

# A meeting of mavericks of poetry and music

By Amy R Handler  
Special to the Advocate

What do a former US poet laureate and a composer of experimental opera have in common?

As it turns out, quite a lot – in the case of Robert Pinsky and Tod Machover.

The pair will screen scenes from their new opera and talk about making art in the age of technology on Dec. 7 in a program sponsored by the New Center for Arts and Culture.

The event, “I Sing the Body Electric,” will be held at the Arsenal Center for the Arts in Watertown and hosted by Pulitzer Prize-winning classical music critic Lloyd Schwartz of *The Boston Phoenix*.

The collaboration between Machover, a professor at MIT, and Pinsky, a professor at Boston University, was born eight years ago in Wellfleet when they met at a poetry reading. The techno-inventor of Hyperinstruments and the founder of the Favorite Poem Project discovered in each other a shared zeal for breaking the bounds of their respective fields. They set to work on what would become “Death and the Powers: The Robots’ Opera.”

The opera centers on businessman-inventor Simon Walter Powers (Walter as in both Whitman and Disney), who creates “The System” so that he can guarantee his immortality. In essence, he downloads his personality and memories into his environment, infusing his house with himself. Bookshelves, walls and a chandelier shimmer and pulsate with

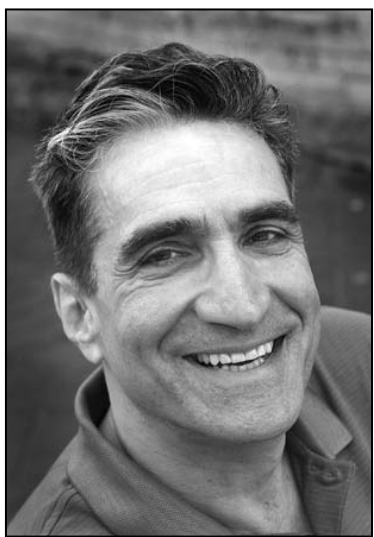


PHOTO BY EMMA DODGE HANSON

## Poet Robert Pinsky

light and music, as he expresses his presence.

Machover describes Powers as a man “who has the influence and power to change the world, but has grown frustrated about his ability – or anyone’s ability – to do so.” The System provides him a way to continue interacting with his family and manipulate his businesses. “He even uses a conjuring of the world’s miseries – which erupt onto the stage before the opera’s final scene – to try to convince his daughter Miranda that the world’s problems are irresolvable and that humanity is eternally flawed.”

Powers tries to lure a reluctant Miranda into The System. “The debate between the two concerning engagement with the problems of the world, acceptance of human limitations, along with capacities (or powers) – and Miranda’s growing acceptance of her own hu-



## Composer Tod Machover

manity – is the central theme and dynamic of the opera,” Machover said.

Yikes, where do such ideas come from? Did Pinsky’s imagination run wild as he was writing the libretto, or did Machover concoct it one night at his Experimental Media Lab at MIT?

Actually, both men devised the plot, and opera was simmered slowly and tested in small steps. Machover said they started out with an operatic aria, which they named “Original Response” and presented to prospective financiers in Monaco. In 2003 they created the plot, and Pinsky began writing the libretto the next year. His first draft was completed in Autumn of 2005. At the same time, Machover composed the opening scene, and presented that in Monaco. Over the next couple of years, Pinsky revised the libretto and work began on the design and

“I Sing the Body Electric,” with Robert Pinsky, Tod Machover and Lloyd Schwartz at the Arsenal Center for the Arts, Watertown, Dec. 7 at 7:30 p.m. Call 617-531-4610 or visit [newcenterboston.org](http://newcenterboston.org).

technology of the staging. Machover composed the score relatively late in the project, performing it alone at the American Repertory Theater last fall.

“This last year, we completed all of the set, design and technology. I orchestrated and refined the music, which we rehearsed all summer in Boston, and premiered in Monaco in September,” said Machover.

“Death and the Powers” will have its American premiere in March at the Cutler Majestic Theatre in Boston. The American Repertory Theater production will feature baritone James Maddalena

as Simon Powers and mezzo-soprano Patricia Risley as Simon’s wife. Less conventional characters include The United Nations (baritone David Kravitz) and The Administration (bass Tom McNichols). Rounding out the cast will be a choir of Operabots (narrators) and Mei-Mei Bots (objects capable of movement), who together tell this story of life transformed.

So what do robots, poetry, opera and human beings have in common?

Pinsky notes that the word “robot” is derived from the Czech for “one who works” and the word “opera” is Italian for work. And humans, after all, derive much of their meaning from their work.

In its essence, a poem does work as well, conveying meaning and emotion. It is – Pinsky said, citing William Carlos Williams – “a machine made out of words.”

## ‘Fever Chart’ puts heat on Israel

By Jules Becker

“Fever Chart,” making its area premiere at the Central Square Theatre in Cambridge, could send some temperatures into the torrid zone.

In this trilogy, subtitled “Three Visions of the Middle East,” the Palestinian characters are sensitive, caring and vulnerable, and the Israeli ones are insensitive, callous and imperious.

In the Underground Railway Theater playbill, Artistic Director Debra Wyse speaks of the characters trying to move together toward peace, but Naomi Wallace’s script seems to say otherwise. This talented playwright (of the fine drama “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”) presents a less-than-flattering picture of Israelis.

In “A State of Innocence,” set at a Gaza zoo, Palestinian mother Um Hisham (Maria Silverman) grieves over the loss of her young daughter at the hands of Israeli soldiers, but Wallace never mentions Hamas terrorist activists against Israelis. Naïve Israeli soldier Yuval (Dan Shaked) is rendered clueless by the script. When Russian-born Israeli architect Shlomo (Ken Baltin) rhapsodizes about his native Stalingrad, you can’t help but think of Helen Thomas’ revolting remark that Israeli Jews should go back to Europe. Ostensibly called in to re-

“Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East,” presented by Underground Railway Theater, Central Square Theatre, through Dec. 19. Call 866-811-4111 or visit [central-squaretheater.org](http://central-squaretheater.org).

build the zoo, Shlomo appears trapped in a time warp as he blathers on about Homa U-Migdal (Wall and Tower) fortressing to secure Israel.

Wallace sets “Between This Breath and You” in a private West Jerusalem clinic, where an Israeli nurse’s aide (Najla Said) rebuffs the claims of a Palestinian widower (Baltin) that her transplanted lungs came from the body of his dead son. She taunts the father with references to the sexual activity she can indulge in thanks to her new lease on life.

If Wallace truly wanted complexity and balance in her trilogy, she might have included at least one generous, emotionally sensitive Israeli.

In the third play, “The Retreating World,” an Iraqi conscript (Ibrahim Miari) laments how his “land of dates” has become one of death. The culprits here are the American and British invaders and their rain

of bombs.

Many theatergoers may find themselves with a dilemma: how to applaud the top-notch acting without seeming to endorse Wallace’s agenda-ridden trilogy. Director Elena Araoz keeps the exchanges in the first two plays sharply timed and the monologue of the last one vivid.

The theater lobby has a wall-length chalkboard for audience members to comment. One question they might ask is why assistant director Salma Abu Ayyash selected exclusively Arab music to accompany the trilogy (Wallace doesn’t specify music in the text).

For its part, Underground Railway Theater should schedule a production of Israeli Iris Bahr’s remarkable monologue “Dai” (“Enough”), which attempts to capture the full spectrum of Mideast perspectives.

At a post-opening reception, Miari spoke briefly to the *Advocate* about his unusual ancestry. The son of a Jewish mother and a Muslim father, this Boston-based performer studied at both Jewish and Arab schools. In April, he will present his own monologue, “In Between,” at Boston Workmen’s Circle. It’s about how he is misperceived. “I have family on both sides,” he said, “but society wants to categorize me.”

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