

In a Grove

Music by Christopher Cerrone • Libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann
Freely adapted from the short story by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

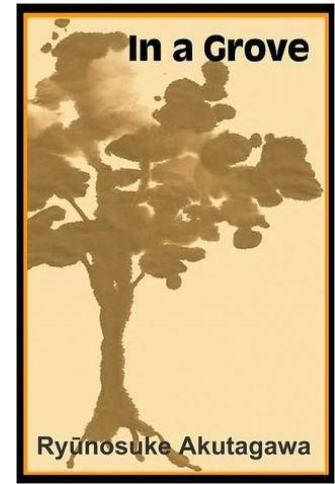
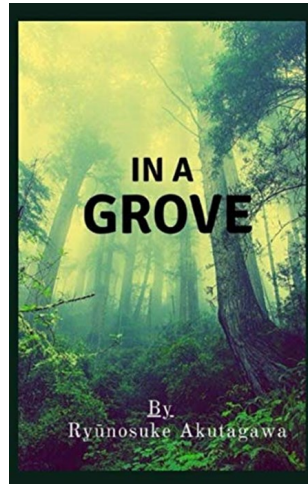
PITTSBURGH OPERA
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera

In a Grove is a Japanese short story by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa first published as *Yabu no naka* in the monthly Japanese literature magazine *Shinchō* in 1922.

Yabu no naka was translated by Takashi Kujima as *In a Grove* for the 1952 English language edition published by C.E. Tuttle Company. For the 2007 Penguin Books edition, Jay Rubin translated the story as *In a Bamboo Grove*.

The story was ranked as one of the "10 best Asian novels of all time" by *The Telegraph* in 2014.



The Roots of a Story from Japan

芥川 龍之介

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa was born in Tokyo, the only son of father Toshizō Nihara and mother Fuku Akutagawa. His mother experienced a mental illness shortly after his birth, so he was adopted and raised by his maternal uncle, Dōshō Akutagawa, from whom he received the Akutagawa family name. Even as a young boy, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa was interested in classical Chinese literature. In high school, his friends included several classmates who later became authors. At university, he studied English literature, which helped prepare him to become an English language instructor for a time.

All of these experiences molded Akutagawa's views and prompted him to devote all of his efforts to writing. Shortly after a trip to China in 1921, he published "In a Grove", which exemplifies his belief that the practice of literature should be universal and could bring together Japanese and other cultures. Akutagawa's stories incorporated ideas from a variety of cultures and eras; he either rewrote stories from his own perspective or created new stories from ideas he collected. As a result, he became known as the "father of the Japanese short story". Japan's top literary award, the Akutagawa Prize, is named after him.

Some of the more than 150 Akutagawa short stories have been adapted into other art forms, such as film, ballet, and a Japanese opera, *Rashomon*, by Mayako Kubo.

The new opera, *In a Grove*, by Christopher Cerrone and Stephanie Fleischmann, comes from long literary roots and adds to the legacy of a skillful Japanese storyteller.

Akutagawa stories translated into English

Old Age
Rashōmon
The Nose
The Handkerchief
The Story of a Head That Fell Off
The Spider's Thread
Hell Screen
The Death of a Disciple
Kesa and Morito
Dragon: the Old Potter's Tale
Autumn

In a Grove

Creators' Summary Statement

A silent, waiting grove. A violent encounter between a Samurai and his wife and a notorious brigand. Seven testimonies, each offering up a different perspective on the crime. Inspired by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's eponymous short story, *In a Grove* is sited on the boundary between installation and chamber opera.

As the audience enters, the piece has already begun. The performers build the environment, which becomes a haunted temple to which the witnesses and perpetrators of the crime have come to reckon with the truth. The audience is complicit in this ritual, inhabiting a shared space with the performers that radically expands and contracts over the course of the work. As the work progresses, the temple opens up to reveal the grove, which now encompasses audience and performers alike.

Four singers play eight roles, each assuming the character of both witness and participant in the crime. Six instrumentalists also function as characters, each in concert with a different testimonial. Dispersed throughout the space and accompanied by electronics throughout, the instruments form the architecture of this world. As the testimonies unfold, singers and players shift the sonic terrain and the audience's relationship to the drama.

The score is both lush and menacing, engendering an air of suspense. Testimonies overlay, evoking the imprecise nature of memory as musical ideas slip in and out of focus. The visual aesthetic is stripped down, verging on austere.

Each of the central characters claims responsibility for the crime. In the retelling of the events from multiple perspectives, the Samurai dies three times, as does Masago, the young woman at the heart of the story, who comes to the temple seeking refuge. Yet she who wants nothing more than to end her life cannot seem to die. She is destined to relive the events over and over again.

Our search for the truth remains as elusive today as when Akutagawa wrote "In a Grove" in 1922. In an age of alternative facts, exploring the possibilities of truth becomes all the more essential. Shifting from intimate to epic and back, *In a Grove* will be a powerfully unsettling, haunting experience designed to be both confounding and crystalline, disjunctive yet deeply emotional.

Source: christophcerrone.com



Theme:

In a Grove is a meditation on subjectivity, innocence, empathy, and guilt, presenting the narrative of a fatal crime in the testimony of several witnesses whose differing stories make the truth impossible to discern.

Facts:

One act chamber opera in English.
Length about one hour.

Time/Place:

1921, Oregon; a landscape similar to that of Deschutes, Malheur, or Siskiyou Counties after multiple wildfires. A ghost forest caused by fire instead of salt.

Premiere:

World Premiere scheduled at Pittsburgh Opera, February 19, 2022.
Commissioned by Los Angeles Opera.

Singers:

The Woodcutter/The Outlaw

(Luther Harlow)

baritone

The Priest/The Medium

countertenor

The Policeman/The Settler

(Ambrose Raines)

tenor

Narcissa Raines/Older woman

(Narcissa's mother)

soprano

Instrumentation:

Flute, Clarinet, 2 Percussion, Harp, Piano/Keyboard, Violin, Cello, Electronics/Sound Designer



Meet the Composer

Christopher Cerrone (1984–) is an American composer whose compositions are internationally acclaimed for their subtle handling of timbre and

resonance, a deep literary fluency, and a flair for multimedia collaborations. Balancing lushness and austerity, immersive textures and telling details, dramatic impact and interiority, his music is uniquely his own.

Cerrone is composing a new antiphonal brass concerto for the Cincinnati Symphony and a work for Hub New Music premiered via Livestream with Arizona Friends of Chamber Music. Other recent works are *The Last Message Received*, as well as works for pianist David Kaplan, mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, cellist Johannes Moser, Lorelei Ensemble, cellist Inbal Segev, and pianist Anthony DeMare (the *Liaisons* project, adapting the music of Stephen Sondheim).

Other works include *The Air Suspended*, a piano concerto; *Don't Look Down*, a concerto grosso for Conor Hanick and Sandbox Percussion; *The Insects Became Magnetic*, an orchestral work with electronics; *Meander Spiral, Explode*, a percussion quartet concerto; *Breaks and Breaks*, a violin concerto; a Miller Theatre Composer Portrait performed by Third Coast Percussion; *Will There Be Singing*; and *Can't and Won't*. Cerrone's opera, *Invisible Cities*, a 2014 Pulitzer Prize finalist, was praised by the *Los Angeles Times* as "a delicate and beautiful opera . . . [which] could be, and should be, done anywhere."

Christopher Cerrone holds degrees from the Yale School of Music and the Manhattan School of Music. His work is published by Schott NY and Project Schott New York. He teaches at Mannes School of Music, along with having an active private studio. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, writer Carrie Sun.

christophercerrone.com



Meet the Librettist

Stephanie Fleischmann (1962–) is a playwright and librettist whose texts serve as blueprints for intricate three-dimensional sonic and visual worlds.

She has been called "a writer who can conjure something between a dreamy road movie and a theatrical coming-of-age tale. Her works have been performed in the U.S. and internationally.

Opera libretti include: *The Long Walk*, music by Jeremy Howard Beck; *After the Storm*, music by David Hanlon; *In a Grove*, with composer Christopher Cerrone; *The Property*, music by Wlad Marhulets; *Boundless*, a video opera serial with composer Avner Dorman; and *Poppaea*, with composer Michael Hersch.

Upcoming works include *The Pigeon Keeper*, with David Hanlon; *Arhipov*, with Peter Knell; *Dido*, with Melinda Wagner; *Barrel of Laughs, Vale of Tears*, with Julia Adolphe; *A Space of Sky*, with Jeremy Howard Beck; and *Seven Sisters*, with Justine Chen. Fleischmann's texts and songs have been set by composers Anna Clyne, Gity Razaz, Olga Neuwirth, Matthew Recio, Brendan Connelly, Sxip Shirey, Theo Popov, Elspeth Brooke, and others.

Music-theater works include *The Visitation, Bacchae, Niagara, Red Fly/Blue Bottle, The Secret Lives of Coats, The Sweetest Life*, and *The Hotel Carter*. Plays include *Sound House, Eloise & Ray, Tally Ho, The Street of Useful Things, What the Moon Saw, The World Speed Carnival*, and more.

Fleischmann has been awarded grants from *Opera America*, the MAP Fund, and New Music USA, among others. She received her MFA from Brooklyn College, where she studied with Mac Wellman. She has taught at Sewanee, Bard, and Skidmore Colleges. Her plays are published by *Play, a Journal of Plays*; *Playscripts.com*; and Smith and Krauss.

www.stephaniefleischmann.com



Adaptations of a Famous Short Story

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, pseudonym Chōkōdō Shujin or Gaki, (1892–1927) was a prolific Japanese writer known especially for his stories based on events in the Japanese past and for his stylistic virtuosity. His short story “In a Grove” first appeared in a Japanese literary monthly in 1922.

“In a Grove” is an early modernist short story—a blending of the modernist search for identity with themes from historic Japanese literature, and is perhaps the iconic work of Akutagawa's career.

“In a Grove” presents three varying accounts of the murder of a samurai, whose corpse has been found in a bamboo forest near Kyoto. Each section simultaneously clarifies and obfuscates what the reader knows about the murder, eventually creating a complex and contradictory vision of events that brings into question humanity's ability or willingness to perceive and transmit objective truth.

Akira Kurosawa used “In a Grove” as the basis for the plot of his award-winning 1950 movie *Rashōmon*, with Toshiro Mifune, Machiko Kyō, Masayuki Mori, and Takashi Shimura. The rape of a bride and the murder of her samurai husband are recalled from the perspectives of a bandit, the bride, the samurai's ghost, and a woodcutter.

Martin Ritt's 1964 retelling of the story, *The Outrage*, featured Paul Newman, Laurence Harvey, Claire Bloom, and Edward G. Robinson. Travelers in the 1870s Southwest discuss a recent murder trial in which all the principals told differing stories about the events.



“In a Grove” in a short story collection



Rashōmon 1950 film



The Outrage 1964 film

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All analyses of the original story proceed from these premises:

- The Husband is dead, killed by a stab wound in the chest.
- The Brigand raped The Wife.
- The Brigand stole The Husband's bow and quiver, as well as the woman's horse.
- In each of the accounts, The Wife wishes The Husband dead, although the details vary.
- The Wife and the Brigand did not leave together.

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

Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
www.pittsburghopera.org