley hoped to prove his theory correct that American Opera could become a musical form with mass appeal.<sup>116</sup> Writers of the time expressed the importance of *Willie Stark's* success:

The popular and critical success of "Willie Stark" is crucial if Gockley is going to continue to direct the company the way he believes it should be run – as a showcase for what Gockley calls, 'musical theatre,' blurring the distinction between operas, with their complex scores, and musicals, with their straightforward songs.<sup>117</sup>

Since arriving in Houston in 1972, Gockley increased the company's budget from \$420,000 to \$5 million in 1981.<sup>118</sup> With nine major productions a year, HGO gave 50 performances each season.<sup>119</sup> "Most opera companies spend 90 percent of their money in putting

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<sup>113</sup> Trustman, Floyd Archives.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

on an opera and about 10 percent selling it to the public. We make it 50-50,” said Gockley.<sup>120</sup> On working with Floyd and other composers, the General Director said, “Many composers have made a conscious, public confession that they are not writing for an audience, they are writing for themselves. We are interested in composers who want to write for an audience.”<sup>121</sup> But with HGO reaching for new horizons in American opera, the company faced challenges in recruiting donors. President of the HGO Opera Board, Robert Citzic, reported, “It is much easier to persuade someone to give \$50,000 for a new production of Italian opera than for an unknown quantity like ‘Willie Stark.’”<sup>122</sup> According to reports at the time, *Willie Stark* cost HGO \$350,000, and though Gockley was pleased with the show, as the premiere approached, he also voiced a contradictory statement that it might explain why *Willie Stark* was not accepted as a Broadway musical:

The production is wonderful and the piece is holding up well. My own feeling is that it’s not a Broadway piece. It doesn’t have the immediacy and simplicity required. Musically, it strives for an intellectualism that takes it beyond the immediate attractiveness you need.<sup>123</sup>

Press releases from March 23, 1981 announced details of “Premiere Week,” a culmination of HGO’s Silver Anniversary Season. Beginning with *Willie Stark*, two other components would be presenting: the Texas Opera Theatre and the Houston Opera Studio. Also, a National Opera Institute colloquium and meetings of the National Opera Association and

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<sup>120</sup> Trustman, Floyd Archives.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

OPERA America were planned.<sup>124</sup> A press release from the Texas Opera Theatre, published that “Premiere Week” would begin with Floyd’s *Willie Stark* on April 24, 26, 28, and May 1 in Jones Hall. Other productions were also included in “Premiere Week:”

... the world premiere of *The Panther*, a music-theatre piece with music by Phillip Glass and developed, designed, and directed by Manuel Lutgenhorst, April 25, 26, 29, and May 2 at the University of Houston’s Art Annex on Lawndale. Texas Opera Theatre also presents its world premiere production of Henry Mollicone’s *Starbird*, April 27 and 30 at St. John’s School Auditorium and the Southwest premiere of Mollicone’s *The Face on the Barroom Floor* April 27, 30, and May 1 at the Black-Eyed Pea.<sup>125</sup>

Times are given for each of the productions, and *Willie Stark* is listed as 3 hours and 20 minutes long.

Floyd and Warren appeared on the front cover of *Opera News* in April 1981, with photos from rehearsals at Houston Grand Opera and a subheading that announced high hopes for the opera, “May prove a breakthrough for American Opera in its creative genesis.”<sup>126</sup> The feature article told that *Willie Stark* was a ten-year project coming to fruition and would be viewed by Stephen Sondheim, Beverly Sills, Kurt Herbert Adler, representatives from the Metropolitan Opera, Chicago Opera, Kennedy Center, and Shuberts and Nederlander Interests.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Press Release, Houston Grand Opera, 1981, Floyd Archives.

<sup>125</sup> Karen Westley, Press Release, Texas Opera Theatre, April 6 and 16, 1982, Floyd Archives.

<sup>126</sup> Heumann, “The Trial ...,” Floyd Archives.

<sup>127</sup> Holmes, “Willie Stark’ ...,” Floyd Archives.



## HIGHLIGHTS OF *WILLIE STARK*

The opera begins with Willie leading a rally of farmers protesting his impeachment; shouting and using football imagery, they yell, “Undefeated, untied and unscored on,” and “We’re a team!”<sup>128</sup> Replete with football players and cheerleaders, the crowd sings, “Light a torch for Willie.”<sup>129</sup> Author Earl Wilcox states, “Floyd gradually develops Willie as an archetypal messiah, replete with tragic and Faustian overtones. In this way, the opera’s theme is a reflection of Floyd’s multidimensional hero.”<sup>130</sup> Floyd uses ironic foreshadowing with repetitious chants alluding to the “Humpty Dumpty” motif of *All The King’s Men*:

They won’t all fall so easy.  
An’ some won’t fall at all.<sup>131</sup>

Also in creating the main theme of Willie’s multidimensionality:

Good come from bad an’ don’t you forget it  
'Cause there ain’t nothin’ else to make it from.  
Good comes from bad, from bad ... nothin’ else.

From the stench of the diaper  
To the stench of the shroud  
There is always something; somethin’ to be found  
For Man is born in sin an’ bred to corruption.<sup>132</sup>

Character Jack Burden embraces this mentality, accepting it as gospel. “The libretto uses the chant (a grand opera version of the folk ballad) to build suspense, provide commentary, and

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<sup>128</sup> Wilcox, 109.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 109.

convey Willie's tragic fall. 'We want Willie ...'»<sup>133</sup> The tension is also built with country hymns, choruses, recitatives, and a Faustian complex emerges when Willie laments:

I wonder if to get power to do good  
A man has to sell his soul.  
I wonder ... I wonder.<sup>134</sup>

A radio announcer sets the scene for Willie to be seen as a messianic figure, saying, "his ragged minions regard Willie Stark as their brother, their champion, their savior."<sup>135</sup> And a town mayor calls Willie, "God's gift to the people, a Moses to lead us outa bondage an' into the Promised Land."<sup>136</sup> Willie encourages the crowd by saying:

Exalt me, exalt me, an' you exalt yourselves.  
Friends, rednecks, an' fellow hicks,  
Let us exalt ourselves!<sup>137</sup>

The reviewer even goes as far as to compare his speech to the Sermon on the Mount, suggesting the moments of self-reflection betray Willie's conflict within his inner-self.<sup>138</sup> Willie hears a church hymn as he sings of being homesick; it is as if he has lost his way, and he coming

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<sup>133</sup> Wilcox, 109.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

home to renew and redeem himself.<sup>139</sup> In a self-communion and Christ-like plea to his people, Willie asks them, “Stand with me in my hour of trial...”<sup>140</sup>

The novel, in an epitaph from Dante, asserts, “... no man may be deprived of hope as long as love exists in the universe, specifically while any thread of green lives on in hope.”<sup>141</sup> The hope that Willie will change his ways and become morally sound exists, but is unfulfilled. Even at the end, Willie revels in his victory, “We have stormed Olympus tonight” in self-glorification, and he will not repent for the sins committed.<sup>142</sup> Thunder is heard, also in Acts II and III, foretelling how the rain fell upon a parched land: “Suddenly, along with increasing frequent thunder and lightning, a strong wind comes up.”<sup>143</sup> Floyd uses folk motifs in hymns, chants, arias, and solos to convey Warren’s hopes: “to show a man whose personal motivation had been, in one sense, idealistic, who in many ways was to serve the cause of social betterment, but who was corrupted by power.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Wilcox, 111.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>141</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All The King’s Men*, New York: Harcourt, Brace (1946).

<sup>142</sup> Wilcox, 113.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>144</sup> Robert Penn Warren, “A Note on All The King’s Men,” *Sewanee Review* 61, (Summer 1953): 477.

## CRITICAL REVIEWS FOR HOUSTON PREMIERE

*The Baton Rouge Sunday Advocate* wrote, “A grand and powerful new opera is among us. Carlisle Floyd’s massive, ‘Willie Stark’ tells an epic story, unleashing American energies and passions with a vitality and a direct strength that are rare in American opera.”<sup>145</sup>

“There was an air of victory and accomplishment .... Although some said they found it emotionally draining to sit through the intense 3-and-a-half-hour production, their energy was boosted at the party by the excitement generated by the wealth of creative talent present,”<sup>146</sup> said the *Houston Post* after the April premiere. The after-party had a feeling of a candidate’s victory celebration, and it was said that the city could boast of its place in the world of arts.<sup>147</sup> Warren beamed, “I am very happy tonight. This is the best birthday present I have ever had.”<sup>148</sup> Floyd glowed with pride in saying, it “ties Houston to New York and to Washington, when the opera goes to the Kennedy Center. It is the greatest accomplishment I have ever had. But a composer always likes his most recent work best.”<sup>149</sup>

“Houston’s opera company borrowed a page from Broadway’s book, ‘Willie Stark’ stands a better chance of beating the odds against American opera,” said *Opera News*.<sup>150</sup> The reviewer explained that there were elements of opera and musical theatre on “a subject calling

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<sup>145</sup> David Foil, “‘Willie Stark’ Views from the Critics,” Press Release, April 26, 1981 Floyd Archives.

<sup>146</sup> Tom Overton, “What a night at the opera!” *Houston Post*, Floyd Archives.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Scott Heumann, “Reports: U.S., Houston,” *Opera News* (1981), Floyd Archives.

for musical treatment of a distinctly American sort,” and the work was “a challenge brilliantly met by composer-librettist Carlisle Floyd.”<sup>151</sup> *Opera News* continued, “It will not please everyone, particularly those who regard operas as a sensual musical bath . . . for long stretches music takes a back seat to the drama.”<sup>152</sup> The review explained that the texture of the music is not thick, but gives precedence to the text.<sup>153</sup> Spoken dialogue is used in a mixture of “Broadway *Sprechstimme*” and Puccini motifs.<sup>154</sup> There were a few problems, though, according to the reviewer: the orchestra was small for the house, and Sadie’s aria in the end of Act I was unattractive.<sup>155</sup> Julia Conwell’s diction as “Anne Stanton” was also reportedly difficult to ascertain.<sup>156</sup> The radio announcements by Lowell Thomas were praised, and the technical staff was also complimented for the production.<sup>157</sup>

The *New Yorker* hailed it as “Floyd’s most mature score for the musical stage”<sup>158</sup> and a “dexterous and accomplished piece.”<sup>159</sup> Continuing, “It is well-written music, fluent, honest, and

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<sup>151</sup> Heumann, “Reports: U.S., Houston,” Floyd Archives.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Irving Kolodin, “The star of ‘Willie Stark,’” *Saturday Review* (July 1981): 91.

<sup>159</sup> Author unknown, “Musical Events,” *New Yorker* (April 5, 1982), Floyd Archives.

effective.”<sup>160</sup> Also, “the blending of musical types is done with rare skill and an individualism not likely to be witnessed on the opera scene in America for many years to come.”<sup>161</sup>

The *Houston Chronicle* especially praised the rally scene, “Come back, Willie,” but took issue with the length and pacing of the work as a whole.<sup>162</sup> Floyd’s music leaned on the side of excessive *recitative* rather than open lyricism.<sup>163</sup> The few technical issues were distracting, such as the Judge’s suicide gunshot, which seemed to happen twice because of a loud drum that sounded after the gun sound effect, and the newsreel image which fizzled out when Willie walked toward the projection.<sup>164</sup> Praise was given to the cast, moreso than the creators, although Prince’s work with the crowds was commended.<sup>165</sup> Another critic wrote:

Here, to be sure, is nothing like the dreams and dilemmas of other operatic romances such as those in *La Bohème* or even *Tosca*. This composition springs instead from a hefty piece of Americana that will either succeed or fail by its manner of re-creation. Floyd has striven to spike his work purposefully with declamation, with plain-talk in sometimes Southern-slurred accents, between biting specialties sung by members of Willie’s ‘team’ and those who block their way. But for those who listen carefully, in the dry soil Floyd has chosen to till, there are thematic seeds that flower and burst into bloom in later episodes.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> “Musical Events,” *New Yorker*, Floyd Archives.

<sup>161</sup> Wilcox, 115.

<sup>162</sup> Anne Holmes, “HGO’s ‘Willie Stark’ cast tops, but total work flawed though provocative,” *Houston Chronicle* (April 26, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Irving Kolodin, 91.

OPERA wrote about the story, “It is an unusual subject matter for an opera to undertake – but if anyone is truly aware of the capabilities of opera, it’s Mr. Floyd. In fact, one can even find the feel of an American jazz undertone glittering through portions of the scenes.”<sup>167</sup> The reviewer credited the set and costume designers, but did not mention the director. The review ends by stating that the opera was theatrical and created a “new mood” in modern American Opera.<sup>168</sup>

The *Dallas Times Herald* had good things to say about the performance,<sup>169</sup> but the *Dallas Morning News* called it a “flawed jewel” and said it needed “improvement.”<sup>170</sup> John Ardoin, who noted that he was also present for the workshop performance (and undoubtedly gave comments) highlighted the great points of the show, which he still felt held promise for becoming a great American work. He noted Floyd’s “singular ability to weave spoken and sung passages together in a single fabric,” but still thought Act I was too long, especially the Judge Burden scene.<sup>171</sup> “The second act lacks focus, and the last act overplays Willie’s assassination at the hands of one of his followers .... As a totality, *Willie Stark* lacks the clear-eyed, sustained thread of Floyd’s finest opera *Of Mice and Men*, although I believe it still has the potential to rival it.”<sup>172</sup> He

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<sup>167</sup> Author unknown, “OPERA,” undated, Floyd Archives.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Olin Chism, “‘Willie Stark’ is no typical night at opera,” *Dallas Times Herald* (April 27, 1981), Floyd Archives. Praising Floyd, the author compared, “Come back, Willie” at the end of Act 1 to Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes*, “Great Bear and Pleiades” and said of the moment, “you could have heard a pin drop here; Floyd certainly had his audience.”

<sup>170</sup> John Ardoin, “‘Stark’ proves flawed jewel in crowning week of opera,” *The Dallas Morning News* (April 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

expressed that the best part of the opera was the rally with, “Come back, Willie,” and deemed it, “... one of the finest pages Floyd has penned.”<sup>173</sup> “Equally impressive is Floyd’s frequent ability to capsule in music a personality. ... stretches of impassioned choral writing, and Floyd’s use of his orchestra is extremely distinctive and atmospheric.”<sup>174</sup> Ardoin encouraged the composer to reexamine these elements but praised the set designer and director saying, “Prince deployed his players with a mastery of a Wellington at Waterloo.”<sup>175</sup> The radio announcer moments were seen as a “superb binding agent,” and Nolan received accolades in his portrayal of the “always-on-stage Willie.”<sup>176</sup> The other cast members were praised, except for Alan Kays (“Jack Burden”) who was said to need more vocal and dramatic power, as well as Julia Conwell (“Anne Stanton”) who was said to have sung well, but needed more “dimension” to her character.<sup>177</sup> Lastly, Ardoin commented on the lobby entertainment, saying it was a bad idea to have a country-and-western band during intermission: “If I had been Floyd, I would have seen red at this gratuitous intrusion.”<sup>178</sup>

Other reviews went even farther with criticisms. It was reported that there were empty seats after the first intermission, and the *New York Times* panned it as they did his last work.<sup>179</sup> Another critic wrote, “Floyd’s language is not highly personal. His music is not difficult or

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<sup>173</sup> Ardoin, Floyd Archives.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Tom Sutcliffe, “Space City stages a new epic,” Floyd Archives.



intellectually challenging. His sense of pace and climax is firmly traditional .... On first hearing, the basic units of his melodic language seemed lamely short-winded, and the orchestral underpinning of the vocal lines thumpingly four-square.”<sup>180</sup> The 36-piece orchestra for the 3,000 seat auditorium was described as, “experimental, insensitive, and tentative in its grasp of structural subtlety...”<sup>181</sup> But by a second hearing of the work, the reviewer changed opinions, realizing that Floyd “had created four distinctive, credible, operatic characters” through musical language.<sup>182</sup> The fragmented vocal lines offered “greater responsibility and opportunity to the singers. And this releases the emotional potential of the story.”<sup>183</sup>

Like some other national media, *Newsweek* did not have kind reviews for the show, calling Prince’s staging “a slicked-up, Broadway-style show with a severe identity crisis. It teeters between highbrow musical and low-brow opera – and misses out on both.”<sup>184</sup> Slightly generous, it conceded that the show was not a “resounding flop,” despite a long first act; the pace was good, and there were some good comic touches.<sup>185</sup> The reviewer argued that the confusion of genres is not enjoyable, it could be known as Prince’s “Second *Evita*,” and the huge steps on

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<sup>180</sup> Sutcliffe, Floyd Archives.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Annalyn Swan, “Grand Opera, Texas Style,” *Newsweek* (May 11, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

the set seemed awkward.<sup>186</sup> But the reviewer noticed that Gockley’s Texas-themed Intermission choice – Pappy Selph, the old-time fiddler – was engaging to the Texas audience.<sup>187</sup>

Reviewer Carl Cunningham (who reportedly felt slighted at not being invited to the workshop premiere)<sup>188</sup> called it a “confident” world premiere, but, “[As] would be expected in most operatic settings of literary works, the inevitable telescoping of events and personalities causes Floyd’s libretto to magnify predictable clichés and to focus upon stock character traits in this tale of the ruthless rise and fall of a power-hungry Southern governor.<sup>189</sup> Cunningham described Warren’s novel as “a leisurely, beautifully written tapestry,” but described Floyd’s composition as sparse: “The score is in the accessible Floyd tradition, but often more astringent and more lightly orchestrated than some of his earlier operas.”<sup>190</sup> He found the music similar to *Bilby’s Doll* but more musically assured with continuity; Floyd’s integration of pop, jazz and folk music added to the texture in a beneficial way.<sup>191</sup> The music at the beginning of Act III was enjoyable to him and overall, the variation between speaking and singing and the radio announcements were well intertwined.<sup>192</sup> “The dry realism of his (Prince’s) direction highlighted the irreconcilable duality of Stark’s personality as a governor who achieves social reform and

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<sup>186</sup> Swan, Floyd Archives.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Holliday, 295. Also see Chapter 2 of this document.

<sup>189</sup> Carl Cunningham, “Review Theatre: ‘Willie Stark,’” Floyd Archives.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

broad public benefits, but abuses his power in doing so.”<sup>193</sup> But overall, he did not enjoy Floyd’s piece: “As a total musical experience, the nervously jagged rhythms that dominate the melodic line (another easily identifiable trait of Floyd’s style) give the score a cold, relentless feeling . . . well suited to the monolithic political drama . . . also reflected in Eugene Lee’s granite-hard unit set . . .”<sup>194</sup> Cunningham said that minus “Come back, Willie,” the score lacked “the warm, human quality and broad lyricism that have made Floyd’s 1970 score to Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* his most widely acknowledged operatic masterpiece.”<sup>195</sup>

In the end, the Southern press mostly sang praises of Floyd’s new work, but the critics from New York and national press had trouble with several parts of the production. “They didn’t get it,” said Prince, and he wrote Floyd a note communicating his disdain for the mixed reviews.<sup>196</sup> Along with thanks for dedicating the published score to him, Prince had several ideas to share with Floyd for fine-tuning the show as they prepared for the Kennedy Center premiere.<sup>197</sup>

## KENNEDY CENTER REVIEWS

Prince and Floyd cut another 20 minutes from *Willie Stark* for the Kennedy Center performances.<sup>198</sup> Washington, D.C., had a great appreciation for the work and the opening saw

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<sup>193</sup> Cunningham, Floyd Archives.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Holliday, 297.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

Robert Penn Warren and Steven Sondheim in the distinguished audience.<sup>199</sup> Hal France conducted the three weeks of performances, and the cast received praise for their performance.<sup>200</sup> Warren called Floyd's show, "miraculous and marvelous."<sup>201</sup> Reviews in Washington from a radio address by Joseph McLellan said,

... an impressive show. It has been called opera, music-drama, drama with music, musical theatre – almost everything but operetta or musical comedy... and if you let it happen to you as it is designed to, it hits you hard. You won't walk out whistling, but you will know that you have had an intense and tightly integrated theatrical experience.<sup>202</sup>

McLellan continued, "The problem is the music," which he attributed as unconventional, yet he found the show in its entirety as enjoyable with high-quality staging, libretto, and performers.<sup>203</sup> He suggested that the modern music added drama in a strongly effective way to heighten emotions; to ask for more melody in this show would be like asking for more "trumpets in a string quartet."<sup>204</sup> Defending Floyd's style, the reviewer said, "Opera is supposed to be a wedding of words and music .... In this case, most of the time, ... the words are colored and

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<sup>199</sup> Holliday, 298.

<sup>200</sup> Bill Zakariasen, "Opera or Drama, it carries a timely theme," *Daily News* (May 19, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>201</sup> Libbey, Floyd Archives.

<sup>202</sup> Joseph McLellan Radio Broadcast, May 20, 1981, writer for the Washington Post, Floyd Archives.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

energized and given form by the process.”<sup>205</sup> He compared the score to a movie soundtrack and McLellan thought that in 10 years *Willie Stark* could be a classic in American theatre.<sup>206</sup>

According to another local critic, Bill Zakariasen, Act I was still a bit long and the score lacked the melodic lyricism for which Floyd was especially known to use.<sup>207</sup> To the reviewer, the spoken lines over the orchestra hearkened to reminiscences of *Sweeney Todd*, and the razzle-dazzle of the 1930’s flashbulbs did not overshadow Floyd’s score.<sup>208</sup> Zakariasen concluded with, “So forget about ‘Willie Stark’s’ lack of melody – once it gets going, it’s got rhythm, and throughout it’s got one hell of a performance and production. It may be that it’s America’s answer to ‘Evita,’ and ‘Willie Stark’ has better music.”<sup>209</sup>

#### FILMING FOR “GREAT PERFORMANCES”

*The New York Times* did not acclaim the work but nevertheless, published articles about the upcoming Public Broadcasting Service special:

Despite the severe critical drubbing it received earlier this year, “Willie Stark,” the controversial opera by Carlisle Floyd directed by Harold Prince for the Houston Grand Opera and Washington’s Kennedy Center, has been filmed for public broadcast tomorrow night to launch the ninth year of PBS’s “Great Performances” series.

Since its April debut in Houston, “Willie Stark” has become something of a cause célèbre in those quarters of the music world which delight in spending hours splitting the hairs that separate modern opera from popular musical theatre ... it has variously, and with some derision, been called a musical drama, a Broadway opera, and a morality musical ... What drew fire was what critics called the opera’s similarities not only to the

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<sup>205</sup> McLellan, Floyd Archives.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Zakariasen, Floyd Archives.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

staging of such hybrid Broadway fare as “Evita” and “Sweeney Todd,” which Mr. Prince also directed, but to the works of such esteemed composers as Benjamin Britten and Gian Carlo Menotti, to whom, they said, Mr. Floyd no doubt listened for hours before composing his eleventh opera. Worse, many of them found it overlong and overwritten, the music so “congested,” so “prosaically recitative,” that they were unable to leave the theatre whistling even one happy tune.<sup>210</sup>

John Duka of the *New York Times* interviewed Hal Prince and inquired as to why he found it important to film *Willie Stark*:

What do you mean, why bother filming ‘Willie Stark’? I should point out that many critics liked it. I’m proud of it, and I wanted it to be on record. The only way most people can really appreciate opera, especially modern opera, is to hear it more than once. People who haven’t heard it or who thought the music too inaccessible the first time will now have another chance to understand it. It is just theatre, musical theatre, that’s all. Let’s not make any more out of it. I had no trouble with the music. I can sing whole chunks of it. Four of the arias are very easy to hang on to. The first performance of ‘Madame Butterfly,’ don’t forget, got booed off the stage. What I want is the life of the show to outdistance one or two bad reviews. The filming, which I am happy for, wasn’t my idea. I think it was probably that of the people at WNET who have a close relationship with Gockley.<sup>211</sup>

The filming happened through connections that Gockley and Floyd cultivated for years, and *Willie Stark* on PBS was funded by Exxon and National Endowment for the Arts, as well as ETV Endowment of South Carolina, WNET/13 New York, and the Southern Educational Community Association.<sup>212</sup> The performance was dedicated to the late Lowell Thomas whose recorded voice was used in the production. Exxon wrote, “With ‘Willie Stark,’ Exxon supports not only an original work of American music, something of an endangered species, but a work

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<sup>210</sup> John Duka, “‘Willie Stark’ – From Opera House to Home Screen,” *New York Times* (September 27, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

that also offers a fairly sympathetic portrait of a controversial Populist. That kind of support deserves notice – and encouragement.”<sup>213</sup>

Filming director, Brian Large, who was selected by Prince, made many adjustments with Prince to make cuts for the filming. Prince summarized the process of *Willie Stark*, defending the Houston premiere, “Since it had no previews, but simply opened as soon as we finished rehearsal, our approach to it was that it was a work-in-progress. After Houston, we cleaned it up for Washington and cut out ten minutes of it. I don’t remember what we cut for television. I haven’t seen it yet.”<sup>214</sup> Prince may have generalized the amount of cuts he had to do, but more importantly, he made the point that most other Broadway-type shows get a preview period in New York before they reach the actual premier. Although the workshops at the University of Houston helped Floyd prepare the piece, Prince did not have the opportunity to preview his concept of the show before the actual world premier. Director of the filming, Brian Large, described his impression of development for television:

We were all aware (Prince, Floyd, and Large) that it was long-winded and had no impact. We knew it had to be rewritten, adapted and re-thought. So we cut out 48 minutes. Cutting, of both music and libretto, went on up to the final minutes of taping, with Carlisle willingly making revisions. What was originally a 3-hour, 10-minute production (in Washington, D.C.) became one of just a little over two hours.<sup>215</sup>

The filming was done at Jones Hall in Houston over the span of six days with six cameras, and Prince was said to be pleased with the adjustments to the production.<sup>216</sup> Some of

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<sup>213</sup> John O’Connor, “TV: Carlisle Floyd’s ‘Willie Stark’ on PBS,” *The New York Times* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>214</sup> Duka, Floyd Archives.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

the camera work was done in reverse shots, that is, filmed from the stage behind the actors, to give it “an added cinematic feel.”<sup>217</sup> Director Brian Large felt that the close-ups helped with another problem he saw in the original production – a lack of intimacy with the characters.<sup>218</sup> The set was done to the same mythical proportions with large steps that remained in every scene (though some critics suggested it might have played better on a set that replicated the small, smoke-filled backrooms of politics).<sup>219</sup> An estimated 20 million viewers had access to viewing the television production, a number that would take 7,000 sold-out performances in Jones Hall to replicate.<sup>220</sup>

Co-Producer Sydney Palmer explained the television process, “The planning for the taping was ‘... devastatingly complex and extremely intense. We had to plan in two weeks what ordinarily is accomplished over a span of about eight months.’”<sup>221</sup> But contrary to other reports and suggestions, Palmer said the composer and director had little to adjust for the filming, citing that they first staged *Willie Stark* with both live and television audiences in mind.<sup>222</sup> According to Palmer, cuts were primarily instrumental interludes initially used in the show for set changes, an unnecessary concept for filming.<sup>223</sup> The scenes of the production were actually filmed out of

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<sup>217</sup> Duka, Floyd Archives.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> R.L. Cowser, Jr., “A National television premiere: Bringing Willie Stark to the People,” *Curtain Call*, Published by Houston Grand Opera (September 1981): 8, Floyd Archives.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.



order (like a movie) to keep the set changes to a minimum as they filmed in only two days.<sup>224</sup> Lighting was difficult to adjust – Willie’s shirt proved “too-white” for television and was changed to off-white.<sup>225</sup> Makeup was also adjusted to look more realistic for the up-close filming, and fortunately, the actors and chorus were able to minimize their performances to television proportions relatively easily, according to Floyd.<sup>226</sup> The ending was also altered to create more of an impact on the television screen. Said director Brian Large:

In the original, Willie is murdered, and then is carried by his bodyguard, Sugar Boy, up that flight of monumental steps. To end with a vast wide angle like that can look meaningless on a TV screen. So we did a dissolve to black and a reverse. Willie is shot, Sugar Boy starts up the stairs with him, everything goes black, (and) then the next thing the viewers see is Sugar Boy, from the front, climbing through darkness over the top of what looks like a mountain.<sup>227</sup>

Regardless if the show required the minimal cuts like Co- Producer Sydney Palmer disclosed, or a much broader amount of adjusting as the director Brian Large divulged, Prince was pleased with the changes made and believed that the libretto could stand alone as a play, without singing:<sup>228</sup>

All of the changes have only strengthened what was there originally. At the risk of sounding defensive, I can only say that ultimately time tests the worth of an artistic creation. Don’t forget that when “West Side Story” came out, critics said it was unsingable. In ten years, people are going to accept this music with no trouble. You’ll see.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Cowser, “A National television premiere . . . ,” 8, Floyd Archives.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Duka, Floyd Archives.

<sup>228</sup> Robert A. McLean, “When Opera meets TV,” *The Boston Globe* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>229</sup> Duka, Floyd Archives.

*Willie Stark* made the cover of the Houston Chronicle’s TV guide, and the accompanying article interviewed Gockley, Prince, and the President of Great Performances, Jac Venza.<sup>230</sup> Venza explained that he had been interested in doing a project with Houston Grand Opera for a while in order to showcase the strong artistic work done by David Gockley.<sup>231</sup> While obtaining rights to broadcast *Porgy and Bess* and *Treemonisha* proved problematic, Floyd’s new work presented the right opportunity.<sup>232</sup> “We consider it one of the most provocative and one of the most important productions in the opera world today,” said Venza, and he noted that the mixed reviews of the initial premiere did not change that opinion.<sup>233</sup> “This way everybody can see and judge it for themselves.” Gockley, who was present with Venza, said about opera, in general, “Opera can’t continue to live unless it is widely appreciated and widely received by audiences now, not 100 years from now. Increasingly, knowledgeable people feel the future of musical theatre is somewhere between the most successful musicals and the successful 20th Century operas.”<sup>234</sup> Also present at the interview with Gockley and Venza, Prince said that he dealt in the abstract and larger than life, but someone someday will do *Willie Stark* realistically, adding that he would like to see that version, as well. The filming for television they created shows a bit of both styles, according to Prince.<sup>235</sup> The famed director of both musicals and operas added:

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<sup>230</sup> Ann Hodges, “‘Willie Stark’ Opera staged for PBS has Houston Brand,” TV Chronilog, September 27 – October 3, 1981, *Houston Chronicle* (September 27, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> O’Connor, “TV,” Floyd Archives.

Opera is at a crossroads. I resent the great distinction between musical theatre, Broadway musical theatre, and opera. If you go back to Puccini, you know that he was writing popular musical theatre for his time. Those works were made with the same priorities as Sondheim, Wheeler or a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical . . . . What we're talking about is, in five years will Broadway be ready for *Willie Stark*? I think so.<sup>236</sup>

#### PRAISE FOR THE PBS VERSION

Praises for the televised production were published nationwide. *The New York Post* selected the broadcast as a top program for the evening.<sup>237</sup> In *The New York Times*, The Year in Review section said it was “truly great musical theatre” and “startlingly contemporary.”<sup>238</sup> *The Seattle Daily Times* called it a coup for PBS to reserve the rights to telecast “Willie Stark,” which was the year’s most publicized opera.<sup>239</sup> Allan Ulrich of the *San Francisco Examiner* reminded the audience that “ever since Monteverdi’s Era 300 years ago,” the perfect ingredients for opera include that which is found in *Willie Stark*: poverty, demagoguery, political chicanery, blackmail, sexual jealousy, suicide, and assassination.<sup>240</sup> Ulrich continued, “The composer works easily and comfortably in the traditional American grain. He is capable of extending a supple

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<sup>236</sup> Anne Hodges, “‘Willie Stark’ triumphs as season opener for ‘Great Performances’ Series,” *Houston Chronicle* (September 29, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>237</sup> Elenore Terzian, “TV viewing/ 24 hours of What’s Worth,” POST PICKS FOR TONIGHT, *New York Post* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>238</sup> Bill Zakariasen, “Classical Music 1981: The Year in Entertainment – Many notes, few delights,” *New York Times*, Floyd Archives.

<sup>239</sup> John Voorhees, “‘Willie Stark’ is more theatre than opera,” *The Seattle Daily Times* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>240</sup> Allan Ulrich, “‘Willie Stark’ – TV opera with a Southern accent,” *San Francisco Examiner* (September 25, 1981), Floyd Archives.

lyric tonal line and restraining his orchestration so that young, healthy operatic voices really have a chance to shine.”<sup>241</sup>

Bill Hayden of *The Palm Beach News* called the show a success: “... a national inferiority complex prevents opera from being returned to populist audiences in this country because of the reluctance to translate the librettos into English .... But, for would-be American opera fans, things are changing, mainly thanks to television.”<sup>242</sup> Hayden cited the televised production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1951 and said that, “While this [*Willie Stark*] would be a powerful, moving work as straight drama, Floyd’s music gives it added theatrical majesty and heightens the tragic overtones.”<sup>243</sup>

*The Houston Chronicle* hailed the television broadcast as a “brilliant and fascinating piece of theatre.”<sup>244</sup> Not able to attend the live performance, reviewer Anne Hodges described the televised version as “a smash, riveting, exciting, and thoroughly polished.”<sup>245</sup> Credit was given to British director Brian Large for restaging the entire show, with a “marvelous blend” of his close-up work in Hal Prince’s large Greek tragedy theme.<sup>246</sup> The entire cast was praised for

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<sup>241</sup> Ulrich, Floyd Archives.

<sup>242</sup> Bill Hayden, “Opera finds A Place on PBS,” *Palm Beach News*, Gannett News Service (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Hodges, Floyd Archives.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

its performance, and the end credits were mentioned which featured the composer and director in interview.<sup>247</sup>

The *New York Daily News* gave glowing accolades in reporting the premiere, “with baritone Timothy Nolan giving an electrifying performance in the title role ... [it is] akin to breaking a champagne bottle over the nose of “Great Performances” as it launches its fall season tonight ...”<sup>248</sup> Nolan was praised for his impressive performance, timbre, musicality, and convincing acting by *The Seattle Daily Times*,<sup>249</sup> as was his portrayal of the contradictory dualism of “Willie” – normal, yet charismatic, “evoking a measure of sympathy for a man who wanted to be all things to all people.”<sup>250</sup> *Newsday* described his portrayal of the title role in the opera as a vivid creation, and even stronger on screen.<sup>251</sup> “What Carl (Floyd) has written is a really great play,” Nolan said in an interview about the show.<sup>252</sup> The singing actor found the character thrilling to play:

I didn’t want to play Willie as if he were a Cobra. I tried to think about the man – a man who did things. Someone who educated himself, made something of himself, who couldn’t break into society because of his background, and couldn’t go back to his roots because he had no relation to them anymore. He’s a man right out of grand opera – an extraordinary man.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Hodges, Floyd Archives.

<sup>248</sup> Patricia O’Haire, “Portrait of a Power Broker,” *Daily News*, New York (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>249</sup> Voorhees, Floyd Archives.

<sup>250</sup> Ulrich, Floyd Archives.

<sup>251</sup> Irving Kolodin, ““Willie Stark’ is enhanced by TV,” *Newsday* (September 27, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>252</sup> O’Haire, Floyd Archives.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

According to reviewer Irving Kolodin, one example of a beautiful moment found in both the stage production and televised show is Willie's line, "Come back, Willie, Come back home, Back to what was good in you."<sup>254</sup> Kolodin gave praises, saying:

Here, in the happy privilege of hearing it a second time around, comes a musical phrase which stood out when first encountered in the printed score, and then in the Washington performance. Now, however, it becomes the blessed event that every composer dreams of, hopes for, and prays to be granted: a phrase blending words and music *together*, in a way so right, real and purposeful that a man with Floyd's technique can make the "Willie Motif."<sup>255</sup>

The praises continued for Floyd's musical drama. Reviewer R.L. Cowser wrote, "WILLIE STARK combines the best techniques of musical theatre and musical drama. It is like a movie, it's so real. People can sing Carlisle's notes and still look natural; it's one of his many gifts, and it all works."<sup>256</sup> *The Boston Globe* wrote, "If he accomplished nothing else with 'Willie Stark,' composer librettist Carlisle Floyd has helped bridge the abyss between the traditional opera form and the American musical."<sup>257</sup> Floyd and Prince are hailed as "achieving an evening of TV theatre so intense and up close that you can feel the heat of the parade torchlights and count the pores on the sweating faces in the crowd."<sup>258</sup>

Sidney Palmer, co-producer of the televised "Great Performances," also worked on the opera production and explained the success of the televised version: "'Willie Stark' marries the two media so effectively that the small-screen version outshines the big stage performance. The

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<sup>254</sup> Kolodin, "'Willie Stark'...", Floyd Archives.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Cowser, "A National television premiere," Floyd Archives.

<sup>257</sup> McLean, Floyd Archives.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

impact of this production is about 100 times on television what it was in the theatre. It's a piece of history. This will play just as realistically 100 years from now as it does today."<sup>259</sup> Palmer continued to praise the television filming as a great work of theatre: "I hate to say it, but I think it's almost better than opera. You can understand the words, and you can understand the characters. They don't distort when they sing. They don't make faces. They don't do all the things you normally associate with opera singers. The closest thing to it would be Broadway."<sup>260</sup>

Perhaps the best compliment to the show came as a final tag to a review not even about *Willie Stark*. *The New York Times* review of the Metropolitan Opera's *Madame Butterfly* described a less-than-stellar performance and finished the scathing report by saying: "I spent the intermission watching the telecast of Carlisle Floyd's "Willie Stark," just to be reminded of what opera as theatre can be."<sup>261</sup>

#### CRITIQUES FOR THE PBS VERSION

Some critics of the stage presentation were pleased to see an adaption for television, suggesting that perhaps the opera house was too large for the dramatic piece, small orchestra, and slightly small "mob" chorus.<sup>262</sup> Many widely commented on the score. One critic discussed the writing as such: "For a while, in the first act of 'Willie Stark,' Floyd gives the impression of

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<sup>259</sup> David Tomlin, "Opera Debut comes off loud, clear on TV," *Dallas Times Herald* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Bill Zakariasen, "Met's 'Butterfly' barely wings it," *New York Times*, (September 29, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>262</sup> Kolodin, "'Willie Stark' . . .," Floyd Archives.

trying one thing, then another. They don't, in my opinion, work. But a moment comes, about half way through the act, when, on a second viewing and hearing, it comes into focus."<sup>263</sup> The *San Francisco Examiner* mostly praised Floyd's work, but still commented on his overall compositional style, saying, "Floyd may be derivative and obvious and even banal on occasion, but he is a shrewd master of the sure-fire theatrical moment, and that's what counts here."<sup>264</sup> Often, critics gave largely favorable reviews while still finding room for improvement in the score. A criticism Floyd had heard frequently, the *Houston Post*'s review mentioned a lack of memorable melodies:

Lyrically, it is outstanding. The dialogue, if spoken and not sung, could probably stand alone as a play. But it is an opera and a modern one at that. It incorporates jazz, folk and popular styles of music. Unlike Broadway, *Willie Stark* contains none of the memorable melodies that inevitably find their way into piano sheet music and popular music recordings. The music can be tiresome for viewers tuning in expecting to find songs they can whistle or hum.<sup>265</sup>

*The Detroit Free Press* pointed out "jagged lyricism and declamatory writing" as earmarks of Floyd's style.<sup>266</sup> Reviewer John Guinn considered *Of Mice and Men* as the better of Floyd's work but praised the cast, and certain sections of the piece, such as a trio of Willie, his mother, and Anne; "Come back, Willie," and Sadie's aria, "A Single Lady Approachin' Middle Age."<sup>267</sup>

*The Dallas Morning News* reported that the television version was great, and accessible

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<sup>263</sup> Kolodin, Floyd Archives.

<sup>264</sup> Ulrich, Floyd Archives.

<sup>265</sup> Vicki Macias, "Preview 'Willie Stark,'" *Houston Post* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>266</sup> John Guinn, "'Willie Stark' Premieres, 'All The Kings Men' make an opera," *Detroit Free Press* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*



even to the masses, without “treating them like the symbol of the Democratic Party.”<sup>268</sup>

Reviewer Ed Bark continued, “The words are in English, the singing is powerful, the sets are appropriately stark, and the story is classically American .... ‘Stark’ is intended to appeal to low-brow, middle-brow and high-brow tastes.”<sup>269</sup> Nolan was mentioned as more attractive than the “typical Willie Stark” look, but his performance was still praised.<sup>270</sup> Occasionally, Bark found the dialogue difficult to decipher, saying, “Even if you pay rapt attention, you’re likely to miss the words behind some of Ms. Conwell’s (playing “Anne Stanton”) high-pitched agonizings.”<sup>271</sup> Critic John Voorhees of the *Seattle Daily Times*, was primarily complimentary of the piece, but agreed with the criticism of Floyd’s music:

Actually, the weakest part of “Willie Stark” is Floyd’s score which never matches in strength or emotion either the story or the staging. It’s a pallid score at best and this story cries out for a Puccini, a Weill – or even Rodgers and Hammerstein. They, at least, would have given us four or five songs that would have been memorable. There are a couple of beautiful arias in Floyd’s score but nothing that really made me want to hear it sung again the minute it was finished .... Whatever the weaknesses of “Willie Stark;” however, it is a major contribution to American arts this year, and PBS is to be congratulated for making it available for all of us to sample so soon after its premiere.<sup>272</sup>

## OVERALL CRITICAL OPINION

Floyd received immeasurable criticism throughout the many stages of *Willie Stark*, but overall, the public seemed to recognize his large contribution to art with his musical dramatic

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<sup>268</sup> Ed Bark, “A Novice opera buff sings out for ‘Stark,’” *Dallas Morning News* (September 28, 1981), Floyd Archives.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Voorhees, Floyd Archives.

work. By the final televised production, *Willie Stark* had sustained countless revisions and cuts throughout multiple performances. Prince and Floyd collaborated to present the best version possible at the world premiere in Houston, but were given the opportunity to refine the show for the Kennedy Center. The Houston performances were strong, but flaws that were obvious at the world premiere performance were adjusted for the next opening in Washington, D.C.

Unfortunately, the majority of the East Coast Broadway and opera communities attended the first opening and based their primary opinions of *Willie Stark* on the first performance. When it premiered in Washington, D.C., Floyd and Prince tightened the show, and the Houston premiere was, in some manners, a preview, as Prince had once said in an interview.<sup>273</sup> Audiences received the Kennedy Center premiere well, and several critics at that point recognized that Floyd's musical drama was a unique score combined with a well-written libretto. Understated at times, the musical textures were sparse, which allowed the singing actors to enunciate the text and dramatic intent with authority. The creation was a hybrid where music and drama intertwined. Prince was proud of the work, as was Floyd and all those involved.

When the most dramatic edits needed to be made for the television version, the essence of *Willie Stark* had already been cultivated by years of fine-tuning. Television critics resoundingly recognized the power of Floyd's musical drama, and those that had criticisms of the PBS version aimed mostly at Floyd's compositional style. Melody, such as those found in Floyd's earlier works and in other well-known musical theatre composers' works, was not as abundant in *Willie Stark*, and some found it to be less likeable. But other critics recognized that Floyd had written the score in a way that heightened the drama of the story being told, much like a movie-score is written, with music that punctuates and enriches the libretto.

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<sup>273</sup> Duka, Floyd Archives.

## CHAPTER 5. REVIVAL PRODUCTIONS

An encore of the Great Performances production was given on PBS in Houston on September 3, 1984, welcomed by the *Houston Chronicle*.<sup>274</sup> According to the paper, it was a hit in its premiere, citing the musical-drama received only accolades in the television form, was staged imaginatively, performed magnificently, and was a theatrical “whizbang . . . works like gangbusters . . . a stunner.”<sup>275</sup>

In the first staging since the Houston, Kennedy Center, and television premieres, Floyd directed a production of *Willie Stark* in 1985 for Charlotte Opera.<sup>276</sup> Advertised again with extraordinary measures, the town was filled with billboards, bumper stickers, balloons, lapel pins, yard signs and outdoor banners like a political campaign. Noon rallies were also planned to showcase the title character. A few adjustments were made to the show, and Floyd called this production his final version for publication.<sup>277</sup> Sets were designed by Carey Wong and built by the Charlotte Opera Scene Shop, and were sent to Shreveport Opera for another performance, and at least two other companies that year were considering renting the show.<sup>278</sup> Timothy Nolan appeared as the title role again, as well as David Vosburgh, as Tiny Duffy (also from the original cast). Charlotte opera favorite, Jerold Norman sang Jack Burden and Metropolitan Opera Star

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<sup>274</sup> Anne Hodges, “HGO’s ‘Willie Stark’ returns,” *Houston Chronicle* (September 3, 1984), Floyd Archives.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> La Fleur Paysour, “Composer To Direct ‘Willie Stark’ For Charlotte Opera,” *The Charlotte Observer* (September 17, 1985), Floyd Archives.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

Rosalind Elias sang Sadie Burke.<sup>279</sup> Other principals included Jeffrey Stamm, Joan Gibbons, Herb Eckoff, and the conductor was Hal France.<sup>280</sup> By that time, Floyd had directed at least 50 productions of his opera *Susannah*, and 12 runs of *Of Mice and Men*.<sup>281</sup> As a policy, Floyd never directed a production on the first premiere for fear of missing opportunities in the work.<sup>282</sup> In Charlotte, his direction to the chorus was to be a group of individuals with vitality and spirit, and he shared his feelings saying that writing *Willie* was the longest he ever worked on a character, yet he never lost interest in him.<sup>283</sup> Floyd reinstated only one cut taken during the PBS version, but changed the sets to a “stylized realism . . . the idea I had in mind from the beginning.”<sup>284</sup> Though Floyd said he used some of Prince’s ideas, but with new set designs, he admitted to approaching the work in a different way.<sup>285</sup> Floyd’s main intention with this production in Charlotte was to create a show that other small companies throughout the country might be willing to do – that means, creating a flexible set that can fit a variety of stage sizes.<sup>286</sup> In an

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<sup>279</sup> Paysour, Floyd Archives.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> La Fleur Paysour, “‘Willie Stark’ Characters Bigger than Life,” (1985), Floyd Archives.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Beth and Hal Farwell, “*Willie Stark* Opens Opera Season in Charlotte,” *The Arts Journal* (September 1985), Floyd Archives.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

interview, Floyd expressed that he greatly appreciated the opportunity to give his show the workshop treatment, a luxury that only Broadway composers have had in the past.<sup>287</sup>

Floyd also directed *Willie Stark* when the show set shipped to Shreveport Opera in 1985, where Louis Otey sang the role of “Willie” and received accolades.<sup>288</sup> Though the audience attendance was low, the reviews were strong; with colorful and elegantly simple sets, the cast gave a strong performance.<sup>289</sup> Newsreel projections were incorporated in this production, complete with authentic pictures of Huey Long that surprised the audience and struck a strong chord of relevance with the Louisiana hometown.<sup>290</sup> Shreveport Opera, like many regional companies in the United States, was not known for staging contemporary operas, as one reviewer said, “The Shreveport Opera took a giant step forward . . . this from a company that has viewed opera as ending with Puccini.”<sup>291</sup> The *Shreveport Journal* reported,

Floyd’s more realistic, intimate staging served the work better than Harold Prince’s Houston Grand Opera production four years ago. Prince, through his open, abstract sets and staging, presented Willie as a fascistic, larger-than-life dictator, when the libretto and score tell us that Willie draws his power from his close relationship with his people – the poor, the minorities, the average working man. He is not above the people. He is a part of them and reflects their deepest hopes. At the end of the rally in his hometown, the chorus very tellingly sings, “Let us exalt ourselves.”

Only when the opera becomes dream-like, surreal, did one miss Prince’s staging. But those moments were relatively few.

Both Prince and the composer faced an enormous challenge in staging the work, . . . Floyd has combined naturalistic American drama with opera. He places major importance on recitative (sung dialogue) and spoken dialogue. Both propel the drama

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<sup>287</sup> Farwell, Floyd Archives.

<sup>288</sup> John Andrew Prime, “Opera season opens with Louisiana flair,” *The Shreveport Times* (October 27, 1985), Floyd Archives.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> David Connelly, “Contemporary opera enthusiastically received,” *Shreveport Journal* (October 28, 1985), Floyd Archives.

forward and reflect the way people actually talk...Even in the arias, the orchestra never becomes mere accompaniment, and herein rests one of the work's weaknesses. The orchestral writing is sometimes so heavy and expressive that only a superhuman singer could break through it. Granted, when the singer does, the moment is very powerful.<sup>292</sup>

Other compliments to the piece included the haunting reverie of "Come back, Willie," and "the way the music softens in Jack's initial angry exchange with his father tells us books about their relationship and their feelings for each other."<sup>293</sup> Otey's performance was praised as "believable, ... gritty, ... imposing, and complete."<sup>294</sup> But the veteran to the show, Rosalind Elias as Sadie Burke "was a big disappointment. She didn't have the vocal power or the dramatic power to do justice to the character. Her aria, 'Shake 'em Up,' did exactly the opposite."<sup>295</sup> Scathing reviews for a chorus that was too small and set changes that did not flow smoothly were still accompanied by an overall summation that, "'Willie Stark' was the most moving and accomplished season opener the Shreveport Opera has presented in years."<sup>296</sup>

Other than these productions, *Willie Stark* fell into obscurity for roughly twenty years, until Louisiana State University Opera in Baton Rouge resurrected it March 23 and 25, 2007. The production was also filmed under Newport Classics with Dennis Jesse, Baritone and LSU faculty member who portrayed "Willie;" John Keene, Conductor; Lawrence Kramen, Director/Producer; Dugg McDonough, Director; Dawn Huertas Arevalo, Production Manager; Robert Grayson, Executive Producer; and Joseph Jaime, Editor. The successful production featured students of the

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<sup>292</sup> Connelly, Floyd Archives.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

university in all other roles and chorus. The DVD also featured short interviews with composer Carlisle Floyd and an excerpt from the LSU Symposium entitled, “360° of Willie Stark”<sup>297</sup> presented in honor of the Collegiate Premiere of the opera.

The symposium was held March 22, 2007, at the School of Music Recital Hall and made possible in part by an Interdisciplinary Faculty Research Grant “The Willie Stark Project.”<sup>298</sup> Centered on the title character, the commentary focused on the compositional, musical, dramatic, literary, historical, and political aspects of the work. Following an introduction by Professor Robert Grayson, Kirkpatrick Professor and Chair of the Voice and Opera Division, composer Carlisle Floyd gave the first remarks, and the remainder of the panel included David H. Culbert – John L. Loos Professor of History; Andreas Giger – Associate Professor of Musicology; John Keene – Assistant Professor of Opera; David Madden – Professor of English; Dugg McDonough – Fruehan Associate Professor of Opera; and T. Wayne Parent – Russel B. Long Professor, Chair of Political Science.

LSU Professor Andreas Giger also wrote the program notes for LSU’s production, saying:

*Willie Stark* can be seen as an intensification of *verismo*, ... because the opera is based on a novel inspired by the political career of a real person (Louisiana Governor Huey Long) and thus more directly connected to real events than *verismo* operas. But other stylistic aspects can also be seen as rooted realism, some of them bearing great relevance to the opera’s dramatic structure.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Complete transcript available in Appendix E. of this monograph.

<sup>298</sup> *A Symposium: 360° of Willie Stark*, recorded March 22, 2007, Louisiana State University, 2 CDs.

<sup>299</sup> Andreas Giger, “The Realism of Willie Stark,” Louisiana State University Opera Program Notes for *Willie Stark* (March 2007).

Giger identified the radio announcer used in Act I and II, and the film clip found in Act II, scene iii as efforts “to bring the outside world into the theatre” and “reinforce the sense of reality.”<sup>300</sup> Floyd’s vocal style following the natural contour of speech and the sometimes vague notation of pitch (Floyd sometimes uses an “x” in the place of a note head) also make the singing and acting more realistic.<sup>301</sup> The reprise section of “Come back, Willie,” is described in detail:

As he dies, Willie intones his “Come back, Willie, come back home” but cannot complete more than the first phrase; the chorus picks up the tune, for the first time in hymn-like harmonization. But while Willie is now truly “home,” the contrast between the comforting lullaby he first sang at a rally in Act I and the view of his dead body on the other is heart-wrenching.<sup>302</sup>

Larry Kramen, director of the DVD filming, called it “a sophisticated program, not just amateur night in Dixie.”<sup>303</sup> Floyd also offered his comments on the back cover of the DVD case:

After two and half decades, I was delighted when the excellent LSU Opera gave my opera, *Willie Stark*, a stirring and convincing revival, both musically and theatrically. I am further delighted that their production has now been skillfully and imaginatively documented in a DVD format which captures the immediacy of the live performance and is available to the opera public at large. Personally I am indebted to its excellent, dramatically engaged young singing actors, its superb, highly disciplined chorus, and the enviable level of the orchestral players. It hardly needs saying that an operatic performance of this quality in a university setting reflects the talents and experience of both a stage director and conductor who bring considerable professional experience to their tasks.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Giger, Louisiana State University Opera Program Notes for *Willie Stark*.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Channing Gray, “Now you can attend last year’s festival on DVD,” *Providence Journal*, FEATURES; Arts/Travel (July 6, 2008), Floyd Archives.

<sup>304</sup> Carlisle Floyd, et al., *Carlisle Floyd’s Willie Stark*, cover material, video recording, Newport, RI: Newport Classic (2008), *Louisiana State University*.



## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

*Willie Stark* has not found a place in the standard operatic repertoire for several possible reasons. The specific dialect and difficult vocal demands of the singers could make casting difficult. The sweeping melodies of Floyd's classics *Of Mice and Men* and *Susannah* are not as predominant in the music of *Willie Stark*, so companies might be reluctant to mount a production that does not contain a "hit" tune. Most importantly, the musical score is not readily available to most musicians for perusal. Floyd's publishers, Belwin-Mills and later Boosey & Hawkes, decided to print new scores only for contracted companies or individuals.<sup>305</sup> In deciding to cut costs through this measure, the publisher has virtually prevented any music library or individual from owning a score of *Willie Stark* unless contracted for a production.<sup>306</sup> This has, in effect, rendered Floyd's *Willie Stark* inaccessible for most singers, teachers, and conductors to study and perform any extended scenes or acts of the musical drama. Three arias from *Willie Stark* are published in *The American Arias* published by Boosey & Hawkes: two of Willie's arias in the Baritone/Bass edition, and Anne's aria in the Soprano edition.<sup>307</sup> The reason *Willie Stark* has not entered the primary repertoire of American opera might solely rest upon this fact.

Beginning with a commission in 1972, Floyd's journey of creating his musical drama took many turns until the premiere in 1981. Slow to find his source material, he eventually settled upon and captured the rights to *All The King's Men*, receiving author Robert Penn Warren's

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<sup>305</sup> Holliday, 284.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid. Regretably, Floyd's opera scores written after 1971 are unavailable unless contracted for performance, including *Bilby's Doll* (1975), *Willie Stark* (1982), *Cold Sassy Tree* (2000), and *Prince of Players* (2016).

<sup>307</sup> Philip Brunelle, ed, *The American Arias: A Collection of Essential Contemporary Works, Baritone/Bass and Soprano*, Boosey & Hawkes, 2004.

blessing for his libretto adaptation in 1977. After a small preview performance at the University of Houston in 1979, a substantial workshop performance funded by the National Opera Institute in May 1980 solicited comments from the audience in hopes of improving the work. Primarily, the comments were positive and offered suggestions to help Floyd succeed in the upcoming world premiere. Some had possibly not read *All The King's Men* prior to the performance but could still connect with the story and characters from a regional and human perspective. Others already admired the original novel and offered specific ideas to more closely match their previous impressions of the characters. The suggestions Floyd received to shorten the work and adjust the complex musical texture in order to accommodate the singers greatly affected his preparation for the world premiere production with director Harold Prince.

Floyd and Gockley then sought Hal Prince's Broadway savvy and experience to make the opera more appealing to a broader audience beyond the typical opera fan base. His later use of television and film to share his works also did just that; reaching not only opera lovers, but any person who wanted to see his musical drama. Why did *Willie Stark* not join the common repertoire of musical theatre? Other predecessors, like Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1952) blurred the lines of classical technique and American musical theatre standards with great acclaim and are still performed today. The answer might be that while Prince's Broadway credentials clearly aided in publicity to the Broadway circles, and the television broadcast brought his musical drama to multitudes, Floyd's score was far more intricate than the typical scores of traditional musical theatre. *Willie Stark* utilizes both spoken and sung dialogue like a musical, but is rooted in operatic virtuosity due to Floyd's classical compositional style. The vocal lines of *Willie Stark* requires a classical technique of its artists to endure the demands put

upon its singers. Overall, some audiences may not have appreciated the musical language that Floyd had to offer.

The question also arises, did the unique influences on the piece, such as the workshop process, a Broadway director, or the “Great Performances” filming hurt the chances for *Willie Stark*’s success in the operatic circles? A definitive answer cannot be given. By being televised in one of the first “Great Performances” of the Public Broadcasting Service, *Willie Stark* had the opportunity to be viewed by millions of television viewers in addition to those who saw the live performance. This was always a goal of Floyd’s. Perhaps *Willie Stark* did not join the common operatic repertoire because it was a hybrid of music and drama and was forging a new path in the classical genre.

Floyd classifies many of his operatic works, including *Willie Stark*, as musical dramas, not as operas. His music has an American realism that incorporates folk-inspired dialect and material, sometimes similar to musical theatre. However, unlike musical theatre, the incorporation of melody is not always paramount in *Willie Stark*, compared to the dramatic delivery of the libretto. As Professor Giger explained in *A Symposium: 360° of Willie Stark*, an intensification of *verismo* is taking place in Floyd’s work.<sup>308</sup> Perhaps a new form of opera for the repertoire, an intensified *verismo* with an American voice, could be emerging in Floyd’s style.

Another component in *Willie Stark* is the dramatic use of multimedia through the character of the radio announcer. Today, several new operas have used multimedia projections

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<sup>308</sup> *A Symposium: 360° of Willie Stark*, recorded March 22, 2007, Louisiana State University, 2 CDs. See transcript in Appendix E.

and sound elements in addition to the traditional operatic conventions.<sup>309</sup> Floyd did it first, 35 years ago. His work may have paved the way for today's musical works, encouraging innovations in the genre.

A new generation of Floyd admirers may not be aware that this great musical drama exists, since it has been more than thirty years since PBS originally aired the work. *Willie Stark* deserves the attention of today's generation of American opera lovers, as it is a strong, dramatic work that helped pave the way for future American opera composers expressing America's unique operatic voice.

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<sup>309</sup> Jake Heggie's opera *Dead Man Walking* (2000) uses "piped-in" modern country and easy-listening music, similar to Floyd's multimedia use in *Willie Stark* with the role of the radio announcer and newsreels.

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APPENDIX A. EXCERPTS FROM ROBERT PENN WARREN LETTERS  
TO CARLISLE FLOYD

August 27, 1973 – “... All I want to say is that I am sorry the thing blew up. But if the Broadway thing blows up – as may well be the case – and if you want to pick up the project again, fine!

Cordially yours, Robert Penn Warren”<sup>310</sup>

August 25, 1974 – “Dear Mr. Floyd: Your letter, which came yesterday, is very gratifying to me. If you and Roger and Mr. Rudel really want to do this, the thing does sound even more attractive to me than before ... Very sincerely yours, Robert Penn Warren”<sup>311</sup>

November 1, 1977 –

Dear Mr. Floyd,

What great news! Not only about the libretto, and associated matters, but that you can pay us a visit. I’d like nothing better than to see you here, and I’m sure that we could talk better at our house than in some hotel lobby or the Century or something like that ... [B]y the way, though I am an ignoramus about music, music is bread and meat to my wife, and she will be looking forward (as I for not such elegant reasons) to your visit .... I’ll say it again that we look forward with the keenest pleasure to seeing you, and to hours of conversation. Please give us what time you can.

Warmest regards,

Robert Warren<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Floyd Archives.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.



February 29, 1980 –

Dear Mr. Floyd,

There is nothing to forgive. I had laid the matter in your hands, and on the knees of God, and turned my back on it till the time came for you to tell me something. Well, the ‘something’ sounds very splendid! You must have been in fury of activity all these months, and I pray that you will not live to think of the time wasted.

As for the opening on April 24<sup>th</sup> – that is my birthday, my seventy-sixth actually in 1981, and I am certainly going to be there, with Eleanor, to inspect the birthday present. I have every reason to expect one of great worth – unless I am painfully misinformed about the giver of the gift. So, many thanks ahead of time .... Don’t worry about trying to keep me up to date on things. I know your hands are full. Please give my warm regards to Roger. All the best!

Yours,

Rob<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Floyd Archives.

## APPENDIX B. THE CHARACTERS OF *WILLIE STARK*

Published with the premiere is the following description of the cast, in order of appearance:

WILLIE STARK (baritone), populist governor of a Southern state who faces the threat of impeachment by powerful members of the state legislature and who faces the personal dilemma of forfeiting ideals to gain political leverage

JACK BURDEN (tenor), Willie's aide and protégé who is also the son of Willie's foremost political adversary, Judge Burden

"TINY" DUFFY (tenor), lieutenant governor and Willie's self-serving henchman who switched from big city politics for mercenary reasons

SUGAR BOY (tenor), Willie's faithful bodyguard

SADIE BURKE (mezzo-soprano), Willie's long-time assistant and political mentor

JUDGE BURDEN (bass), Jack's father, an imposing and powerful Southern aristocrat who, disdaining Willie's manipulation of constitutional law, comes out in favor of Willie Stark's impeachment

GEORGE WILLIAM (mute), the judge's butler

ANNE STANTON (soprano), a lovely, sleek young socialite who is both Jack Burden's fiancée and Willie Stark's covert lover

LUCY STARK (mute), Willie's daughter who was crippled in the structural collapse of an old schoolhouse early in Willie's political career

MRS. STARK (mezzo-soprano), Willie's mother who sees only her son's native goodness and nothing of his corruption

HUGH/JEFF (baritone/tenor), two legislators initially in favor of Willie's impeachment

BANJO PLAYER/HARMONICA PLAYER, street musicians from Willie's hometown who capture the ambiance of Willie's childhood during a political rally

BOY w/HARMONICA, a hometown child who sparks old memories for Willie

CHORUS/SUPERS, people, football players, reporters, news photographers, highway patrolmen, mounted police, medical aides, stretcher-bearers<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> "Opera Facts," Floyd Archives.

APPENDIX C. PROGRAM FROM SECOND WORKSHOP PERFORMANCE

The 1979-80 MUSIC THEATRE WORKSHOP

Presentation  
of  
A Work in Progress

WILLIE STARK  
A Musical Drama in Three Acts  
Music and Libretto  
by  
Carlisle Floyd  
Based on the book All The King's Men  
by Robert Penn Warren

The Workshop is produced by  
Houston Grand Opera's Texas Opera Theatre  
in Association with the National Opera Institute

WILLIE STARK is a Commission of the Kennedy Center Foundation  
Roger Stevens, Chairman of the Board

WILLIE STARK ARTISTIC STAFF

Conductor: JOHN DeMAIN  
Pianist: MICHAEL PISANI  
Production by RICHARD HUDSON  
Lighting designed by GEORGE DARDEN  
and MICHAEL PISANI  
Chorus prepared by JOHN DeMAIN

CAST

(In order of appearance)

Willie Stark  
Jack Burden  
“Tiny” Duffy, Lieutenant-Governor  
Sugar Boy, Willie’s Bodyguard  
Sadie, Willie’s Assistant  
Jarvis A. Dawes  
Lucy Stark  
Mrs. Stark  
Anne Stanton  
Miss Edwina Littlepaugh

LOUIS OTEY  
DAVID ARLEN BANKSTON  
CARROLL FREEMAN  
WARREN ELLSWORTH  
PATRICIA SCHUMAN  
GRAYDON VAUGHT  
SONYA RENEBERG  
DIANE KESLING  
CHRISTINE DONAHUE  
CAROLYN FINLEY

Newsmen

Robert McCullough  
Van B. Russell, III  
Robert Smouse

Office Boys

Mark Franko  
Chris Trakas

CHORUS

Stephanie Bettini, Gwendolyn Dorsey, Dorothy Farrar, Shelly Fitze, Mark Franko, Bettye Gardner, Allen Gordon, Robert McCullough, Van B. Russell, III, Doreen Shaw, Robert Smouse, Margaret Stenborg, Jayne Sylvester, Chris Trakas, Graydon Vaught, Jesse Woods.

\*The Principals of this cast are composed predominantly of members of the Houston Opera Studio.

## SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Setting: A State Capital in the Deep South  
Time: 1935

Act I Scene iii Rally in Willie's Home Town  
Act II Scene i Governor's Offices  
Scene ii The Stark Home  
Scene iii Apartment of Miss Littlepaugh  
Scene iv Jack Burden's Apartment  
Scene v Governor's Offices

Approximate Running Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

There will be no intermission.

## STAFF FOR THE MUSIC THEATRE WORKSHOP COMPANY IN HOUSTON

David Gockley	Consultant
Carlisle Floyd	Consultant
John DeMain	Project Director
Jane Weaver	Managing Director
Anne Tomfohrde	Production Manager
Michael Bothne	Technical Director
Thomas R. Bruce	Production Stage Manager
Patricia L. Sanborn	Costume Coordinator
Casey L. Anderson	Props Coordinator

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sydney Berger, Peter Breaz, Michael Cusack, Drew Hoover<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Program from Floyd Archives.

APPENDIX D. COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE  
AT WORKSHOP PERFORMANCE

The following are comments from the audience after the May 25, 1980, performance that took place at the University of Houston. Some punctuation and spelling corrections have been added to aid legibility. Some 78 sheets were found in the South Caroliniana Library Floyd Archives. The form reads:

Please provide your candid responses to the work you have just seen performed. As the Music Theatre Workshop is a process through which new works are revised, adapted, and given a tryout prior to full, public production, we would appreciate your comments on the opera. Bear in mind that a workshop performance does not emphasize expensive production elements (scenery, lighting, costumes).<sup>316</sup>

Comment sheet #1 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“First Act is dramatically solid. Exposition ingenious, economic in terms of time. ‘Homesick’ nicely lyric, with the exception of Jack Burden, characters are quickly established. Act II just keeps generating more power, more conflict. Scene ii has beautifully contrasting textures, some great music, more tremendous theatre. The strength hangs through the end. Really superlative.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Rally well staged but ‘Stand with me’ needs more evangelical fervor. Stark got elected by pumping up poor people’s passions; this aria needs the emotion – loud, stirring emotion – to justify the beautiful visual that ends Act 1. Think the dramatic impact of Scene ii could be even greater if there [was] more lyric trio singing. It’s the warmest scene in the play with three people who at least like each other plus the emotion catalyst in the child. It would be nice to hear more gentle singing to both supply a human side to Willie and to heighten the dramatic contrast with the impassioned singing marking most of Act 2 since time could be a problem, perhaps one of the duets could be shortened or deleted when Willie wins and greets his people on the steps. He should be cocky redneck, celebrating with his people, instead he seems contemplating. You have to see the coarse side of him to establish acceptable reason for Jack not only to kill him but for Willie to die. Finally – chorus scene at finale beautiful. What a shame to button everything up with the announcer.”

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<sup>316</sup> Floyd Archives.

Comment sheet #2 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“The orchestra parts sound as though they will be beautiful. Most characters good development (see below). The emotional movement is very strong, especially in the second and third acts. Anne’s scene, Act II is beautiful and the most moving. Acts II and III on the whole move much better than Act I – much more emotional and directed. Lyric sections are a relief. Last chorus is beautiful.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“The newsreel bits seemed both irrelevant and superfluous. They are not necessary to the story. They emphasize the political aspects of it, true, but then there seems to be too much going on – too many subplots. Some parts too long – involved, particularly Act I, also Act III last scene. It seems as though the whole work could be shorter, more concise. Some of the arias are too involved, and the orchestral texture seems to work against the singers – more in Act I than elsewhere. Too complicated in places to follow. Sadie’s character seems too much, almost caricature – her whole relationship with Willie is never quite clear. Should she be a softer person?”

Comment sheet #3 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Come back, Willie is very effective in both settings. Preceding aria is hard to follow – maybe too long. Perhaps work should end on that note, too.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Suicide scene – no sympathy, guns should be visible, tension should heighten as he talks, one never feels that Jack loves the Judge. It is essential to establish this in order for the confrontation to be effective, yes, Willie finally comes between them. Guns should be visible.”

Comment sheet #4 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Compelling music and drama, well written characterizations”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Did not like opening crowd scene music = not lyrical enough – too shrill.”

Comment sheet #5 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Marvelous matching of mood and music.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“First Act seems to be really four scenes and could be slimmed down some.”

Comment sheet #6 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Harmonies for Act 2 Scene 2 emotional.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Demagoguery insufficiently displayed in Act 1, Scene iii.”

Comment sheet #7–

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Powerful, energetic, thought provoking.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“I find that all of my criticisms are of the staging. Good luck, I think it is a winner.”

Comment sheet #8 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Superb.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“No Xerox in 1935 (re: copy of letter which led to Judge’s suicide).”



Comment sheet #9 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Scene ii, Act II good melody. Scene iii, Act I good drama and melody.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Flashback from opening was too much (illegible), not enough melody in Scene 1 and 2 of Act I.”

Comment sheet #10 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Interesting Story.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Relentlessly bleak. Dull lifeless music. Title Role insubstantial.

Comment sheet #11 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Some lovely monologues. Act II best continuity.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“In some spots dramatic substance/content didn’t seem to support such dramatic music – could be percussive nature of two pianos. Too long – especially beginning narration and ‘comments’ after his death – first her epilogue, then chorus, then announcer.”

Comment sheet #12 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act I – Scene iii – would it be well to [illegible] more singing of chorus reflecting Stark’s ‘home’ aria – and less of his long diatribe as a solo? Will finished production show Stark as a stranger campaigner?”

Comment sheet #13 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Dissonance and range in tones communicates tension exceptionally well. Especially the contrast to resolution.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“My reservations lay in the extensive dissonance. The lack of melodic phrases made me uncomfortable at times. I realize that the story is loud with tension. However, times of resolution were not sufficient to offset the frictions.”

Comment sheet #14 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Enjoyed the rally in the first act. Enjoyed the scene in Mrs. Stark’s home. Anne’s aria was lovely but too long, please prune. Very dramatic, has me by the throat constantly. I really love it. Closing is wonderful.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“I’m a little exhausted by the unrelieved passion. I’d like to see more musical tenderness of romantic kind or another between Anne and Jack in Act I and between Jack and the Judge. Nor is Willie Stark’s character very clear in Act I: his one major song in Act I, at the rally. Perhaps more exhilaration when he hears that Anne is free to marry him. Include a repetition of Anne’s earlier marriage deals, if possible. Trim radio announcer ... very good! But trim act announcements.”

Comment sheet #15 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“The suspenseful thread of interest is relentless and gripping. Musically the time sequences, flash backs are harmonically suggested by dissonant juxtapositioning of tonal centers. The rhythms very convincingly portray the characters – the slick aspects of Willie Stark’s persuasive prowess, Sadie’s bitter frustrations and threatening undertones, contrasts of mood, action, characters themselves, humor, and above all the tragic implications and suggestions of the recalled details good and evil. The genuine emotional verity of each situation .... Nothing is over used. A great script movingly realized in music.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Early in Willie’s rally aria the diction and sense were hard to get but this contributed to the lucid climax later. The Judge’s son was underplayed perhaps purposely but as weak as in true life. The postlude wrapped it up fabulously.”

Comment sheet #16 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Powerful, dramatically; the use of ‘folk-like’ melodies (nicely spaced!) adds depth and homogeneity to the work. Good use of musical and dramatic ‘leitmotiv.’ America has just received a new artistic music drama of staying power. Thank you, Carlisle!”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act I: too long, Act II: none, Act III: last scene: cut the radio announcer, superfluous, overall: the dramatic plot almost too complex, but it does work.”

Comment sheet #17 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“A very powerful work that will continue in the tradition of the prestigious works like *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men*.”

QUESTIONS:

“1) Why not shorten some of the expository arias of Act I to reduce the length of Act I to no more than 60 min? (There’s excess fat in there!)”

Comment sheet #18 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“I’m a newcomer to opera and am able to give only a general comment. I enjoyed it immensely but feel the first act was too drawn out. The second act was super, and my favorite.”

Comment sheet #19 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Like ‘Little Bitty drug store,’ like most of the opera musically – has a lot of variety – but just like *Bilby’s Doll* – you never hear the beautiful music long enough.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“1) Why do the people like Willie? Why does Jack work for him? Jack’s first words indicate that he doesn’t like him – so you never understand why a rebel, Ph.D. type would stick with him. Just why was Willie ever elected? 2) So much of the opera is on a high, high pitch – not very many ups and downs – all too up! 3) Judge’s scene begins so high pitch – get no relief from the scene before. 4) You never understood Jack and Anne’s relationship – he never cares about her – so you’re not that sad that she left him. 5) The biggest problem is you don’t know who to like! Jack is the one who is standing up (or supposed to be) for truth, goodness, and honor – but somehow the opera has made Willie the star and hero. I don’t care about Willie – I cared about Jack and the torment he went through but I was never told enough about him.”

Comment sheet #20 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“1) Cut the ‘pock-mark aria’ of Sadie’s – you already know who she is by that time and that aria doesn’t move any action and only prolongs things. 2) In rally – get to ‘Come back Willie’ faster – that’s the main point of the scene but its framed by too much other stuff. 3) The music for Willie to convince Anne to marry him is disturbing, high pitched and angry sounding – I hate it. I read the book in high school – and can’t remember a thing – now I’ll go back and find out what’s in the book.”

QUESTIONS:

“1) Why is Willie up for impeachment? 2) Why does Jack stand up for Willie when Willie [illegible] to get dirt on the Judge? 3) Who is the protagonist? 4) Why does Anne love Willie?”

Comment sheet #21 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Fabulous drama! Loved angularity of music contrasted to add building to lyrical arias. Most music extremely effective – it sent chills up my spine and Anne’s music brought tears to my eyes. Superb cast!!!”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Moments before Judge’s suicide seemed weak. Not enough reason given for why people loved Willie so, thus his death didn’t seem quite so tragic as it could have been. Sadie’s telling Jack of Anne and Willie, then seeming surprised at his reaction didn’t ring true. I didn’t understand if she really didn’t want to hurt him, if she was out to make trouble or what .... I kept missing facts in trying to listen to radio announcer. Could visuals help somehow since we’re so visually oriented?”

Comment sheet #22 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Diane Kesling and Louie Otey are superb. The opening scene is incredibly moving and strong. This excitement, coupled with the nostalgia the era generates, is what the work is held together by. I am quite impressed with the quality of both the work and this production of it. The writing for the chorus is extremely effective. I like the use of the radio to tell the story, too. Scene changes are unobtrusive.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Too long. Maybe you could cut the bit with the child and Willie’s mom’s aria – they are nice but not integral to the story. Scene ii of Act I seems too long too – could Willie come a bit sooner? The character of Jack is not too clearly drawn. Also, it’s a big surprise when Anne goes to the Stark home and marriage is discussed – no preparation. Radio announcer at end doesn’t work – more effective to end with blackout.”

Comment sheet #23 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Arias depict character of individuals as well as move the story along. Fantastically exciting and thrilling scenes for Anne in Act II, Scene II and for Sadie in Act II, Scene III. BRAVO!! Continuity holds my interest.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Two musical segments in Act I, Scene II are not sufficiently developed to establish character’s motivation or their significance in the story. ‘Please don’t let this man come between us,’ sung by the father should have more [illegible] to show both the father’s hurt and his disappointment with his son. Anne’s aria segment about marriage should be fleshed out to make her duplicity as Stark’s new girlfriend more startling. Note the

absences of duets, in Act I, especially since they begin to appear in Act II. Willie's last act aria needs a little more fervor. It needs to be more triumphant."

Comment sheet #24 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

"1. Opening speech of radio announcer is too long. 'Half-staff' should be used for flags on land. 'Half mast' is only for ships' flagpoles. 2. Rally scene is reminiscent of first revival meeting in *Susannah*, yet without the building interest of the earlier work. 3. Anne's long Act II scene – [would] be more touching (if that's possible!) if a reprise of her Act I marriage ideals came after the 'you've overplayed you hand' section and before the 'end it tonight.'"

QUESTIONS:

"Will there be another opportunity to see 'Willie Stark' before next April? I hope so!"

Comment sheet #25 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

"If the rally is drawn from Willie in Mason City, or in any event, there should be interaction of a personal nature – The crowd should identify with Willie personally – Why do they like him? We should hear of Willie's part from a character – I think – to create more sympathy for him as a character. It would also help the 'Come home' aria to really feel that he knows the people."

QUESTIONS:

"Why couldn't the second act start with the rally part, the scene at [illegible] in Act I, so Willie becomes more sympathetic?"

Comment sheet #26 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

(None written)

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

"Act I – very long. The contrast of mood seems very long in coming. I, ii – Anne's entrances and exits seem somewhat unmotivated from the stage [illegible]. I understand

the need to establish the relationships Jack – Father, Jack – Anne, Anne – Willie, but could it be more lightly done? I, iii – The crowd is very static. A different staging could overcome some of the effect. The feeling and ‘rally’ doesn’t hold. II, ii – end of Anne’s final aria seems anti-climactic.”

Comment sheet #27 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Sustained dramatic intensity”

QUESTIONS:

“Planning to film? Should film very well.”

Comment sheet #28 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“the unity of the play’s theme, the lyrics, the direction and the driving force of the music.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“At times the staccato driving force of the music competes rather than enhances the libretto, a more subtle orchestration when in full production will soften the diversion.”

Comment sheet #29 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“The entire effect is powerful and magnetic blend of theatre in all its best [illegible] reality, blended from audio/ visual stimuli that are made up of fine acting, [illegible] music and good voice. I can project the musical comedy version as the next Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.”

QUESTIONS:

“Is there anything hummable here (hear?)?”

Comment sheet #30 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Strong characters, good singing opportunities, very demanding title role.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Anti-climactic, first act too long.”

Comment sheet #31 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“The arias throughout were melodic and lyrical. Act II Scenes ii and iii were very impressive. Was impressed with the stills at the beginning of the scenes – except Act I Scene i – the people should wait until that still is over – was distracting.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“It was a little long – needs some trimming. Needs some duets, etc. in Act I.”

Comment sheet #32 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act I – Good story, Act II – Powerful story but needs [illegible]. Act III – Good, climactic ending, Good ‘Willie, come home’ repetition.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Flashback from opening was rough, and opening was too long. Act I – drags quite a bit. Shorten arias, particularly Willie’s in Mason City. Act II, Act III – Willie’s final scene should be more dramatically highlighted.”

Comment sheet #33 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act I: total believability – Stark suits the work.”



#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act I – too much info given over the radio; i.e. too lengthy. Anne Stanton is too vague a character and why did Sugar Boy pick her up at the Judge’s home? Try to disguise the motives for Stark’s death more cleverly; they become instantly obvious to me and it became a question not of who and why but how. Perhaps the references to Stark’s death should be reserved until later. Music has too much discord throughout. Act III – Scene between Judge and Jack lacked depth. It seemed trite. Finally the radio at the end should be eliminated, it is redundant, too distracting.”

Comment sheet #34 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Wonderful libretto. Act 2 scenes i-ii excellent. Scene II, ii with Anne great! Tender. Comic moments good, very necessary, perhaps more of them.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Ira too British-sounding. Too long – Act I – needs to be tightened. End of Act I Scene ii: emotional, dramatic, musical stopping place for act. Too much screaming by Anne before aria (II, ii): lessening effect of lovely melody. Chorus II ii? Their running through is disjointed. ‘Goddamn’ used too much. Act I, iii – more of Willie’s inner struggle (does one sell soul to do good?) needs to surface earlier. Parts of it seem to suffice without music as a play, and the redundant lines break up dramatic flow (those repeated vocal lines). Ending – better if stopped BEFORE announcer! IDEA: What if you put den part of I, iii into Act III to give us less in Act I and more of Willie’s inner conflicts in III?”

Comment sheet #35 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Create mood of uncomfortable hot weather. I didn’t like off-stage voice-sounds. This is crass and not original. The announcer is too cold, bland. This problem (i.e. of informing us) can be handled more creatively.”

Comment sheet #36 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Flash back technique is very effective. Dramatic and compelling characterization especially Sadie, Stark, and Judge Burden. Second Act moves much better than first. Beautiful trio in second act.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Jack Burden does not quite come to life – his character – to be in such violent conflict with his father is actually not convincing. Perhaps I crowd scene is shortened into [illegible] help the first act – crowd scenes seem to drag.”

Comment sheet #37 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Perhaps it’s me – but I frequently had difficulty understanding lyrics, although I moved, in case it was the pianos that interfered. I’m sure it would be a different situation with orchestral accompaniment. Really fine – I’m anxious to see the finished production – very exciting, dramatic – spellbinding. Otey was excellent –The slow start built to a beautiful climax – I also applaud the unusual treatment at the final moments.”

Comment sheet #38 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“It is a musical drama that holds the audience from beginning to end. The lyricism and the family atmosphere in the second act are breathtaking. Strong contrast, terrific dramatic intensity and excitement are the characteristics of this work. Admirable work of all participants. Each character brings strong vocal and dramatic impact.”

Comment sheet #39 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“It is a great sacrifice for a composer to tweak his work if it is needed, because he loves so much his work – and with good reason. But for the sake of public approval perhaps a few parts can be trimmed. I cannot be more specific; I would have to hear it again.”

Comment sheet #40 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Overall, I thought it was very strong, dramatic; the characters are well defined musically. A very exciting piece.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“The ending – I don’t think the action after Willie dies does anything to advance the piece or adds any drama. The use of the radio announcer broke the flow and mood, I thought. I wonder why the audience has to wait until Act 2 Scene ii to feel any sympathy for Willie. The first act seemed long, though it wasn’t. A lot of action was packed into this act, I know. I think the third scene, particularly, didn’t work for me.”

Comment sheet #41 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“I really enjoyed the production. It was absorbing, dramatic – very exciting music drama.”

Comment sheet #42 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“It is powerful, touching, beautiful – almost overwhelming in the sheer drama. A real Tour de Force. The music is simply wonderful, I like the newscasts on the radio, was also glad to see upper class and lower class listening to newscasts. It’s very moving as well as extremely exciting.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“See casting – under general comments [next entry]. I think the spoken dialogue between Sadie and Anne after the assassination is unnecessary – anticlimactic – Their duet says it all. I’m also not sure about the end – seeing the radio announcer. I think just hearing his voice may be more effective.”

Comments Sheet # 43 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“As far as casting, I think Anne Stanton should be tall, slender, aristocratic in looks and movement. To me this is very important. It makes her involvement with Willie more shocking – more of a surprise. To cast this part with someone like C. Donahue (although she’s a fine singer and actress) could be a serious mistake in my opinion. Jack Burden, Sugar Boy, and Willie are excellent. I picture Judge Burden as elegant, white hair, white moustache, Southern gentleman type. Sadie is excellent in every way! Louie Otey is excellent as Willie. I do think he should be dressed in even poorer taste. Look cruder. The

big important thing is Anne Stanton. She must be elegant looking to make the contrast between Willie and her believable. (Maybe 'fatten' Willie up also.)"

QUESTION:

"I'm not sure of the merit of removing the drunken seduction scene between Jack and Anne. I thought that was important. So little is made of their involvement – their relationship. Showing that made Willie more of a 'heel' and also showed the torment more that she was going through. It also showed why Jack did what he did in the end. If not the drunken scene, then a 'love scene' between Anne and Jack to establish their relationship."

Comment sheet #44 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

"I found *Willie* extremely exciting theater as well as opera (as it should be but is not always!) The characterizations are well developed. The music is equally exciting and balances well – Libretto permitted clear audibility. I am particularly intrigued by the potential for personality development – The sparse sets add to this production and I hope will not be lost in final production – The opera maintains the poetry of the book."

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

"For me Scene i of Act 3 doesn't quite work musically or dramatically – This is the weakest part of the opera."

Comment sheet #45 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

"I enjoyed the move from sung to spoken word dialogue worked well. Could use more – In all a powerful work. I look forward to seeing it again."

Comment sheet #46 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

"Act 1: Superb first act! Hardly a put-together, backyard production! Well-drawn characterizations, music reinforced characters and emotional content well. Especially fine music at end of Scene ii after Anne's song. Willie's 'Cold blanket' aria fabulous! Act 2: Also extremely well done. Anne's song at end of Scene ii, 'My home is in your arms,

Willie' especially strong and evocative. Music in Scene ii at Mrs. Stark's home, in general diverse, well organized and appropriate. Act 3: Superb and fulfills story."

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

"Act 1: 1) Jack appears weakly-drawn character. Really do not perceive Willie's real attachment until Act 2. Jack seems too unsubstantial. 2) Willie's 'reflection' at rally could be tighter, clearer. Act 2: 1) Jack still seems unfocused and unresolved character. 2) Sadie's reaction to Anne and Willie seems a little overdrawn and melodramatic. Sadie knows Willie too well to become so extremely disturbed over the news (?) of his relationship with Anne. Act 3: No real weaknesses, but Jack still unsatisfactory character."

Comment sheet #47 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

"Excellent – pity that the story has no redemptive message. As opera: works beautifully; all elements of vibrant and vital human emotions in tension and, unfortunately here, tragic resolution."

Comment sheet #48 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

"Not enough women's parts."

Comment sheet #49 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

"Act II's music superb."

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

"Act I too long, music too strange, Radio narrative too long."

Comment Sheet #50 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Marvelous the complexity of personality and motivation portrayed. Stark’s aria on the law is great.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Opening recorded voice too fast – too much information to take in at that pace. How did Anne get to Burdens’? Did she drive herself? If not, how was she going to join the Judge for dinner? If so, did she leave her car at the Judge’s when she went to meet the Governor? Seems to be a stupid move on her part – unnecessarily risky for Sugar Boy to pick her up at the Judge’s. I can imagine her driving home and being picked up there. Act II Scene iii – very powerful, but I think it’s trite – Stark knows Sadie will be right back, he’s not stupid and he doesn’t want to reveal Anne to Sadie. He would get Anne out of there immediately, before Sadie returned. No sense that Jack really feels enough about Anne to throw himself at her.”

Comment sheet #51 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“How did Jack get the job in the first act? I assumed it was a political appointment – Stark and the Judge were friends; then I tried to believe he was smart. Why would Stark appoint him? Sadie and Willie – don’t have enough sense of the connection to believe the intensity of her reaction. It is a fabulous work – conception, music. I think what needs development is Jack. He’s too weak (too naïve, immature) to merit Stark’s attention or Anne’s love.”

QUESTIONS:

“The ending is weak. I’d cut it at the assassination. The first act is fabulous.”

Comment sheet #52 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act II much stronger than Act I; effective and strong scene between Stark and Sadie – best music. Effectively dramatic. Dianne Kesling’s character strongest next to Carol Freeman’s – both should be cast in Jones Hall production. Chorus in Act I effective with

[illegible] passages sung by chorus members. Final chorus tableau very moving – should end there.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Duets in Act I should be revised – somewhat lengthy as present. Accompanied recitative rather repetitious as far as piano accompaniment – some recitative accompaniment in Act III likewise repetitious. Cut last reporter scene after chorus tableau during final scene – distracting from the previous chorus scene.”

Comment sheet #53 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Very interesting story and characters! Dynamite. Strong – interesting development in first act – a little long. Sadie’s aria very strong – Act I. Willie’s aria at rally also very strong. The reason for his sudden musing over his past seemed obscure at first. Act II Scene 2 very moving – trio especially beautiful and surprising and right for story.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act I Scene 2 seemed long – needed more substance between Judge and son (in fact all characters) – son Jack and fiancée interchanges seem weak – son needs development. Judge’s aria needed more substance. Act II in Anne’s aria –her words ‘overplayed your hand’ seemed out of character. The words of a very calculating woman, which she is not.”

Comment sheet #54 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Act I seemed slow to get moving – generally longer than necessary – one too many crowd scenes? Act II very much better pace – very exciting. Act III judge’s reaction didn’t seem right – later when he said, ‘he’s come between us’ – THAT response was right. Didn’t think his suicide really worked.”

Comment Sheet #55 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

(None written)

## WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“I think that it is important that Willie’s Act I characterization could be stronger. We don’t understand why he is so well loved. This could be fixed by stronger, more personal interaction between Willie and the crowd as in his encounters with the crowd in Mason City. It would add a very human side of Willie in the first act, which we don’t feel until the scene at Mama’s. Also we need to know more of Anne’s past; social standing is not clearly enough drawn.”

Comment sheet #56 –

## GENERAL COMMENTS:

“If we heard about Willie’s past from Willie then we would sympathize more quickly than we do with the third character of the announcer, the rather clinical, matter-of-fact ending. However, was stunning. I look forward to a brilliant show next spring.”

Comment sheet #57 –

## STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Fine dramatic and musical climaxes – strong characterization of Willie”

## WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act I much too long – too much declamation in Scenes i and ii of Act I. More lyricism and less blatant high notes for most of the major roles – loud is not necessarily exciting – sometimes it worked against the drama – as in Scene i, Act III.”

Comment sheet #58 –

## STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“It’s a powerful, enthralling piece! Every character matters. All of the major characters are torn at least two ways. Jack between Willie and his father, Anne between Willie and Jack, Sadie between her love and hate for Willie. Willie’s conflicts are multilayered. All this is conveyed by the book and the music, interacting and exposing. Great – terrifying – moving. Music – tremendous. The mixture of through-composed arias of few simple ABA structure. Emotion-evoking effects...it’s hard to be specific on short notice. The theatre – the way the piece moves and appears on stage. The book, as adapted. Especially – some of the vocal ensembles... (Act II and others), some arias – Chris Act II, Diane I and II. The music for the character. The opening scene and freeze. The choral music. Sense of humor!”



## WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“I’m not sure of the radio device. The exposition is essential, but isn’t there another way? I felt it delayed the beginning and weakened the end. The length is a problem. Nothing lagged and I don’t know where you can cut, but it does run too long for an evening performance. Act III is weaker than I and II. I felt more involved, more excited and tense at the ends of both I and II than at the end of III. Last scene (Willie’s victory) seemed long and tame. Why? One specific small problem. Act I Sc. ii butler answers door. But when Sugar Boy comes for Anne, she says, ‘Yes?’ and he walks in. Where is butler?”

Comment sheet #59 –

## GENERAL COMMENTS:

“A fine piece. Music strong, beautiful, dramatic, appropriate, effective. The cast was superb. I’d like to see Diane play the role on the main stage. Chris – Louie – Richard – David – and the others (plus chorus) gave powerful performances. Congratulations! I’m looking forward to seeing it again.”

Comment Sheet #60 –

## STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Second and Third acts rely on emotion and human reactions to situation. This is what grabs us, moves us and what we can identify with. Third act is concise and moves well. Keeps us going. Transitions from speech to singing excellent.”

## WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Newsreels – disrupt action – too long and totally unnecessary. Especially final one. Information does not add to show. Ruins transition to rally at end of I. First Act too long: Political background needs to be shortened. Importance lies in human reaction to situation – not situation itself. Too much character development in first Act (Sadie, Jack/ Judge relationship.) A simple statement keeps us wondering where it will lead rather than showing us too soon. Too many set pieces for the sake of character development. They become predictable and lose us.”

Comment Sheet #61 –

## GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Would like to hear accompaniment go with vocal line occasionally – some incredibly beautiful and moving music.”

Comment Sheet #62 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act I: very powerful stuff! And with enough welcome relief in the tension from time to time that while the emotional involvement of the listener is very great, it’s bearable and not overpowering. Act II: The character of Willie Stark unfolds very well and his humanity is as believable as his political ruthlessness. The music is wonderful – and it seems to me that Louie Otey and Christine Donahue are absolutely perfect in these roles, vocally and histrionically. Anne Stanton’s arias will be the ‘Ain’t it a Pretty Night’ of *Willie Stark!* It’s beautiful - and she sings it magnificently. Act III –wonderful – with the exception of the ending noted below.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act I – I think the curtain should come down quickly on the rally scene, and the orchestral music should continue until the curtain is down. Opening scene: The transition between the radio dialogue and the action could have sharper contrast to make it more evident that the action is a flashback. Act II Scene iii – When Anne Stanton comes in to tell Willie of her broken engagement, the music is loud and the tessitura for Anne is such that the words are lost – that’s too bad because the words are important and must be heard. Act III – The ending seems somewhat weak – wouldn’t it be better to just have the curtain come down on the exit of the chorus – and not the moralizing by the radio announcer?”

Comment sheet #63 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Having minimal scenery is really not a bad idea at all – the listener is able to concentrate on the words and the action and not be distracted by a lot of visual enticements. We feel that Christine and Louie must sing those roles with HGO (and Kennedy Center too!) – they are fabulous and such an asset to the production. The music is wonderful – beautiful writing and so fine for the singers.”

Comment sheet #64 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Development of character with regard to conflict; two-sided arguments – indecisiveness/ambivalence; with each character within each character with regards to Willie. Musical juxtaposition of these two elements: especially Willie, Anne in Act II, Scene ii.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Anne’s motives – balancing of two men in the second scene somewhat unclear – needs more focus. Act I. Scene i – Some junctures in the musical fabric a little weak. Pacing could be better. First news clip maybe too long. Could be alternated with action towards the end. Act I could use more comic element to relieve tensions, as Sugar Boy’s bit in act two does there. Basic effect of ending great, but timing seems too slow – chorus too late – pacing slowness here lessens emotional effect on audience.”

Comment sheet #65 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“The hustling towards wonderful emotional responses. Powerful story, excellent characterizations, Some memorable arias – Single Bed Blanket, Anne’s Aria, Sadie’s Aria in Act II.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Too long in places – things restated that could have been stated and then left. For instance: Sadie’s ‘Shake ‘em up’ Aria; ‘Come Back Willie’ sequence. The narrations – either rewritten in true ‘radio’ style (shorter sentences, fewer adjectives) or cut. The examples of how Willie has bent the law that some in Act II would be better preceding the judge’s complaints about Willie bending the law. Too much unrelieved loud, hostile music in Act I.”

Comment sheet #66 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“I think sometimes the accompaniment in the first two acts needs to go more with the vocal line instead of always so percussively against it.”

Comment sheet #67 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Intensely gripping drama – flashes of humor – touching emotionally in the conflict between gentle compassion, human sensitivity and drives and evil, grasping, violent power. Flashback technique very effective.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“The character of Jack Burden is less than convincing – it is hard to equate his sense of honor towards his father and his devotion to his ‘scoundrel’ boss whom he seems sometimes to worship and sometimes to violently oppose. His love for Anne is not felt as being strong – in all, he seems ambivalent and not solid as an important character in the drama as it unfolds.”

Comment sheet #68 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“The conflicts between good and evil – fear and courage in each character beautifully and strongly drawn – a marvelous work”

Comment sheet #69 –

#### STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“After the first act Governor Stark had my vote. Scene where he buys boy a hand organ was good, he should have played it. If I had just paid \$5 for the organ I would have at least tried it out. Scene with Willie and his daughter was fantastic, almost could cry. Little girl was cute. End of Act II was strong. Hard to believe each act builds upon the other.”

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“The song about her daddy kissing and slapping her. Why not just her daddy just hitting the side of her face. Kiss and hit is awkward.”

Comment sheet #70 –

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Very strong and well developed opera. The Governor of blackmail, the love of the people for him are gotten over well and make this performance great. If you do this in Jones Hall, got to use Louis Otey as Willie. Ya’ll really miss out.”

Comment sheet #71 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“‘WILLIE’ is deductively American in every respect. The use of ‘back staging,’ with people listening to the radio is extremely effective in foretelling and complementing action. The music is beautiful but tense – at times the mood of incipient doom is relentless.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“‘Jack’ has the weakest characterization. Should there be evident tension between his familial ties and his professional ambition? Where does he stand? The second act, the scene with ‘Lucy’ is superfluous and should be omitted. She has been mentioned and further attention to her is unnecessary, although the duet between ‘Mama’ and ‘Willie’ is beautiful. The scene in which Sadie slashes the portrait of Willie should be deleted. The ending was out of sync. Forget the radio announcer and finish with the chorus walking off stage.”

Comment sheet #72 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act I – dramatic impact, Act II – much more compact, Act III – the best of the three.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act I – much too long. Relationship between Jack and Anne not firmly established. Eliminate numerous dead spaces. Act II – Eliminate dead spaces. The scene with Ann in Willie’s office is weak.”

Comment sheet #73 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Musical drama of the highest sort. Libretto is marvelously rhythmical and accessible. ‘The law is like a Single Bed Blanket.’ ‘A man comes from an oak.’ Anne’s aria, ‘He’ll be my home.’ Sugar Boy’s antics are a very fine touch. Confrontation between Jack and the Judge. ‘You owe me something, Willie Stark.’ Special thanks to a marvelous cast. They made the work live.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“The character of Jack Burden is not established early enough. The fact that he is an idealistic college professor is not enough to make Willie’s admiration of him credible or to make us believe that Willie would use him to stand in as governor. Later Jack’s love for his father, his passion for the poor, etc. fill out the character somewhat. But this is a crucial character to the tragedy and needs something quite early to engage the audience in his plight and dilemma. Really, this is a small weakness. Overall, a spectacular work.”

Comment sheet #74 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Second act strong”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“First act too long. Final scene (radio announcer) should be eliminated!”

Comment sheet #75 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Jack’s aria (Act III) was, textually, too repetitious for my taste.”

QUESTIONS:

“Why didn’t they do ‘The Trees on the Mountain’?”

Comment sheet #76 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Act I – Feeling of Tensions great in voices and music. But perhaps not enough diversity in voices – Loved the feeling of no staging in Willie’s rally aria – good to have a change of pace. Act II – Loved it – everything.”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK:

“Act 1 – Sadie goes on too long about pox marks, etc. Feel the mentions of Anne coming to Judge’s house poor – don’t think you’d need triangle if Jack and Judge and Willie...”

maybe she just came to look for Jack. Act III – too down, too even, bigger rally or more dramatic confrontation between Judge and Son. The radio announcer bit doesn't work as an ending.”

Comment sheet #77 –

STRENGTHS OF THE WORK:

“Good tunes! A sense of continuing movement in the work. Has a sense of humor! Seems to leave holes in the texture for the voices to show through. Dialogue has good colloquial rhythms – sounds like speech. A great murder mystery!”

WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK: (scratched out to say “First impressions:”)

“Lost words: Angular line in Diane's first aria plus fast tempo make words difficult to understand. Before ‘I can't forgive that’ section of Judge – perhaps too high in bass range to be clear enough. Willie's torchlight aria – rhythms too busy to get words? Some 4/4 sections – word accents seem confused by 4/4 meter. Act II – love duet in Ma's house – slow, less interesting than later. Act I finale – curtain should fall more quickly. Act III – Jack seems too square – like Don Ottavio. End is awkward.”

Comment sheet #78 –

GENERAL COMMENTS:

“Keep the production spare, so we don't get distracted by things. It makes us listen to the dialogue.”

APPENDIX E. TRANSCRIPT FROM LSU'S *A SYMPOSIUM: 360° OF WILLIE STARK*

Audience: Applause

Robert Grayson:

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. I'm Robert Grayson, Chair of the Voice/Opera Division at the LSU School of Music, and a team leader of the Willie Stark Project, which has been made possible by an Interdisciplinary Grant from the Faculty Research. I'd like to welcome you on behalf of both these entities tonight to our symposium: 360° of Willie Stark.

I want to acknowledge, in absentia, two members of our team who are unable and out of town to participate tonight, Dr. Gains Foster of the History Department and Dr. John Lowe of the English Department. I also would like to ask you, at this moment, to take your cell phones and turn them on "silent," because we are videotaping this presentation for possible inclusion in our commercial release of the DVD of *Willie Stark*.

So tonight we'll be examining this fascinating character, Willie Stark, from a variety of perspectives: from the operatic, the musical, from the dramatic, from the literary, the historical, and political. Our format this evening will be to call several of our experts to speak to offer brief remarks. Then, we'll follow a panel discussion, and we'll give an opportunity for you to ask questions, or, in the case of one or two, contribute a few comments. I'll introduce each of our panelists before they speak, and it's my pleasure to begin by introducing a very special guest to our campus. Carlisle Floyd is widely recognized as the Dean of American Opera Composers. You have his biography in the program, but I would call your attention to the fact, that he not only composed a number of highly successful operas, but several of these operas have achieved something that is elusive to most contemporary composers that becomes staples of the standard operatic repertory. Among those, his *Susannah*, which we did here a couple of years ago, *Of*



*Mice and Men*, and *Cold Sassy Tree*. They've been performed by companies, large and small. By regional opera companies, by big companies – The New York City Opera, Chicago Lyric, they premiered in Houston Grand, and performed at the Metropolitan Opera – and they are repeated many times over, each season throughout this country and around the world.

Mr. Floyd also has a very substantial career as a professor of music at the university level and is the founding director of, what we regard as the model young-artist training program, the Houston Opera Studio. So he's thoroughly interested and invested in the development and advancement of young singers, of course, in the field through his marvelous compositions, and we have found him to be articulate and charming, knowledgeable and full of wit, and it has been a distinct pleasure for the students and faculty of the LSU Opera to interact with him during this production, and I'd like you to help me to welcome, Carlisle Floyd.

Audience: Applause  
(0:3:23.3)

Carlisle Floyd:

Thanks for that very warm welcome. I don't really think I have to say anything now. I thought perhaps to get us off on, I hope, will be the right foot, I will say a few words, which may turn out to be many words about the conception of *Willie Stark* as an opera. In 1972, I was commissioned by the Kennedy Center to do an opera for the Kennedy Center. The chairman of the Kennedy Center, Roger Stevens, who was a very distinguished impresario and also a man who fostered talent all over this country, saw the production of my opera, *Of Mice and Men*, in Kansas City. Afterwards, he asked me if I'd be willing to do an opera for the Kennedy Center, and, of course, I was thrilled of the prospect, having no idea of what I would end up doing, but certainly, the opportunity was very enticing, to say the least. And I can remember, very

distinctly, going back to my hotel that night and never being able to go to sleep just because of the prospect of the commission from the Kennedy Center. It turned out to be a very long commission because I did not have anything in mind to do at that point, or to tailor for the Kennedy Center. I also had another commission for the Houston Grand Opera for the bicentennial. So, Stevens very kindly said to me, “Finish your commission for the Houston Grand Opera, then turn to the Kennedy Center commission!” which is what I did. In the meantime, I had looked around for subject matter, and for some years, I had been torn with the idea of doing an original script based on a Southern governor. But, I had done a version of the libretto, which had the title, at that time, of *Grand Boy*, but somehow, it never came to fruition. I was never satisfied with what I wanted from it, and so I was floundering, wondering what I was going to do.

When Julius Rudel, then music advisor to the Kennedy Center, said, “You've done your original libretto on a Southern governor, so why don't you just do the classic of *All The King's Men*?” I thought, “That was a marvelous idea!” I had been a great fan of the book from the time I'd read it, and knew, of course, that it would be an enormous challenge from the very beginning. But I was excited by the prospect, and so I talked to Roger Stevens about this, and we investigated to see if the rights to the book were available for a musical version, only to be told that they had been opted for a Broadway country-western musical, which put the first obstacle in our path. The rights had been taken by a young jingle composer of television commercials, and I think he was successful and he managed to lay claim to this as his property, and so – such as that was our first obstacle to overcome, and I remember distinctly Roger Stevens calling me – I lived in Tallahassee at the time – and he called me from Washington, saying, “We've investigated the rights, and they have indeed been obtained by a composer, and a lyricist for a country-western

musical, but he says if you want to do it, we can buy them out,” and I said that is marvelous, but I said, “Who is going to undergo that expense?” He said, “We will at the Kennedy Center.” He said, “If you want to do it,” and I said, “I don't know that I can do it, but I would like to try,” and he said, “that's perfectly good enough for me – I've never been afraid of failure!”

So, indeed, he was good with his word, and he bought the rights out from the Broadway version, and I then had them assigned to me, but this was after some time of pursuing the rights originally, because to do that we had to go through the famous William Morris Agency in New York, which is a largely a theatrical agency, but did not know what on earth to do with an opera. They were used to working with Broadway musicals, which was a totally different thing. So, there was some difficulty in getting Robert Warren to actually involve himself in securing the rights for me, and I used one particular friend of mine, and colleague, who was head of writing it – Paul Angle by name, who was a very good friend of Warren's, and he wrote me an introduction to Robert Penn Warren, and then Warren wrote me a charming letter, and he said, “The letter of introduction was totally unnecessary.” He says, “I'm a musical barbarian, but I know of you!” (Laughter) which was, I thought, a wonderful way to begin an association. So, that all preceded the Kennedy Center purchasing the rights for me. And then all I had to do then was to write the opera, starting with the libretto. And this took a great deal of time, and thought, and effort, and a great deal of rewriting and revision. I think I once counted on the shelf of my cabinet in my studio in Houston, I think there were eleven versions of the libretto before I finally got one that I felt that I could start writing music to. And then that precipitated even more changes, but that's how it all first came about. And at that point the Houston Grand Opera also got in on the business of the world premier because, at that time, the Washington Opera was not nearly the opera company that it is now a days, and Roger Stevens obviously needed a producer. So it was a

very logical and natural to get behind Houston Grand Opera and the Kennedy Center with the world premier actually being in Houston, and subsequently moving, then to Washington to the Kennedy Center, for a two-week run. And that's how it all began with the wonderful assistance of Roger Stevens primarily, plus the very famed director of the original production, Hal Prince, and with the Houston Grand Opera chorus and conductor, and it was a very marvelous evening in the theater.

For the occasion, we had been able to attract Robert Penn Warren, and his wife, Ellen [Eleanor], down to Houston for the opening, and along with them, Lowell Thomas, who's someone you may remember from your childhood. He was the Voice of Radio of the 30's, certainly. And we actually were able to invite him and have him on hand in Houston, as well. So, it was a very gala occasion, and filled with very distinguished people. And I remember at the dinner that the president of the university gave for the occasion; he introduced Robert Penn Warren, who was having his seventy-sixth birthday, and I remember then, he introduced Lowell Thomas, who rose to his feet and said, "Oh, to be seventy-six again!"

Audience: Laughter  
(11:27.7)

Carlisle Floyd:

He was, at that time, 89, but a very remarkable 89. So as I said, it was a gala occasion there, also a gala occasion when it opened. Then the following, in two weeks, at the Kennedy Center, and a great many of Hal Prince's theater people were in attendance, as well (as a very – fortunately for us – an enthusiastic audience). And I said to my colleagues here that I thought I'd prefer talking about the challenges of adapting that formidable book into a libretto when we get into the question-and-answer portion of the program tonight. But – to be continued, as they say.

Audience: Applause

(12:10.8)

Robert Grayson (12:19.8)

Well, the gentlemen gathered around the table ... I feel a little bit like I'm in a board game because the name tags are not really correct, or in front of you. Why don't you just turn them, or you can make nice and exchange them?

Audience: Laughter

(12:33.1)

Robert Grayson (12:36.1)

The next speaker from our panel – (Laughter) This has got to be great for the DVD. The next speaker today is David Culbert. He is the John L. Loos Professor of History at LSU. He provided the visual materials for the original production of *Willie Stark* in Houston in 1981. He was the director of historical research for the documentary maker, Ken Burns, in his *Huey Long* in 1985. He holds a degree in organ performance from Oberlin. His areas of specialization include Mass Media and Propaganda, Nazi Germany and Propaganda, and, of course, 20th Century American history. He is a fellow of the Wilson Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian Institute, Fellow of the National Humanity Center at Yale University, Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies [Study] at Princeton. His books include *News For Every Man*, *Radio and Foreign Affairs*, and *30's America*, and *Mission Moscow*. David Culbert.

Audience: Applause

(13:41.1)

David Culbert (13:52.7)

I have a stage prop, Keith Marshall, and so, I actually wrote out my remarks so I'll stay within my allotted amount of time and still have time to call on Keith, whom I see ... come forward. I attended the world premier of *Willie Stark* in Houston on April 24, 1981. For the original production, I provided my sixteen-millimeter print of *All The King's Men*, the 1949 Robert Rosen film adaptation. It was utterly amazing to see Lowell Thomas, arguably the best-known radio-news reel voice of the 1930's, still on his feet, if barely, as the radio announcer for the original production. Tonight, it is a pleasure to see this prominent composer here in Baton Rouge on the occasion of an extraordinary musical event for LSU's School of Music. *Willie Stark* performed on a campus synonymous with the life of Huey Long, after which the figure of Willie Stark is patterned. For years Warren insisted there could not be any possible connection between Stark and Long, but in the final published introduction, to the limited edition club's version of *All The King's Men*, Warren admitted that there really was a good similarity. Warren told me that he got the idea for writing what is often termed, "The finest novel of American politics" while sitting on a swing on the porch of a house in Baton Rouge, rented by John Palmer, Warren's first doctoral student here at LSU. Warren said he only saw Huey Long a single time, and that was over lunch and here on this campus. It may well have been for the dedication of Maison Frances, April 5, 1935, [which is] today's [LSU's] Honors College.

Warren remained rather embittered about the refusal of LSU, in 1942, to match a \$500 per year pay raise offered by the University of Minnesota. He left Baton Rouge destined for bigger and better things. I was able to get the university records relating to Warren's employment here at LSU, and the reason for his departure was not just what he thought. Warren's colleagues in the English Department did not want to see him stay because he lacked a Ph.D. They insisted

no exception should be made. It was not the President of LSU, but his colleagues who refused to match an outside offer of \$500. Soon after, Warren was appointed Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. *The Baton Rouge Advocate* reported this news on the front page in a small notice, but confused the nature of the honor, “Robert Penn Warren appointed Poultry Consultant to the Library of Congress ...”

Audience: Laughter  
(16:40.2)

David Culbert (0:16:44.4)

There are two musical matters in Carlisle Floyd’s *Willie Stark* which I would like to mention because they are both good examples, easily understood, of why this is a remarkable composer. Both have to do with musical adaptation, but can’t kitsch. Consider Act I, scene iii – the return of Willie to his hometown of Mason City. The favored son returns in glory and is greeted by a crowd of well wishers chanting, “We want Willie!” A poor musical idea, the very one adopted by the recent Hollywood adaptation of *All The King’s Men*, entails the use of a generic Cajun on-stage band. In 1949, Hollywood’s Robert Rossen settled for a generic Oompah Band, a match for exteriors, which used the State House in Sacramento, California, as a stand-in for the Art Deco skyscraper in Baton Rouge.

Floyd literally ‘sets the stage’ with a single harmonica player and band show. The tune is suggestive, just a bit, of *The Yellow Rose of Texas*, but requires two virtuoso players. What Floyd does with this melody and how the harmonica and banjo are joined by a piano is the difference between music of extraordinary inspiration and round-up-the-usual-suspects music found in both Hollywood film scores. A second musical adaptation occurs in Act III, scene iii, when the poor and disposed, the source of Willie’s strength, gather in front of the capital to await the outcome

of the impeachment vote. Floyd is his own librettist and has made many changes to the Warren novel. The crowd begins to sing a Baptist hymn, “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” with the text amended to include Stark's name. Floyd has improved the refrain's rhythm, adding one dotted-sixteenth-note where James Black settles for a string of eighth notes. Floyd uses a revival hymn with the text that could seem to comment on a roll call in the statehouse (an inspired idea), but then develops this idea by placing the revival hymn's four-square harmony above an orchestral pedal point in a remote key using music in an effective way to show the listener what is going to happen. Music performed in two keys simultaneously is a very good way to show aurally a foreshadowing, and in this case, an assassination is coming very shortly.

There's one piece of music, which Floyd elected not to use, and it puzzled me in 1981, and it still puzzles me. Huey Long's theme song, “Every Man a King” had a text by Huey and a tune by Castro Carazo, the bandleader at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, brought by Huey to LSU to direct the Tiger Band. The refrain makes the case for why Floyd elected not to use this, or whether a concern in 1981, which the Houston Opera's Director of Marketing wrote to me about, and perhaps that is the answer. “As I mentioned during our telephone conversation, both Mr. Floyd and Mr. Warren are quite sensitive about focusing attention on Huey Long in a manner which might directly infer that he and Willie Stark are one in the same. We cannot ignore the sensitivity in any way.” My time is up, uncharacteristically short-winded. I would like to call on my friend, Keith Marshall, who studied with Robert Penn Warren and Kenneth Brooks at Yale, and is himself a Rhodes Scholar, to tell us something you'll certainly enjoy. Keith, I think you need to come up here, if you will please.



Keith Marshall (20:45.5)

An anecdote – It was about the time of the opera. My wife and I were back in Oxford for the 80th anniversary of the founding of the scholarships and I studied with Mr. Warren, and then it turned out I had a scholarship in 1968. He had been [there since] 1928 both Louisiana and New College, so we ended up in the dining hall, and my wife was sitting next to him. She said (she was a reporter then) is now travel agent and loves to know everything about everything. She turned to me and said, “Do you think I could ask him for an interview?” and I said, “This is really not the right place, dear.” So she turned right around and asked him if she could have an interview, and it was great because the next four days were spent with Mr. Warren and his wife, taking them around, kind of doing everything with them. And one night we were walking along one of the streets of Oxford and coming in the opposite direction were Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Clinton had been in the same class that I was. So, we all met, and I said, “Mr. Warren, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Bill Clinton.” And Bill said, “Oh, Mr. Warren, I am so pleased to meet you! A lot of people have told me that I remind them of Willie Stark,” and Mr. Warren just guffawed and didn’t say anything, but it was just kind of an inside anecdote.

Audience: Applause  
(22:11.6)

Robert Grayson (22:23.8)

David Madden has served as Professor of English at LSU for 39 years and 9 years at other institutions, as well. He’s a prolific, recognized author of novels, short stories, poems, plays, screenplays, and scholarly works. He is the author of *Sharp Shooter: A Novel of the Civil War*, [and] 1996 Pulitzer Prize nominee, *On The Big Wind* and *The Suicide’s Wife*, also a Pulitzer Prize nominee, as well as five other books, sixty short stories and sixty-five poems.

Among his many honors he has received the Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction from the Fellowship of Southern Writers, The Rockefeller Grant in Fiction judged by Saul Bello and Robert Penn Warren, and the Gitlin Prize for the Best Essay on Thomas Wolfe from the Thomas Wolfe Society. Professor Madden has seven works under submission and other works in progress. David, I'm glad you had time to come talk to us, and please welcome, David Madden.

Audience: Applause  
(23:28.6)

David Madden: (23:37.3)

Well, I'm here substituting for my colleague, John Lowe, who loves opera, but apparently my reputation for not caring for opera did not reach the right people. But perhaps the little-known fact that I've written ten libretti did get to a few people – four or five of them with Dinos Constantinides and some of his graduate students. In fact, in this very room, a couple of days ago, one of my pieces was a short opera. So I have a real interest in following, if not opera generally, the task of adapting a novel. In my case, I adapted Euripides' *The Trojan Women* into an opera, and so I was eager to see what the outcome of this effort years ago was. I didn't see the original production, but I think it ... before I get into my responses to the opera and my observations about the novel itself ... I wanna remind people, or bring people's attention to the fact that this is probably the most protean novel in American history, maybe world literature.

It began as a verse play, which I think he lost and then rewrote, in which, by the way, I put on at Barnes & Noble a year ago – part of it. So he rewrote it [and] then it was a play called *Willie Stark: His Rise and Fall*. This is after the novel appeared and then a revived version and then a play adapted here at LSU from the novel itself in a kind of free-wheeling way, but very effectively, about ten years ago. And also we should remember that the Civil War chapter in *All*

*The King's Men*, which is in the exact center of the novel and which I think is absolutely crucial to the novel itself (and perhaps to a more sophisticated music adaptation some day), but not to an opera. That chapter was once published by itself as a kind of novella, quite long, and it has been adapted into a play, which has been published by LSU Press. In fact, most of the mutations of this dramatic adaptation of this novel are available in a volume from LSU Press.

Then we have the restored novel. I put on a conference here with some of these same people to look at the difference between the restored novel, what he originally wrote, and what he was talked into publishing. And then we have the opera. It's really remarkable. It interests me personally because my second novel, *Cassandra Singing*, I wrote simultaneously at Yale Drama School, where Robert Penn Warren had just been teaching, as a play and as a novel. It's been done as a play, been done as a novel, I adapted it at Warner Brothers, I was the last Writer-in-Residence there adapting it at Warner Brothers. They accepted the play. Warner Brothers got bought out, and the play got shelved. So I know what it's like to want to present the essence of the work, of a concept of what one has imagined in terms of characters and their situations in many, in many ways – many, many opportunities, and I'm still looking for opportunities for different versions of my own works. So I'm very sensitive to this whole question of adaptation.

I found with *The Suicide's Wife*, which was made into a movie, that all they really bought, once I saw the movie, was the title, which they then changed in the rerun. So it's kind of a crazy business. And I thought, well, where is this part, where is that part? ... It's so cinematic ... This, that and the other. And then when I adapted my own novel, I went so far away from the original novel that I had to conclude that it is a futile, pointless exercise to compare the novel with the play version, an opera version, or a movie version because the novel is words. And the thing to remember about this novel is that it is not about Willie Stark as much as it is about the

source of those words, which is Jack Burden, and his words go through several different kinds of rhetorical structures. He is a tough guy, with a wise crack out of the side of his mouth. In fact Warren talks sometimes out of the side of his mouth like that. And sometimes he is very lyrical, sometimes very philosophical. So you can't just take the story outline, or the characters, or the historical model.

I'm one of those who prefer to teach my students not to pay any attention to the historical model because it cuts into the universality of the work. It's a big distraction. So that when I look at an adaptation, I'm not looking anymore for Jack Burden to be the main character of the movie. He was wonderful as the voice-over in the old *film noir* tradition in the first version. The problem with the second version of the movie was that they wanted to be totally faithful to the movie, and I kept saying, "Yeah, see if you can do the Jack Burden. I don't think you can." They did it, and it ruined it. The shifting of the day to 1950 ruined absolutely everything. So when I saw the recording of the opera, I saw Jack there, and I thought, please don't favor him too much, please don't have him a static figure delivering an aria here, an aria there, a very tedious sort of thing, slowing the action, because it's not going to work, above all, in an opera. What I found was the very kind of thing that most people who compare novels with movies, or plays, or operas, would be really upset with; he made Jack the assassin. Which I think is brilliant. At first I was shocked, but one of the points I want to make is to have to even think about the difference between the novel and the opera is a distraction, and the brilliance of this opera, this libretto, is that it really works. It works beautifully. And, as well as the other changes, that the way he handles Anne – which was a botch in the recent movie – Anne's relationship with Jack Burton. So I wanted to stress in my extemporaneous remarks my admiration as a dramatist, as a writer of plays, as a Yale Drama School graduate, as a novelist, as the author of several libretti for the way in which

he solved major problems of adaptation. I have to conclude, though, by saying that I really don't think you have to think of either Huey Long or Robert Penn Warren's novel at all to respond to one of the tightest operas I've never seen. I do know about a lot of operas. Not as one who likes [them], but one who is interested. Robinson Jeffers, for instance, who was the first adapter of *The Trojan Women*, and I followed that, and studied that to learn how to write 'em.

Anyway, it's a great pleasure to be here with a master composer and librettist and with so many fine works. I'm tempted to say that Carlisle Menotti of America, but [to] hell with that – I mean, Menotti is the Italian version of you, sir!

Audience Applause  
(0:33:23.3)

Robert Grayson (0:33:35.1)

Thank you, David. T. Wayne Parent is the Russell B. Long Professor of Political Science and Chair of that department at LSU. Professor Parent specializes in Southern politics, selections, and Louisiana politics. If his face is familiar, it's not surprising. He is frequently on both local and statewide and national television commenting on elections and campaigns. During his career at LSU, he has received five awards for excellence in teaching. Among the many publications, he is the author of *Inside the Carnival: Unmasking Louisiana Politics*, with a new epilogue post-Katrina. And, with Michael Henderson in 2003, *The Party's Over: The Rise and Stall of Legislative Reform in Louisiana*. Let's welcome, Wayne Parent.

Audience: Applause  
(0:34:25.8)

T. Wayne Parent (0:34:35.8)

It's great to be here. I was delighted to be asked to speak, and I'll speak very briefly, since I'm one of the last ones speaking, and I'm looking forward to the discussion about a novel that I love, and it's because it's about a theme that I love. It was interesting; the anecdote about Bill Clinton declaring that he was like Willie Stark. When I first arrived back at LSU (I'm a Louisiana native), I sat in the office of my mentors, Cecil Eubanks, who continues to be my dear friend. I sat in the office, and he walked in, and he was happy that I was back on the faculty. I'd been a student here as an undergrad, and I just looked at him, and I just declared, I said: "I am a populist, Cecil," and when I returned back to Louisiana, I felt that. I felt like I want to be a man of the people, and Louisiana is about being a man of the people. And as the years (I've been here twenty-five years) have gone by, I've realized that being a populist is a difficult thing to be because it forces you to have a lot of faith in the innocence of humanity. And I think the universal appeal of this novel and all the adaptations is that it forces us to struggle with that; with our idealism, and our want for everything, for giving the people what they want and when you give the people what they want, you might not like what they ask for. One of the things that really struck me in my time at LSU was the story, really, of the political science department's most illustrious graduate, Hubert Humphrey, who was Vice President, and *this* close to being President of the United States. He, like me, like Bill Clinton, and like most of you, I think, likes to think that people are good, and he (some of you will remember him as a delightful populist) he was a man of the poor, and he was attracted to LSU because of Huey Long's populism. And, he came to LSU for graduate work to get his master's degree. In fact, he was on campus at the same time as Russell Long, and he, like all of us and like the characters in the novel, I think – certainly like Jack Burden – when he arrived at LSU, and when he arrived at the bastion of

populism he saw that all was not pretty. All was not pretty when you give the people what they want, especially in the short term. It affects not only the person who receives the power (and that's much of the story of Willie Stark, is that, he receives the power from the people and it corrupts), but the people themselves that you want so much to believe in. He saw Baton Rouge that – he lived right around here actually, right up the street and went to Louis' [Café] all of the time – he saw Baton Rouge that was full of racism at the time. Racism was clearly not something Huey Long needed to use to gain power, other Southern populists needed to use that, but he had money to give to poor people. He didn't need to use racism to gain power, but he saw the racism in Baton Rouge, which existed all over the South. And that's what poor white people wanted, they wanted separation, they wanted to feel good about themselves because they were white and better than African-Americans, better than black people. And so what he did was, he called his wife and said, "I don't want you to move down here." You know, populism is not pretty in that sense, and he went on to probably more than – he, and Lyndon Johnson, I think – more than almost any non-African-American, went on to the 1948 Democratic Convention and started what eventually rolled into the Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Act. And his struggle – apparently Bill Clinton still doesn't have a struggle – but his struggle, my struggle, Jack Burden's struggle are all right there in that novel, and I know a lot of what's been done with the novel, it endures because it shows us our foibles from every different point of view. Willie Stark was corrupted by his power. The people themselves didn't necessarily want what was best for everyone, and even Judge Irwin, who we think is this, ya' know, this elite, who Jack certainly thought was this well-educated good man, even in the end we find that he had his foibles, as well. So the reason I love this novel because it's the struggle we deal with everyday. It's the struggle we're dealing with in Iraq. We thought we could bring democracy to the Middle East

and everything would be all right. Well, it's, you know, it's not all right. Democracy isn't that easy. And that's what this novel, I think on one level, is about. It's effective on several different levels, but I think on the very basic political level, it's about our struggle with our own innocence and our need to have faith in people and realize that we can't always. Well, thanks again, and thanks for having me here, and I look forward to the discussion.

Audience: Applause  
(0:40:40.5)

Robert Grayson (0:40:50.0)

John Keene is the music director of the LSU Opera and the conductor of *Willie Stark*. John has conducted (another of Carlisle's pieces for us) *Susannah*, *Little Women*, and *La Bohème*. He's the founder and artistic director of the Elision Opera Group of New York City for which he's conducted *Don Giovanni*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *La Clemenza di Tito*. His professional opera credits include serving on the music staffs of the San Francisco Opera in the Merola Program, as the director of the apprentice program at the Sarasota Opera, as a member of the music staff at the Opera Theater of St. Louis, Virginia Opera, Lake George Opera, continuing associations of seven years with the Chautauqua Opera, and nine years with the New Orleans Opera. His performances as accompanist and chamber musician include appearances at the Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, and at Carnegie Hall. So, John, will you tell us, how you do get to Carnegie Hall? John Keene.

Audience: Applause  
(0:41:47.4)



John Keene (0:41:55.4)

Well, obviously, I am a musician, and most of what I have to say about Willie Stark will be heard tomorrow evening and Sunday afternoon. So I'd like to keep my remarks brief, as well, but thinking about what I might want to say today as I was driving in, I thought about the fact that I'm almost always asked when I speak, or when I meet people, "Who is my favorite composer, or what is my favorite opera?" And the most honest answer I can think of is almost always the work that I'm currently working on. And I would have to say with complete honesty that that's definitely the case this time. This is a real masterpiece, in my opinion. This is a man, Carlisle Floyd, who is able to create living and breathing characters, not just through a finely crafted libretto based on a brilliant work of literature, but through music, which is of course the whole point of the operatic art form. It's really kind of a miracle, opera, after all – the synthesis of literature, history, politics, art, dance (often), music (obviously) ... But in this case, I think the thing that one carries away from this experience of hearing or studying and/or performing *Willie Stark* is these are living characters who start to enter one's psyche, and it's mostly done because of the music. Of course, they're larger than life, they have great historical and political basis, obviously, but the music is what makes them memorable and makes them speak. I brought today something that I've considered sort of my good luck token on this project which is a libretto from the Houston premier, and I was able to purchase this and didn't even really notice this at the time (for some reason), but it's autographed by Robert Penn Warren. So I'm thinking that if anybody would like to contribute to me a first edition copy of *All The King's Men*, I would be happy to have you sign that for me, Carlisle. I hope that you will enjoy the performances tomorrow, and I would just like to say that it's been a great privilege to work on the piece, and I would like to thank, personally, Carlisle, for coming to visit us, not only this weekend for the

performance, but earlier. About a month ago he was here for several days where he heard rehearsals, worked with our students, spoke to all the principal characters, as well as the chorus .... This is an irreplaceable experience for young artists to meet a living composer and to interact with someone who has created the very work that they're working on. Thank you very much!

Audience: Applause  
(44:36.6)

Robert Grayson (44:47.1)

Dugg McDonough is the Mary Berry Fruehan Associate Professor of Music and the Director of LSU Opera. Prior to coming to LSU in 2001, he, for seventeen years, was director of the opera theater at Temple University where he staged nearly fifty original conceptions of different works, including five world premiers. As a professional stage director, he's been associated with a number of noted companies including the New York City Opera, Santa Fe Opera, [and] Opera Theater of St. Louis. As a writer he has authored stage works including *Ordinary People: A New American Opera* with music by Robert Trembly, which will be premiered soon by the Virginia Opera Studio. He also has written *The Middle of Nowhere*, an original lyric theater piece, and *Gone With the Wind: A New Dance Scenario* commissioned by the Atlanta Ballet. A specialist with working with young performers, for the past fourteen years he's been co-director of the apprentice artist program at the Des Moines Metro Opera, and he has staged a wonderful production of this work. Dugg McDonough.

Audience: Applause  
(0:45:49.1)

Dugg McDonough (0:46:00.4)

I will, indeed, try to be brief, which I know will come at a total shock to the cast members, students and colleagues in today's audience. *Willie Stark*, as John Keene, so eloquently said, is a masterpiece. It's a masterpiece that, in recent years, followed the fate of many wonderful works. And that makes this privileged event that much more special for all of us. What I mean by that comment about *Willie Stark* is that it received a wonderful 1981 premier at the Houston Grand Opera and, as Carlisle [earlier] said, at the Kennedy Center, and, of course, was filmed for public television. And then – aside from, I believe, one production – it was directed by Carlisle himself at Carolina Opera where it essentially disappeared for over twenty years from the landscape of American Opera. And this, unfortunately, is too often the case with wonderful American works. Carlisle, in all of his brilliance, has, at times perhaps, fallen victim to what seems to plague to a number of our great American opera composers. They will compose one astonishing and very popular work which gets done, and done, and done, and done – in the case of Carlisle, it's *Susannah*, and in recent years, thank goodness, *Of Mice and Men* has begun to be done by companies all across the country – but each of Carlisle Floyd's operas are wonderful, and worthy of performance. And it is a true privilege to be able to bring Willie, as they say, back to life. This is a dream of mine. When I came to LSU and was hired by Dean Ron Ross five years ago, one of the things that enticed me, besides the wonderful faculty and the wonderful student population, was the region. I'm a Southerner, but from Tennessee – a bit further north in *Susannah* country – and I came to Louisiana and I thought, wow, what an opportunity. Along with the *Traviatas*, or the *Bohèmes*, or the *Così fan Tutte*s, or the *Figaros*, what a great place to do great American works, so many of which are set in the South – Marc Blitzstein's *Regina*, Lee Hoiby's *Summer in Smoke*, of course, most recently, Jake Heggie's

*Dead Man Walking*. I thought, if we can cast and produce these incredible American works, what a great gift it will be to us, the community, and hopefully, in a bigger picture, to American opera, and Willie Stark, of course, was one of the first pieces I thought about. When I began to consider these things, needless to say, it has a great local connection, but I remembered so fondly the 1981 televised production, and when I went back to look at the score and look at the libretto, I was certainly not disappointed. It is a gloriously colorful work – colorful in its music, and, as John said, in it's characters. It's a work beautifully paced that speaks to all of us, not just as Southern Louisianans, but as Americans. And to get to know Carlisle Floyd, a man for whom I've had undying admiration for years, has been a special treat on top of all of this. I trust that our wonderful, wonderful cast, many of whom are here today, have had a glorious experience with this work and will sail with that experience right through tomorrow night and Sunday afternoon. This has been an incredibly rare privilege and one of the high points in my entire career as an educator and director. And for all of those who participated in this production, for Maestro Keene, for Carlisle, thank you very, very much. Come to *Willie Stark* – I think you're going to like it a lot! Thank you all!

Audience: Applause  
(0:49:44.3)

Robert Grayson (0:49:55.8)

To begin our panel discussion I'm going to introduce Dr. Andreas Giger, Associate Professor of Musicology, and I'm being signaled by our videographer and producer of the DVD that we're going to make a tape change here. Just take a moment. All right, talk amongst yourselves and stretch, and we'll be back with you in about ninety seconds.

CD 2

Robert Grayson:

Andreas Giger, he is the founder of Internet database *Saggi Musicali Italiani* and co-editor of the Internet database *Musical Borrowing: An Annotated Bibliography*. He specializes in both 19th Century Italian opera, especially the works of Giuseppe Verdi, and on the works of Leonard Bernstein. Giger has published in *The Journal of Musicology*, *The International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, *The Cambridge Opera Journal*, and the second edition of the *New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. His book *Verdi and the French Aesthetic: Verse, Stanza and Melody in 19th Century Opera* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press and is supported by a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities. Dr. Giger, you've been the silent partner thus far this evening, so I'm going to give you the opportunity to make a comment to launch our panel discussion, or ask a question. So take it from here, will you please.

Andreas Giger: (0:00:58.7 )

Thank you, Bob. There is a reason for my relative silence here tonight. I had the honor of writing program notes for the productions, and I pretty much said what I needed to say at that point. So I thought that I didn't need to reiterate everything that's already going to be in there. And quite apart from that, why does one need a musicologist if the composer is sitting right next to me? But we have heard in several of the presentations tonight that *Willie Stark* is a masterpiece, and, of course, it's always the task of the musicologist to try to explain why that is and maybe by giving just a couple of ideas as to why *Willie Stark* is such a masterpiece. Let me start with two examples and maybe that will lead us to the point of departure for our discussion

here tonight. The first example is from very early in the opera, when Sadie Burke sings her aria “Shake ‘em up,” in which she recalls the advice that she gave to Willie Stark when he was still a pretty bad speaker. So at the end of that aria she feels she has things under control. Yet she’s at the height of her power. Everything seems to be going her way. Of course she also has feelings for Willie Stark, and the action stops, the music stops, and in comes Duffy, and [he] says, “by the way, the boss has a new lady friend,” in spoken voice. So you have that contrast of singing with speaking and that creates some of those great dramatic moments from which opera lives. And if I remember, I recall one of my mentors, he always said you need two very important things for a successful opera. The first one is strong characters, and the second one is strong situations, and that would be just one of the many strong situations one finds in this work.

Another one, I’m skipping now to the very end, ... again, a person in this case, of Willie Stark feels he is at the height of his control. He’s just won the impeachment vote, he’s in front of the capitol. He sings his aria about being triumphant, and as he reaches the highpoint of that aria, Jack Burdon steps in front of him, and shoots him, and you suddenly see him tremble, and you go from singing to total consternation. At that point then, as Willie Stark lies dying, he recalls the lullaby from the end of the first act. He can’t get very far with it though. The lullaby’s eventually picked up in a hymn-kind-of-version by the offstage chorus, and you feel that contrast between that lullaby that’s sung in the background and the visual image of a dying Willie Stark on stage. So these are just two ways I feel why this opera is so incredibly successful, and these are just two of them. There are lots, many in between. So maybe we can pick up at this point? I’m quite sure the conductor and the stage director have numerous examples to add.

John Keene (0:04:29.4)

Well actually, one thing that comes to mind is the mention that's been made several times this evening of sort of the classic thought process when you first read an opera libretto, or come to learn a new work. Which is what is the dramatic situation, and how skillfully was it handled so that there isn't this sensation that the drama is building or continuing and suddenly it stops while someone sings and kind of holds everything up? As if that's a problem. And in my view, as a musician and as a conductor of opera, that's when things really get interesting. I would like it for the action to stop so the characters can sing in at least two moments that you've mentioned. One of the great things that happens is that we start to really see inside these people and really find out what makes them tick, and through the music which speaks at least as loudly as the words, if not more loudly. So I think that's probably one of the reasons those two moments stand out particularly.

Dugg McDonough (0:05:34.9)

Well, one thing that opera certainly can do, in my mind at least, and the minds of many others, I'm sure, better than any other art form is the expression of inner-monologue in an outward way. Certainly, I think all of us who've worked on this piece would agree that Act I, scene iii, Willie's, "Come back, Willie, come back home," is one of those moments where we learn the soul of the man, and to my mind, we learn the soul of the man much more, and much more clearly in the opera *Willie Stark* than in any of the other versions that have tried to approach *All The King's Men*. Again, it's something very special that opera can do. It can take music, and it can translate inner feelings in an outward way. That is just absolutely gorgeous, gorgeous and astonishing. Again, this is one of those ways characters are built on-stage, and

when blended with music, it's just an undeniable power and beauty about it, and you really will experience that, especially in that scene, and in a number of others. Writing a libretto myself, I've had to deal with that subject of inner-monologue and know when do people speak to themselves, when do people speak to others, and the balance of this in *Willie Stark* is enormously well-crafted. You get a little bit of everything in this work. You get some intense dramatic music alternating with dialogue, back to music, back to dialogue, back to music. For the dramatic situations seem to just tumble forward, and then you get these wonderful moments of reflection, and the balance is truly astonishing, and very special.

David Culbert (0:07:22.3)

I have a thought about an issue that didn't trouble Carlisle Floyd, but has certainly troubled members of the Long family. And that is whether *All The King's Men*, the novel, is fundamentally a sympathetic portrait of this figure Willie Stark or whether it is, in fact, a vitriolic assault on a fine native son. And I only read the book a number of times, and it's a mystery to me why someone would take the attitude that Russell Long certainly did. I mean, he told me he wasn't the man to use the same level of enthusiasm I bring to public discourse, but he definitely felt that this was a hatchet job, and his daughter, Kay, continues to feel this way. The Long family has a Web site and you can get, actually, quite a lot of helpful information, but you will never find that the Long family's Web site would recommend to anybody that you would ever open the cover of this blasphemous assault on the reputation of *All The King's Men*. And I honestly believe that some of the most vivid and memorable passages in *All of The King's Men* very much indicates that Warren, at a bare minimum, was willing to suggest that this could of been someone who, somewhere along the way, as he says, spilled his greatness on the ground.



But, it is certainly a sympathetic portrait while dealing with some of the complexities of someone who takes power and uses it. And I think that Carlisle Floyd did a very good job in the opera, in using music importantly so that when Willie – who could sing a little in real life but certainly wasn't ready to be an operatic baritone – when Willie is given a chance, basically to sing about the Share the Wealth program, what it is that he wants to do for the poor and the dispossessed, that these are moments in which the music, very much, allows the character to be given a great deal of integrity for the vision, and for what he is hoping to accomplish. I think that, of course, adds to the integrity because a depiction of Huey Long which focuses – as he was happy sometimes to do in real life as Huey Long – to focus on the trivial few-beers-and-a-couple-laughs approach to life would very much deny a chance for a fine opera to explore some serious ideas without sending the audience out the door. It's quite a neat trick.

Dugg McDonough (0:10:12.4)

Carlisle, could I ask you to ... When you were here before, you relayed this wonderful story about meeting Robert Penn Warren, about his reaction to the 1949 film and why, and his feelings about his connection ... The connection between his Willie Stark and with your Willie Stark ... It's a wonderful story. Do you mind telling us a little bit of that?

Carlisle Floyd (0:10:35.3)

What Dugg is referring to was my first – I suppose there were two visits to Connecticut to meet with Warren, and this is the first. To give you a little bit of background on this, Warren obviously had libretto approval, and he had the libretto, my libretto, submitted to him. But I had not had any word as to what his reaction was, nor that he approved or disapproved of what I'd

done with his book. So ... but never-the-less, he very cordially and graciously invited me to visit him and Eleanor in Fairfield, and he met me at the train station, and we drove all the way from the train station to his house, and he did nothing but talk to me about his wife. And, of course, all I wanted to know, “Am I going to get to do this or not?” You know, basically – and as we pulled up into the driveway, he said, “Oh, by the way, I read your libretto, and I liked it,” and I immediately was ready for the rest of the day and for the evening.

But needless to say, working with the material as long as I had, I was just anxious to get at him, and compare treatments of Willie Stark in the film version. And one of the first things that I said to him was, which Dugg is referring to, I said, “How did you feel about the movie version of *All The King’s Men*?” and immediately he started doing this (hand gesture). I’ll never forget – it was such an eloquent gesture. He didn’t need to say anything. He said, “That was not my Willie, that’s not my Willie.” He said it was a “fascist track, don’t you remember?” Well, I didn’t remember. He said, “Yes, at the end of the film they have him saying tomorrow the world!” Which I had conveniently forgotten, but he said, “No, no, no.” I said, “Well then, I’m very, very happy that you feel that way because my reaction to the film was exactly the same.” I felt in the film version he was an east side thug. Basically, a boss, and they had absolutely no conception of Willie Stark as the complex human being that he was. And then, what Dugg is referring to is, then he paid me what I felt was the supreme compliment. He said, “Now my Willie and your Willie are the same.” And so after that I had a great evening. He was asked by some reporter after the Kennedy Center performances about his and my conversations. And for some reason, a reporter asked him, “Did you and Carlisle have drinks together?” and Penn Warren says, as he was a noted for imbibing a great deal, he said, “Well, I would hate to think that we wasted the whole afternoon and evening!” But something that I wanted to say in

response to what David, right?, had said earlier that I wanted to come and ... that was the whole process and the whole challenge of transferring a work of art from one medium to another, and, as he very properly and accurately said, “A novel is words.”

I was at a cocktail party in Santa Fe with the playwright, Peter, what’s his name?

Robert Grayson: Peter Shaffer.

Carlisle Floyd:

And we were talking, and I was in the process of doing *Willie Stark* at the time, and, he said, “Well, does Penn Warren want to do it, your libretto? And, I said, “No, I hope not because I’ve done one myself,” and he said, “He won’t. He’s much too smart. He knows the difference of the dramatic and the narrative medium.” (That’s right!) And, I thought that was a very insightful and rather profound thought. And it certainly turned out to be the case because, as you mentioned, he’d done the play.

David Madden (0:14:47.9)

And the play shows in contrast to your opera that he never really – with all those adaptations, versions, productions – he never really learned the lesson that he was hired at Yale Drama School to teach and that is that a character like Jack Burden is not stage worthy. He’s not playable. You can’t play the guy, no matter how eloquent, no matter who the actor is. He’s just not effective as Jack Burden in the novel. The wonderful thing was your solution to that problem by having him become an integral part of the dramatic structure and instigator of action and a reactor to action. To have him not only be the person who shot Willie Stark but to know from the

beginning that the judge was his father, which you cannot play in an opera, and it really doesn't work all that well in film, and certainly wouldn't work in a stage version. So the more I think about what you've done with this, the more impressed I am with how much you have left the novel and previous versions of the play and the movie so far behind that this is really your work, and further, as far as the words are concerned, I was very sensitive. I love the words in the novel. I quote a lot of them a lot of the time. I was glad to see that as far as I can remember, not a single word in that in that libretto is Warren's. You didn't slavishly try to echo the famous lines, phrases. Am I wrong?

Carlisle Floyd 0:16:41:0

There's one or two

David Madden (0:16:41.8)

Maybe one or two? Okay ... show's how insensitive I am. Cut 'em out! So, I think that's the ideal way to go – is to just start with a clean slate. Ideally don't even rely at all on any previous work. You could have done your original thing with the Governor, but I think it is very good that you did stick with the Warren because you have some components there that are so powerful inherently that when they're brought together the way you bring them together, they're far more effective, and I wanted to echo what you said, that in the movie version, and even in the novel, we don't get inside Willie Stark. But with music and the words you chose and the setting of that aria and the echoes of that aria throughout the work, you really did get in, I felt, to Willie himself for the first time.

Carlisle Floyd (0:17:44.9)

Well, I personally have found that what interested me – there’s so many things that interested me in the book. In terms of the character himself – he can’t be reduced to good or evil. Nor can any of us, for that matter. But the point is that Jack Burden in my version is young Willie Stark. And very interesting enough, when it was done opening night at the Kennedy Center, I had a great couple who was sitting in the founders box and next to me was the president’s box and George Bush Sr. was sitting in that box, and he said to me at intermission (cause I had never met him before, although we were both from Houston), he said, “You have no idea how many ‘Jack Burdens’ there are in Washington.” I took that as a great compliment, and the other compliment that I got that evening was Senator Yates from Illinois who was the great proponent for the arts in Congress [for] many years, and he sat directly behind me. And he said to me, he said, afterwards, he said, “I’ll have to tell you this, Carlisle. I just got in from Illinois this afternoon,” he said, “and I was, frankly, very tired.” He said, “But I thought, well, I’m going to the opera so I’ll have a good chance to doze.” He said, “Carlisle, I want you to know that I didn’t doze for a moment during the entire opera!” I said, “I consider that the highest possible praise.” But, something that Warren said to me over dinner that particular night, in terms of what you were saying ... We were talking about Jack Burden versus Willie Stark. Jack Burden, in my version from the way I conceived it, is a composite of Adam Stanton and Jack Burden. Adam Stanton to me is rather shadowy in the role. But he has all that fierce kind of idealism and impossible kind of idealism. And I wanted to combine that, and I think you very, very accurately said that you can’t put Jack Burden on a stage because of what Penn Warren had said himself to me that night over dinner. He said, “Willie is the man of action; Jack is the man of inaction!” You cannot put an inactive hero on the stage. They’re dull, and I thought that was the calamity of

the second movie ... (Yeah, very much) ... that they gave a very accurate portrayal of Jack in the novel, but he never became a dramatic character despite excellent actors. But that, I felt, gave me license and the go-ahead with his saying that because I felt that was what I tried to do was to juxtapose those two men, plus the women, because I felt that Anne Stanton was very under-realized in the novel for my taste (and in the recent movie). She was hardly there. Well, I thought Sadie was even more neglected. But Anne Stanton, I felt, was a very strong character, again to put them on the stage to make her worthy of what she does, I think, has to be a great deal going on inside the lady, at least that's the way I tried to deal with it.

David Madden (0:21:05.7)

And in your version, just as Willie and Jack complement each other, there are parallels there. There are also parallels between Sadie Burke and what she would have liked to have been: Anne Stanton. And Anne Stanton who becomes Sadie Burke lurking in the shadows with her lover ...

Carlisle Floyd (0:21:25.7)

Yes, absolutely, improbable though that seems, given their particular social status.

Robert Grayson (0:21:36.0)

Well, gentlemen, we want to give our audience a chance if they have some questions. So if you have a question, raise your hand, and I'll come in your direction. This is the thinking man's audience. Here we go.

Audience Question #1 (0:21:52.2)

Thank you all for being here tonight, and we particularly appreciate you for being here for this occasion. Mr. Floyd, if you could bring your Willie Stark back to life this evening and take him to your home for either coffee, or a glass of wine, or a beer, and direct conversation with him, what would you like to hear him talk about?

Carlisle Floyd (0:22:25.3)

I didn't get the question.

Robert Grayson (0:22:27.0)

(repeats the question)

Carlisle Floyd (0:22:48.4)

Well, I think if I felt emboldened enough, what I would like to have said is what I have in the center of the opera. Willie Stark has a moment by himself in which he has set into motion this enormous accumulation of the events that end up in the destruction of Judge Burden and also his other political opponents. And he says to himself in a moment of self-reflection, "I wonder if in order to do good, a man has to sell his soul." And I think this is what I would put to him, basically, if that was ever a conscious choice on his part, a conscious rationalization. Because it is very inviting, I would think, to a man of power to justify on the basis of the good that I'm accomplishing through the evil. So I think that I would, as I said, if I felt bold enough, and felt comfortable enough, I think I would get that personal.

Robert Grayson (0:23:53.9)

Thank you, another question.

Carlisle Floyd (0:23:54.9)

I'd also like to ask the same question, but to a number of present day politicians.

Audience member (0:24:06.0)

Mr. Floyd, thank you for being here tonight. All of us at LSU who were involved with *Willie Stark* have fallen in love with the work. Especially, I think, us young singers who have the chance to learn it. Can you even hear me with the microphone? Yeah? Okay! Now I've lost my train of thought. And we began to realize the connection between the text and the drama, and the music and how well they work together, but do you, or anyone else see any difference in, as Mr. McDonough was saying earlier, how *Willie Stark* hasn't taken off in the professional world as some of the other operas, *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men*? Do you see in any difference in that? Because, we obviously see the underlying sense to what makes it a great opera.

Dugg McDonough:

What Noel was asking ... do you see any reasons why, as opposed to *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men*, do you feel that there are any particular reasons why *Willie Stark*, as he said, "hasn't taken off in the number of performances?"



Carlisle Floyd (0:25:23.3)

No, frankly, I haven't because I think, if I may say so in modesty, I think it's every bit as effective theatrically as either of those other two operas. And it's a more complex opera to mount in terms of producers, as these people can attest; it's a larger scale opera. But I found it fascinating material to work on. It's something the theme of which still fascinates me as we see it more and more in our own society. In other words, the public man versus the personal, the private man. And what happens when the public man is trying to triumph and is brought down by his own private demons of which is the subject I've wanted to deal with dramatically. I think it's a timeless and very great thing to try to deal with. But I've never felt that there was anything – let's put it this way – there are other operas of mine I think the subject matter of which might be a little bit more remote than say, *Susannah* or *Of Mice and Men*, but I don't think that's the case of *Willie Stark*. I think, certainly, that *All The King's Men* is standard reading for any educated person in this country, and I never felt that was a problem. It had a very large television audience when it was done on "Great Performances," and my publishers thought that might've killed immediate transfers to stages, to do it in the theatre, simply from fear of comparison of the television version. I had no idea of whether there's any credence in that or not, but needless to say, I am delighted to have it revived after fifteen years or whatever it's been ... perhaps even longer now, twenty years. And I'm quite sure, for my own satisfaction, that I'll feel justified in what I see tomorrow night because I spent many years working on *All The King's Men*, and I can tell you honestly [that] I never spent a boring day working with those characters. They kept me absolutely riveted to what I was doing for four years.

Robert Grayson (0:27:44.5)

Well, I am so sorry to say that we are a multi-use facility. There's an 8 o'clock recital; we have to clear the stage for that. But I want to thank each of the people who have spoken tonight: John Keene, Wayne Parent, David Madden, David Culbert, Carlisle Floyd, Dugg McDonough, and Andreas Giger for presenting a wonderful evening, a variety of viewpoints, and I want to encourage each of you to not only come yourself, but let people you know in town know about this production, because it's a fantastic representation of this work. This is your hometown opera. I know you're proud of us, and we're so excited to be doing this. Thank you for coming tonight. I'd like to ask the audience to exit through the rear doors. The panel will exit from the side of the stage and be available to greet you in the lobby. Thank you all very much! Thank you, gentlemen!

## VITA

A teacher as well as performer, Betsy Uschkrat has been an Adjunct Professor of Voice for Loyola University's College of Music since 2010 and has been on staff as a Vocal Instructor for the Preparatory and Continuing Studies Department since 2008. Interested in various musical genres, Ms. Uschkrat specializes in both classical and musical theatre repertoire, frequently performing throughout the United States. Her love of American Opera was first discovered while pursuing her Bachelor's Degree at the University of Houston Moores School of Music, where she sang the role of Mrs. Honeychurch in Robert Nelson's *A Room with a View* (released on DVD with Newport Classic). While attending Indiana University for a Master's Degree in Vocal Performance, Ms. Uschkrat was named Miss Indiana University 2006, became Miss Indiana 2006, and competed in the Miss America Pageant in January 2007. Also while at Indiana University, she sang the title role of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*. In 2008 she moved to New Orleans with her husband, Tyler Smith, and in 2009 won Shreveport Opera's Singer of the Year competition, as well as Birmingham Opera's Vocal Competition. A two-time Regional finalist for the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, Ms. Uschkrat also won the 2016 Mobile Opera's 2016 Competition. Other honors include recitals and performances with The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.; Des Moines Metro Opera; New Orleans Symphony; Opera Idaho; Idaho Falls Symphony; Louisiana Opera of Monroe, and Opéra Louisiane in Baton Rouge. Ms. Uschkrat plans to graduate from LSU in August 2016.