

tion, begins when Lucifer conspires with Hades to destroy the power plants that enforce endless, paradisiacal summer. Later, they enlist Persephone and Sun Tzu in their rebellion; sometime in act two, Adam and Eve show up, as does the archangel Michael. Jacobs, 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 eons, the complete cycle runs a little over five hours, and began

O P E N B O O K

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:

[D]emocracy in America has always been a contact sport. Words like “cooperation” and “consensus” may sound appealing and even comforting, but American democracy has survived and thrived from one generation to the next on the basis not principally of harmony but of conflict—sometimes intense conflict—mediated, generally, by shared ideals.

Indeed, democratic decision-making in the United States has nearly always been rooted in disagreement and tension, including plenty of bare-knuckle politics. The nation witnessed intense partisan, ideological, and often sectional conflict in everything from the battle over ratification of the Constitution in 1787-1788 to the repeated fights over a national bank (in the 1790s, 1830s, and 1910s) to the bitter struggles over health care and gun laws today. Intense political conflict has always been with us and is, in fact, profoundly American.

The critical question is what makes this conflict either constructive or destructive. Indeed, this is the central question of this book. Political conflict is not a disease, as some pundits contend, but instead an essential feature of American democracy. In most periods across the nation’s history, it has served as a powerful source of strength. But not always. And this, in a nutshell, is what we need to figure out. Why has fierce political conflict proved highly constructive at

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



many historical moments and severely destructive at others, and which type of conflict...characterizes the nation’s democracy today?

...[T]he logic of what I call productive political tension...runs...beyond policy-making to the very foundation of democratic governance itself. Productive tension between competing factions serves not only as a vital source of diverse policy ideas, but also as a critical check on democratic excess, as Madison observed on the eve of the Constitutional Convention....The words “productive tension” appear nowhere in the Constitution, of course, nor is there any certain recipe or formula for creating and sustaining it. But...[i]t is, in short, one of the intangibles of American democracy, which breathes life into the republic in the most mysterious of ways, animating an otherwise static set of structures and rules as powerfully—and subtly—as the oxygen carried in our bloodstreams.

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