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By Penny Gray

Making Art Out of the Dark

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Upper East Side poet Anna Rabinowitz has much to smile about these days. Most poets are grateful to have a collection of poetry published; few can boast that their words have been set in an opera, and even fewer can say that the opera has been successful enough to warrant a CD release. But Rabinowitz can.

From a book-length poem to a multimedia experimental opera featuring the music of composer Stefan Weisman to its current incarnation as an audio recording, *Darkling* is a haunting portrayal of the emotions, terrors and incalculable losses incurred by Eastern European Jewish people during the period from between the two world wars to the Holocaust.

Rabinowitz's journey to becoming a poet was a somewhat circuitous one. She had a full life as a wife, mother and interior designer before deciding to pursue life as a poet, something she had dreamed about as a child. "I just decided that I didn't want to wake up one day and realize I hadn't done what I wanted to do, so I found my way back to poetry," she said.

She started taking classes at The New

School, where she was singled out by teachers and encouraged to take her new vocation seriously. She enrolled in the Columbia MFA program as a mature student. "It was the best thing I ever did," she said.

Since then, Rabinowitz has gone on to an illustrious career as a poet. A National Endowment for the Arts fellow, she has published four volumes of poetry, including *Darkling*.

Darkling started as a shoebox full of photographs and letters in her parents' closet. When Rabinowitz's parents died, she was left with a collection of memory fragments she didn't know or understand. "It was terrible to grow up in this world alone, marginalized and without family, having parents who must have felt terrible that they were the only ones to survive," she recalled. "And all the while I felt angry with them because they wouldn't talk about these things."

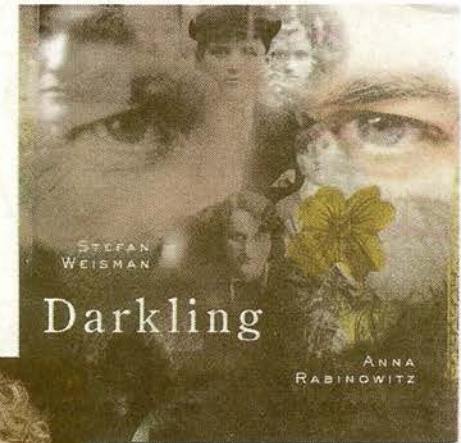
Rabinowitz sent the fragments off to be translated from Yiddish into English. When they returned, the real work of *Darkling* began. "This project was a way of honoring the lives of friends and relatives, not forgetting them, letting them

have their moment. I guess it's a way of being a sort of missionary and relieving myself of guilt at the same time."

For Rabinowitz, the process was both haunting and frustrating. "I didn't want to invent anything. I knew I was distant from the events of the Holocaust. I find it problematic when people write about this period. It's like they're writing a consolation, which trivializes it."

The book of poetry was released by Tupelo Press in 2001 and caught the attention of American Opera Projects, a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing and generating new American operas while expanding the form. Post-classical composer Stefan Weisman created a score that is rich in minimalist riffs, recalling Schoenberg, Bartok and Shostakovich and hinting at Jewish folk idioms.

The operatic incarnation of *Darkling* opened at Classic Stage Company in 2006 to such success that it returned to New York the following year as part of New York City Opera's VOX. Since then,



Anna Rabinowitz.

the opera has toured widely in Europe and the United States.

Now, *Darkling* is available in a realm beyond the written page and live performance. The new recording, released by Albany

Records and produced by Judith Sherman, brings *Darkling* full circle for Rabinowitz. "Time inevitably imposes a distance on all events of history. How do we keep memories alive? Should we keep memories alive?" she said. "But in this case, it's important that we keep navigating the distance. *Darkling* has a life of its own and needs to continue."

Darkling is available at www.amazon.com.