



## Heart of a Soldier: capturing 9/11 in an opera

One man's quick thinking saved thousands of lives on 9/11.

Thomas Hampson, who plays him in a new opera, reflects on the life and loves of an American hero

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Thomas Hampson

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Thomas Hampson, Rick Rescorla's widow, Susan, and Dan Hill. Photograph: Cory Weaver

I was performing in London when David Gockley (San Francisco Opera's general director) came to talk to me. He wanted to discuss an idea for a new work based on a book called *Heart of a Soldier* by the Pulitzer prize-winning author James B Stewart. Francesca Zambello, the opera director, had recommended it to him – she had seen the operatic potential in the story of Rick Rescorla, a 9/11 hero born in a small Cornish village.

The book struck me like a thunderbolt: here was a moving story – about fate and the bonds of love and friendship – that shone brightly in stark relief against the black

backdrop of 9/11. And at its heart is a poet-soldier, Rick Rescorla, Morgan Stanley's former director of security, whose inspirations were Kipling and Shakespeare, and whose bravery meant some 3,000 fewer people died that day than might have done, even though he lost his own life.

I had been in New York, rehearsing at the Metropolitan Opera, on September 11 2001, but I hadn't heard this tale of heroism, and I was immediately intrigued. Without hesitation, and with only a kernel of information about the project, I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

Stewart's is not a political story, and composer Christopher Theofanidis and librettist Donna Di Novelli haven't created a political opera. There's no finger-wagging. It's not a morality tale about terrorism, nor even an account of what unfolded on 11 September.

I was asked to sing the role of Rescorla, and I started finding out about his story and what made him the man he was. He fought in Vietnam, and he never got over losing any of those young men serving under him. The responsibility he felt towards them was one of the life experiences that shaped how he responded on 9/11.

Rescorla was adamant that people should be disciplined and prepared for the unknown eventualities of their lives. You learn to drive better because you never know what another driver is going to do; when you work in a 115-storey building you have fire drills – and you have them frequently. That's what Rick did. And because of that discipline – that attention to technical and mundane detail, and that belief in people – nearly 3,000 people didn't die.

The closest comparison I can make to an existing opera is William Tell – which, incidentally, is the only opera I've done before with Zambello. It's the same kind of story: about family, about hearth and homeland under attack by intruders, and how we have to stand up for people.

Rescorla wasn't a goody-two-shoes, but he understood – and lived according to the belief – that at the defining moments in your life you simply do the right thing. He gave people tremendous faith in themselves, and he liked doing that. It's an honour for me to try to find the footsteps of this character I have come to admire so much.

To my mind, Heart of a Soldier reflects the essence of American life: the belief in self, and the belief in the right to live one's life in a way that one believes in. It's not a long opera, but every vignette, every little scene, is full of life: full of people doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing at any given moment, sometimes with happy results, other times with tragic consequences. It's tremendously sad at the end, with the cataclysmic collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. But it's also two wonderful love stories: an achingly poignant romance, and a profound friendship between two men that spans decades and continents. The first is about two people – Rick and his second wife Susan – in mid-life with a lot of baggage, with a lot of life

behind them, who meet by chance in a defining moment we can all appreciate, because they find the dream we all have: that we can be brought to a moment by higher forces. The second storyline, arching across Rick's adult life, is his friendship with Dan Hill, whom he met in 1960 when both were in the army, and whose close friendship endured to the end of Rick's life.

Theofanidis incorporates into his score a recurring musical theme based on a Cornish folksong about the heart – the lion's heart and being true to your own heart (Rick was born in Hayle, in Cornwall, where a memorial to him has been erected). Returning at one point to the 1960s, to capture the essence of the time, the opera tells the "lion story" of how Rick and Dan met. Dan had heard about the fabled Rick, who ventured into the jungle to track a lion that has been terrorising villages. Three days later, Rick returned with a huge carcass slung over his shoulder and a lion's tooth around his neck; Rick took the lion's blood and smeared it ritualistically on his arms and legs, inhabiting the spirit of strength. Such warrior moments and military metaphors are there in the opera, and the Cornish melody embodies these particularly heroic moments.

A few days into the rehearsal process, I'm struck by how Theofanidis has mustered in his music all the requisite momentum, rhythmic drive and powerful but never maudlin lyricism to make for a deeply theatrical and moving evening. His musical voice is fascinating and exciting, tonal and yet inventive.

One thing about this role and this opera that has such a profound appeal for me is that it's not loaded with melancholy or self-pity. It's life-affirming and filled with hope. It gives the feeling that the characters have been involved in a life-fulfilling process. Some of those lives are shorter, and that's very painful for those left behind. It's neither a pacifist story nor a military story, but a personal one: about the heart of a soldier, about courage, fate, and certainly love. The story of Susan's relationship with Rick is beautiful: though tragic in its brevity – the two were married for only two years before his death. There won't be a dry eye in the house, for many reasons.

America has been profoundly changed by 9/11. While not being a "9/11 opera", this piece allows everyone to meet the phenomenon of 9/11 on his or her own terms. Despite being an artist who works all over the world in an art form so bound to European culture and history, I am an American who feels very strongly about my country's ideals, and I reflect often on its founding principles and how real-politik has reinterpreted them in any generation. While reading Stewart's book and looking forward to doing the opera, I wrote to Gockley: "This is a profound project in my life and a great honor to even try to make a life like Rick Rescorla's realisable ... He's a great human being. He has given me a little renewed piece of faith that there is right in the world, that there is reason."

This work isn't entirely full of hope, but it is full of reason and consequence. There's a sense of fulfillment in it. We have an arc to our lives, and we don't know what it is. There's only so much any of us can know.

**Heart of a Soldier has its world premiere at San Francisco Opera on 10 September. Details: [sfopera.com](http://sfopera.com)**

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