

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, 2014 production photo, <http://rickyiangordon.com/images/gallery/27/27-8.jpg>



"Do we suppose that all she knows is that a rose is a rose is a rose?" Gertrude Stein, *Operas and Plays*, 1932

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis wanted an original opera for mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe and, on her recommendation, they commissioned composer Ricky Ian Gordon to create the piece for their *New Works, Bold Voices* cycle of American opera on American themes. Thinking about Stephanie Blythe's "larger-than-life" voice, Gordon came up with the idea of chronicling the life and times of the "larger-than-life" characters Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. While Stein was a well-known writer, she is probably more famous for the cultural "salons" that she and Alice hosted at their residence at 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris—hence Gordon's title *27* (or *Twenty-Seven*) for the opera.



Man Ray's 1922 portrait of Alice and Gertrude in their home at 27 rue de Fleurus (Getty Images)

The 90-minute opera, with a prologue and five acts, premiered on June 14, 2014 at the Loretto-Hilton Center in St. Louis. Covering a time period of about 40 years through WW I and WWII, the opera focuses on the Saturday evening salons with up-and-coming painters like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso and, later, American writers and artists like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Man Ray, who strove to win Stein's approval. While the salon scenes are funny and fast moving, *27* also introduces the darker side of Gertrude's life, where questions arise about how she and Alice, as Jews, stayed safe during Hitler's time. She is known to have had some questionable relationships with people who were identified as collaborators with France's Vichy regime. Whatever the truth is, *27* has proven to be an innovative and interesting look at two American women who were ahead of their time personally, professionally, and socially.

by Jill Leahy

27 Synopsis

Setting: Paris, France in the early decades of the 20th Century

Prologue Alice Knits the World

Alice B. Toklas sits in her living room at 27 rue de Fleurus and conjures the world she shared with Gertrude Stein by knitting the memories of their past back to life.

Act One 27 rue de Fleurus

Gertrude enters the salon and invites her guests to peruse her collection, praising the genius of the artists, as Alice attends to everyone. Pablo Picasso reveals his own portrait of Gertrude in a ceremony that is met with disdain by Leo Stein and a bit of jealousy by Henri Matisse. Leo announces he is moving to Italy and storms out. Gertrude and Alice toast his departure and sing of the ringing bells of genius that celebrate their love.

Act Two Zeppelins

Gertrude and Alice weather the First World War in Paris. Gertrude continues to write as the cold sets in and food becomes scarce. An American doughboy stationed in Paris becomes a friend, and provides them with coal and cigarettes, but fails to return with sought-after eggs. Another boy is added to the tally of the lost generation.

Act Three Génération Perdue

After the war, Gertrude's attention shifts from painters to writers, now welcoming the likes of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the photographer Man Ray. Ernest and Scotty are desperate for Gertrude's endorsement so she encourages them to wrestle for her attention—she will announce the winner a genius. The writers are expelled from the salon as the next war approaches.

Act Four Gertrude Stein is Safe, Safe

Gertrude and Alice survive the Second World War by sacrificing paintings. Picasso's portrait of Gertrude preys on her conscience, asking her to explain how a Jewish-American authoress survived Nazi-occupied France. The guilt eats away at her and she dies in Alice's arms.

Act Five Alice Alone

Alice, now alone, is surprised by the return of Picasso. Together they say goodbye to the portrait of Gertrude as it is being shipped off to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Picasso sketches an image of Gertrude for Alice as the bells of genius and love chime once more.

Adapted from <http://rickyiangordon.com/works.php> and Albany CD recording of a June 2014 performance at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.



Characters

Gertrude Stein *mezzo-soprano*

An American writer of novels, poetry, and plays. Born in Pittsburgh, PA, Stein moved to Paris in 1903, making France her home for the remainder of her life. Her home with Alice B. Toklas, at 27 rue de Fleurus (Paris) "brought together confluences of talent and thinking that would help define modernism in literature and art."

Alice B. Toklas [TOE-klahss] *soprano*

An American-born member of the Parisian avant-garde of the early 20th century. Remaining in the background, she acted as Stein's confidante, lover, cook, secretary, muse, editor, critic, and general organizer.

Frequent guests at the Stein home:

Pablo Picasso *tenor*

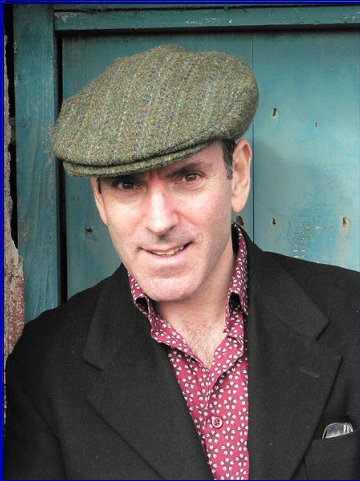
Also sings *Fernande*, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, *Painting #1*, *Gris Painting #1*, *Picasso's Gertrude #1*, *Soldier #1*, *Empty Frame #1*

Leo Stein *baritone*

Also sings *Madame Matisse*, *Man Ray*, *Doughboy*, *Painting #2*, *Gris Painting #2*, *Picasso's Gertrude #2*, *Soldier #2*, *Empty Frame #2*

Ernest Hemingway *bass-baritone*

Also sings *Marie Laurencin*, *Henri Matisse*, *Painting #3*, *Gris Painting #3*, *Picasso's Gertrude #3*, *Soldier #3*, *Empty Frame #3*



Ricky Ian Gordon photo by Kevin Doyle

Meet the composer Ricky Ian Gordon

by Jill Leahy

Ricky Ian Gordon was born on May 15, 1956 in Oceanside, NY and raised on Long Island.

After studying music composition at Carnegie Mellon University, he settled in New York City, where he quickly emerged as a leading writer of vocal music that spans art song, opera, and musical theater. Mr. Gordon's songs have been performed and recorded by such internationally renowned singers as Renee Fleming, Dawn Upshaw, Audra McDonald, Kristin Chenoweth, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Frederica Von Stade, Harolyn Blackwell, and Betty Buckley.

F. Paul Driscoll, writing for *Opera News* in 2014, wrote that Gordon admits that the first draft of **27** was written at high speed. "I got the libretto and started the music on May 21," he recalls. "I handed it in in October. It was a profound experience. Gertrude and Alice felt very alive to me—I felt as if I were visiting with them." Stein and her world have been an interest of Gordon's since his student days at Carnegie Mellon. "I was living in Shadyside and had this horrible flu. I couldn't do anything except read and eat tangerines. I picked up *Charmed Circle* by James R. Mellow, about Gertrude and Alice and their world. I was completely transported—not only because Gertrude's story was interesting to me. At that moment I found a frame for my own life. Everything Gertrude did to create a life for herself made sense to me. The thing about that book and that circle—the salon—is that you don't feel a sense of people doing something for their own glory—there's a thread in the story of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas of joy and amusement and engagement, that they genuinely loved these talented people who visited them and amazed them and stimulated them at their home."



http://www.coteriedowntown.org/?page_id=89

Meet the librettist Royce Vavrek

by Jill Leahy

Royce Vavrek was born in Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada and is now a resident of Brooklyn.

A librettist and lyricist known as "an exemplary creator of operatic prose" (*The New York Times*) and "a favorite collaborator of the post-classical set" (*Time Out New York*), his writing has been called "sharp, crisp, witty", "taut", "meticulous", and "exhilarating" by a variety of critics. He is also co-Artistic Director of The Coterie, an opera-theater company founded with soprano Lauren Worsham. He holds a BFA in Filmmaking and Creative Writing from Concordia University's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema in Montreal and an MFA in Musical Theater Writing from New York University. He is an alum of ALT's Composer Librettist Development Program.

His selection to write the libretto for **27** is a story about all the stars aligning. When Ricky Ian Gordon received a commission from James Robinson, artistic director of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Gordon suggested they pick Gertrude Stein as the subject. His first choice for a librettist didn't work out, but then he remembered Royce Vavrek who had said, "I'll do anything to work with you." On March 16, 2013, Gordon told him, "If you can read 15 books about Stein, Toklas, and the 'Lost Generation' and write an opera libretto in a month, you have the job." Gordon's stipulations were that he wanted to include a favorite Stein quote ("Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded") and he wanted to make sure that there was something about how they stayed safe during the German occupation of France in World War II. Vavrek read voraciously for two weeks and finished in six weeks what Gordon called "a stunning libretto."

Introducing Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas

by Jill Leahy



Gertrude Stein, the youngest of five children, was born in Pittsburgh (formerly Allegheny City on the North Side) in 1874, though she only lived there until she was three years old. Her parents moved to Europe, then back to the U.S., and then settled in Oakland, California. Both parents died when Gertrude was in her early teens so she was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Baltimore. Stein attended Radcliffe College, where she studied psychology with noted psychologist **William James**, and attended The Johns Hopkins University, where she studied medicine, but did not receive a formal degree from either institution.

In 1903, Stein moved with her brother **Leo Stein** to an apartment at **27 rue de Fleurus** on the Left Bank of Paris. Together, Gertrude and Leo began building the **art collection** for which they would become famous. In 1907, Gertrude met **Alice B. Toklas**, who had come to Paris with another friend. Alice moved into the apartment, and it was during this time that the renowned **Saturday evening salons** took place, attracting both expatriate American artists and writers, and other notables in the world of art, music, and literature. When Gertrude and Leo had an acrimonious split in 1914, he moved and took half of the art.

Gertrude Stein's real talent was her ability to spot the most **exciting and promising new artists and authors** long before they were recognized by the rest of the world. While Gertrude was in the forefront of the gatherings, Alice often entertained the wives and mistresses of the "**genius**" attendees, prompting some historians to say that Alice was Gertrude Stein's "**wife**" in the living arrangement. However, though Gertrude physically and personally dominated the salons, Alice dominated Gertrude. Toklas' editor, Robert Lescher, said, "Small or not, she was steel, absolutely." According to the gourmet **James Beard**, Alice was also a really good cook. One of her two cookbooks is the famous *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, which contained a recipe for fudge made with marijuana or hashish that "anyone could whip up on a rainy day."

There is no question that Stein and Toklas were devoted to each other. Gertrude Stein's 1933 autobiography, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, was written as if Alice Toklas were the narrator. Most have heard **A rose, is a rose, is a rose**, one of Gertrude Stein's most famous quotes, but many are surprised to learn that it was Stein, in a conversation with Ernest Hemingway, who coined the phrase "**the lost generation**" while describing the expatriate writers living abroad between the wars.

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Life partners and hostesses of the Parisian avant-garde at salons during the early 20th century:

Gertrude Stein (1874 – 1946)
Alice B. Toklas (1877 – 1967)

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org
412-281-0912 ext 242

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
pittsburghopera.org/education