Bare-Knuckle Politics

administration David A. Moss developed a course on American governance and politics using the Business School’s case method—in which students are presented with facts and issues, and then discuss potential outcomes. He has now pulled that material together in Democracy: A Case Study (Harvard, $35), a unique textbook. Moss (whose Tobin Project was featured in “Rebooting Social Science,” July-August 2014, page 54) describes American governance as “an organism, not a machine” in the introduction, where he also has this to say:

In the wake of a contentious U.S. election, faculty members of two Harvard professional schools have published on the nation’s democratic origins and traditions (see also “A Conservative Counter-revolution,” page 69). Cherington professor of business

Moss, along with composer Julian Wachner and dramaturg Cori Ellison, watched as the singers waded through this madcap, overstuffed plot. In workshop, “We find out whether something sounds stupid when it’s sung,” says Jacobs, “or if something stinks. Everything looks good on paper, sounds good on paper—but there’s nothing like putting it on its feet.”

A freewheeling approach to different cultures is typical of Jacobs’s work, which is fantastical and afterlife-obsessed. Her libretti star characters from Chinese legend, with dream sequences set in Sumerian myths and lines borrowed from King Lear and The Song of Songs. This hodgepodge reflects her upbringing in Singapore, with its stew of faiths and languages. Jacobs’s Cantonese-speaking parents initially sent her to a Chinese school, where she learned Mandarin; then they had second thoughts (“They were afraid I would be converted to this horrid little Communist in their midst”), and switched her to a Methodist missionary school, where she learned hymn singing and Bible study. The family regularly celebrated Hindu festivals and the end of Ramadan with their Tamil and Malay friends, Jacobs recalls. And: “We watched Chinese opera religiously, every Sunday, at my grandmother’s house.” The genre differs from Western opera not just in musical scale but in overall duration, she points out: a single work can go on for days, with attendees eating throughout. Jacobs attempted to recreate a version of that experience with her Ouroboros Trilogy, which audiences could watch in all-day musical marathons at Boston’s Cutler Majestic Theater this past September. “They do not allow you to bring in food,” she laments. “Munching on French fries as you’re watching—it wasn’t possible. But if it were, I would want that!”

Ouroboros follows a snake demon and her besotted companion as they’re reincarnated at three different points in time. In each of the operas—Madame White Snake, Naga, and Gilgamesh—a dogmatic man of religion becomes their adversary, and other humans get tragically caught up in the conflict. Spanning fictional eras, the complete cycle runs a little over five hours, and began...

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