

THE NEW YORKER



Illustration by Mengxin Li

The composer Kamala Sankaram and the librettist Rob Handel describe **“Looking at You,”** playing downtown, at HERE Arts Center (Sept. 6-21), as “an immersive techno-noir opera.” A gifted engineer arrives at a Big Tech company to develop a dating app just as an Edward Snowden-esque whistle-blower makes headlines by leaking a cache of classified documents. The fuzzy, pulsating softsynths of electronic dance music represent the tech behemoth’s relentlessly upbeat atmosphere—a milieu that Dave Eggers satirized at length in his 2013 novel, “The Circle”—and a piano and a saxophone trio provide moments of interiority and intrigue as the story lines cross. The director, Kristin Marting, drops the audience inside this hybrid world of sound, where people cleave to the machines that learn to predict and satisfy their desires—and where no one seems to mind trading privacy for a little convenience.

— *Oussama Zahr*

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

LOOKING AT YOU



Kamala Sankaram

HERE and Opera on Tap in association with Experiments in Opera presents the world premiere of *Looking at You* by composer Kamala Sankaram, librettist Rob Handel, and director Kristin Marting. *Looking at You* is an immersive techno-noir operatic experience that confronts surveillance capitalism and the erosion of individual privacy in a digitized world.

Friday, September 6 and Saturday, September 7 at 8:30 PM; Sunday, September 8 at 4:00 PM

Tickets \$15-\$50

HERE, 145 Sixth Avenue, New York, NY

...: [Website](#)

OBSERVER

Composer Kamala Sankaram on Expanding Opera's Audience With a Techno-Infused New Work

By [Billy McEntee](#) · 09/02/19 9:00am



Kamala Sankaram. Dario acosta

Step aside, “Netflix and chill”—opera is experiencing a vital revolution and composer Kamala Sankaram may be its savior. With her new opera *Looking at You*, Sankaram is crafting a piece that speaks directly to our digital age but with a performance that has to be experienced IRL. More than the traditional art form one associates with older patrons and even older scores, classical music and opera has long been reconsidered in New York thanks to organizations like [Heartbeat Opera](#), [Groupmuse](#), and now the arts center [HERE](#) and [Opera on Tap](#), two groups that are presenting the world premiere of Sankaram’s stirring and contemporary new work from September 6 through 21. With her librettist Rob Handel, Sankaram explores—via a techno-noir score—the way capitalism, the erosion of online privacy, and the quest for individualization collide in our post-Y2K society. We spoke to Sankaram about the technologically complex new piece and what it’s going to take to expand the audience for opera.

Observer: Opera is often misunderstood as stuffy, but there's also been such fresh and vital opera in New York of late. What attracts you to this art form?

Kamala Sankaram: I think that there is so much baggage attached to the word "opera" because of how we think we're supposed to experience it: decked out in pearls and totally quiet. I had a conversation with a cab driver recently that drove this home for me. He asked what I was doing in town, and I told him I had written an opera. He immediately said, "I don't like opera." And I said, "Oh? Why? Which opera don't you like?" And he said, "I haven't actually seen any." So I asked him how he knew he didn't like it, and he said he didn't like it because of how it sounded on TV commercials. So the cultural depiction of opera represents it as something kind of fuddy duddy and boring, and that becomes what people think of opera, even if they've never actually heard one.

I didn't actually grow up with opera either. While my mom loves classical music, her tastes run mostly to instrumental and symphonic music. And my dad (who is from Andhra Pradesh, India) pretty much only listens to Indian classical music and Bollywood. So, that's what was played in my house. I sang in the choir and joined the theater class. All this is to say that I think that many different kinds of people from many different backgrounds would enjoy opera if they could get over the first step of coming to the performance.

This preview you've released of the work is so cool—very compelling how colloquial the lyrics are, and how familiar the techno-infused composition is. These are not the elements that often come to mind when we think of (traditional) opera. Do you feel in a way you are subverting or expanding the form?

I guess it depends on what you believe the form is. I believe that opera is a music-forward form of storytelling. By that definition, this is an expansion. The composers of the canon were not shy about using all of the musical tools at their disposal to create their work, and I don't think that contemporary composers should be either. That being said, there are people who will not consider this an opera (and they have come to previous workshops of the show!) because it isn't in a big house and doesn't use a big orchestra. However, I think that for the art form to stay alive and healthy, it must embrace manifestations that appeal to a contemporary audience that doesn't know the canon at all. It must fit in spaces where the tickets are affordable, and where people can come without feeling intimidated.

What inspired you to tackle the intersection of capitalism and the erosion of privacy in our increasingly digital world?

My earliest experience of the internet was on Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). There was something so open about it: you didn't know who you might meet, or where they might be. Because of that, everyone thought the internet would let the whole world become more open. Instead, what has happened is that new gatekeepers have emerged who are not only preventing that openness, but are finding ways to monetize the most intimate details of our lives.

The most chilling aspect of all of this is that we don't know what the future uses for this data will be. We also don't know how decisions about how the data should be evaluated and used data are being made, since much of this decision-making is being left to algorithms trained through machine learning. In a nutshell, to train up an algorithm, you feed it data in order to get a desired output. If the output isn't what you want, you change the parameters of the algorithm until it does give you the answer you want. For example, you could feed an algorithm a set of pictures until it can accurately label a face as a face. Then you send that algorithm out into the world to do facial recognition on new photographs.

But you don't really know what the rules are that it's using to make its decisions because you can't see inside what's called the *black box* — the pattern in the data that the algorithm is using for decision-making. The thing that we don't talk about enough is that the way the algorithm functions is totally dependent on the kinds of data it was trained on. Because of this, biases are coded in. Facial recognition algorithms have trouble with Black faces. Google shows women ads for lower paying jobs than men. We're in a pivotal moment where we can decide as a society that we care about these issues, and we can insist that there is some kind of regulation and oversight for the big tech companies that are creating these algorithms and outsourcing decision-making to them. But that will only happen if people become aware of how pervasive and potentially harmful the problem is.

You're partnering with a number of technology groups—Bandcamp, BluPanda, video designers—to create a certain ambiance for the show. Can you discuss what audiences may be walking into?

I can't say too much, but I can give you the broad strokes: You have been invited to the welcome party for Dorothy, the new chief engineer at Rix, a small company in Silicon Hills. On your table is a tablet computer that will help you get a free drink. Soon the tablets in the space become the chorus for the show. And as the narrative progresses, the tablets transform into something more sinister... the algorithm.

Again, without giving too much away, let's just say this is a fully immersive experience, meaning you can agree to be part of the show without actually having to leave your seat or even interact with the singers. Kristin's staging takes place all around the space, and I should also mention the tremendous video design by David Bengali, which includes unique content on each tablet, as well as on screens throughout the theater.

This might be a little out of left field, but something your opera reminded me of is the backlash Joaquin Castro experienced, in certain circles, for sharing *public* information about top Trump donors. The internet indeed wields a lot of potential—do you feel like your opera has become increasingly topical in a way?

I think it becomes more topical every day. We are only now beginning to recognize the immense impact that internet companies have on not only our democracy, but our economy and almost every aspect of modern life. But we do need to make a distinction between the internet itself and the gatekeepers who have monetized it. On its own, the internet is not a tool for good or bad. Rather, because we have let these large companies monopolize and curate our access, we have let what could have been a public good become another tool for corporate interests.

To your example, one unforeseen effect of the internet is callout culture. It's much easier now to point out things that we perceive as injustices or biases, especially among those who are politicians or celebrities. We don't address this specifically in the show, but it is definitely part of the question: what will your data be used for in the future? Right now, many politicians are being confronted with decades old tweets. Are there things that you've posted that you wouldn't want a potential boss or partner to see?

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.



INTERVIEWS NEWS OFF-BROADWAY THEATRE

INTERVIEW: In new opera 'Looking at You,' check your privacy at the door

📅 September 6, 2019 👤 John Soltes 💬 0 Comments 📍 HERE Arts Center, Kamala Sankaram

Photo: Looking at You looks at issues of privacy in the digital age. Photo courtesy of BRIC / Provided by Everyman Agency with permission.

With a premise that's influenced by today's saturated marketplace of snooping surveillance techniques and hidden user data — all courtesy of Big Brother and corporate America — *Looking at You*, a new opera about to receive its world premiere, proves to be a cautionary tale and one that needs a helping hand from audience members.

It's also a noir-influenced, EDM-inspired hoot. Did we mention the singing tablet computers?

The show, [which plays Sept. 6-21 at the HERE Arts Center in New York City](#), features music by Kamala Sankaram, a libretto by Rob Handel, direction by Kristin Marting and musical direction by Samuel McCoy. HERE co-presents the production with Opera on Tap and Experiments in Opera.

The helping hand from audience members comes in the form of a clever immersive theater technique. Here's how it goes: Ticket buyers, no doubt unsuspecting, are invited into the corporate headquarters of Rix, a fictional company in Silicon Hills. They have congregated to celebrate the launch of a new app called CheckUOut, and their first action is to be served drinks after giving their orders to a computer-generated assistant. All around them is a swirl of operatic voices and noir elements that set the atmosphere for what's to come.

Eventually, the songs and accompanying videos become personal, reciting information about the audience members, who have been seemingly tracked from the moment they walked in the door (or even bought a ticket).

The creative team has done their homework on this surveillance piece. They have consulted behavioral economist Alessandro Acquisti and his team at Carnegie Mellon's Privacy Economics Experiments Laboratory; Ralph Gross, chief scientist for BluPanda; Bandcamp co-founder Joe Holt; Bandcamp head programmer Daniel Dickison; and video designer David Bengali. The collaborations helped the *Looking at You* team learn how to "mine public data in real time during each performance through a custom-designed system, which at times includes 32 distinct streams of video."

To explain this unique operatic phenomenon even further, *Hollywood Soapbox* exchanged emails with Sankaram, who has received commissions from Washington National Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Shakespeare Theatre Company, Opera on Tap and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, among others. Questions and answers have been slightly edited for style.

How would you describe *Looking at You* to someone who has no idea about the production?

We like to describe it as 'Edward Snowden meets *Casablanca*.' It's a story of high-tech espionage and star-crossed lovers, with music that borrows equally from EDM, film-noir soundtracks and opera, scored for piano, saxophone trio and electronics, with a chorus of singing tablet computers. On the day that Dorothy gets her dream job, she finds out that her long-lost lover has become the world's most famous whistleblower. Will she turn him in or burn her shiny life to the ground to save him?

How immersive will the production get?

The show is set in the canteen at Rix, a tech company in the fictional Silicon Hills. Audience members are seated at café tables, where they can interact with tablet computers containing a digital assistant who will help them get drinks. The staging takes place all around the space, so the audience is really inside the show.

It's not your typical immersive show in that the audience can stay in their seats. They (mostly) don't have to interact with the actors, and they don't have to say any lines. But, if they agree, they can become part of the show in a very immediate and unexpected way. I can't really say much more than that without giving away too much, but I think you won't have experienced this kind of immersive theater before.



Looking at You features a cast that interacts with the audience and maybe asks for some private information. Photo courtesy of BRIC / Provided by Everyman Agency with permission.

How long has the production been in development?

It's been in development about five years, which isn't actually all that long for an opera (!). Part of what has kept the piece in development has been trying to keep up with the pace of change in both the technology and the culture at large.

Rob and I were first inspired to make a piece about privacy and the internet following the Snowden revelations. Shortly after that, Rob (through his position as professor of playwriting at Carnegie Mellon) met Alessandro Acquisti, a privacy expert who studies the exact things we were interested in. I also happened to have taken a job as a research consultant with the Ford Foundation's Internet Rights unit, so I was reading up on many of the same issues.

So we were deeply engaged in thinking about the impact of tech companies on internet culture and privacy at a time before awareness was as widespread as it is now. When we started, our main concern was how to get people thinking about the fact that their private information was easy to find. But then, of course, the 2016 election happened, Cambridge Analytica happened, and we realized that the issue wasn't just about privacy and had never really been just about privacy.

The issue is really about *who* has access to your personal information and *how* they are being allowed to use it. So basically, we've been revising the piece in order to keep up with both the news cycle and the tech, and I'm glad it's finally premiering before anything else happens!

What was it like working with Carnegie Mellon's Privacy Economics Experiments Laboratory?

While I have a research background, this is the first time I've worked on a piece that has so thoroughly merged academic research with an artistic practice. Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross (who is now with BluPanda) have really helped us to clarify what the final takeaway from the piece should be for the audience and have helped us strategize how we can get there.

I should also mention that in addition to CMU, we are also collaborating with Joe Holt and Daniel Dickison, two engineers from Bandcamp.com, who are building custom software for the piece, so it's really a collaboration between artists, people working in tech and academic researchers, which is very exciting.

What was it like to collaborate with Rob Handel and Kristin Marting?

This is my second collaboration with both Rob and Kristin, and I've also collaborated with both of them separately on other projects. It's nice to be able to collaborate on more than a single project, since usually it takes making at least one piece together to really get to know each other.

Opera and music-theater are complicated art forms because you have to figure out how to make something that can tell the story in three ways: through the text, through the music and through the staging. Ideally, you want those three things to complement each other rather than getting in each other's way.

So there's a lot of compromise, letting go of ego and trust involved. I'm lucky to have collaborators that I trust, and also to know that if I feel strongly about something, they will help me to figure out if and how it fits into the piece. In the end, we're all working together to create something that we couldn't have made alone.

What do you think the show says about privacy and online communication in the 21st century?

I think the piece addresses the pressing issues we're facing in a way that is entertaining, but still thought provoking. One of the questions I've been asked about this show is whether 'privacy' is an outdated concept. If we're in the age of personal branding, why should we care who sees what we post or what is done with that data?

My answer to this is that we should care because we don't really know what is going to be done with the data in the future. We present an extreme version of this scenario in the finale of the show, but the fact is that your data is already being used to make decisions about you that you might not know about. Right now algorithms are widely used for this decision-making, and they 'learn' to make decisions based on hidden patterns in the aggregated data of a population.

This means that we don't really know why these decisions are being made (and in many cases, neither do the people that created the algorithms in the first place), and we have no recourse against them.

What if your insurance premium goes up because you post a picture with a martini? What if you lose your job because your car reported that you were speeding? It seems far-fetched, but people are already losing their jobs or being denied opportunities because an algorithm has made a decision about them that they couldn't fight. We have the opportunity now to decide what we want the internet to be, but we can only do that if we are aware of what the problems facing us actually are.

By John Soltes / Publisher / John@HollywoodSoapbox.com

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ



Brandon Snook (video projection) and Blythe Gaisert (foreground) in 'Looking at You' PHOTO: PAULA COURT

By

Heidi Waleson

Sept. 10, 2019 4:38 pm ET

New York

Subjects for immersive theater don't get much more relevant than the insidious spread of surveillance, which is cleverly explored in the opera "Looking at You," by Kamala Sankaram and Rob Handel, now in its world premiere production at HERE, which co-produced the work with Opera on Tap and Experiments in Opera. Audience members receive lanyard ID badges as their tickets, and are invited to sign in with their "employee numbers" to get free drinks for consumption at their cabaret-style tables; we are attending what purports to be a tech-company party. So far, so benign. But about midway through the 82-minute performance, the tablet on my table started showing images from my Facebook page. My page is pretty tame, but by the end of the show, I had to wonder what else could be found out about me. That's the point.

Mr. Handel's artful, well-paced libretto and Ms. Sankaram's lively music-theater-infused score limn the tale of Dorothy, an ambitious engineer who invents an app, CheckUOut, for Rix, the tech company that she has just joined. It's supposed to be a relationship aid, as in letting you find out right away if that cute guy at the bar is someone you should date—but it is actually a powerful data miner that instantly collects and analyzes everything the internet knows about that person. Meanwhile, Dorothy's boyfriend, Ethan (an Edward Snowden figure), has just released 1.7 million secret documents, the product of surveillance by 13 governments.

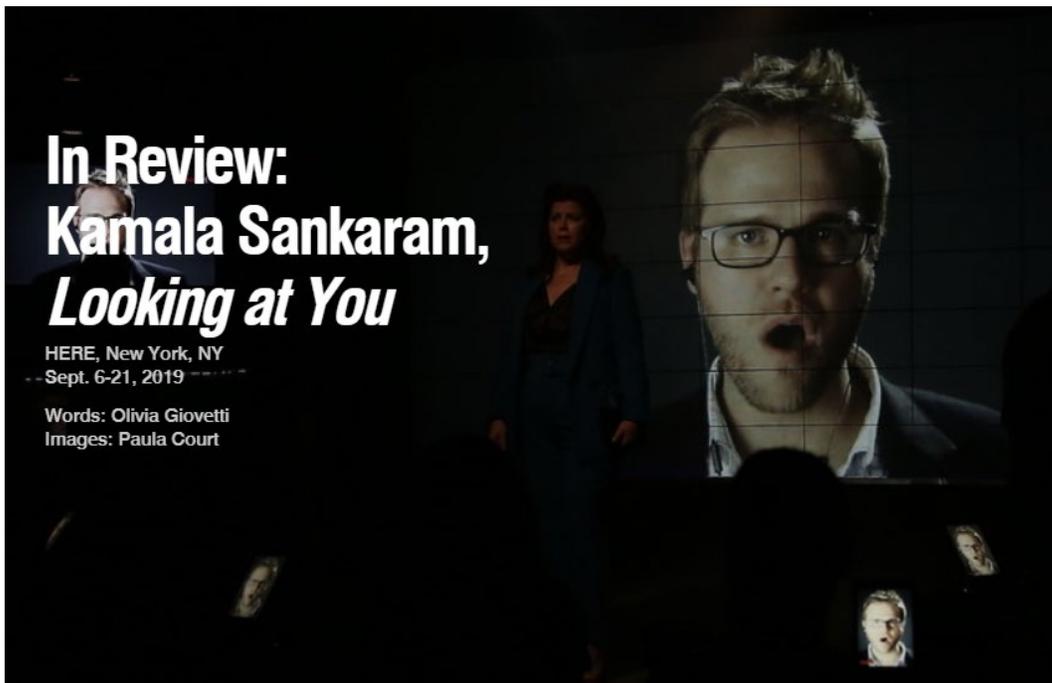
Gradually, the opera reveals a sinister connection between these two activities: Personal data mined from seemingly harmless social media can be commercialized and accessed by all kinds of entities. This privacy invasion is taken to its logical, weaponized extreme. At the app launch, the Department of Homeland Security swoops in on the audience member chosen as the app's demonstration target and takes him away.

It's a serious issue, but the creators avoid didacticism, instead skillfully deploying suspense and humor in their storytelling. Ethan contacts Dorothy from his secret location by hacking her Fitbit; there are sly "Casablanca" references to go with Rix. The excellent singers deliver solid characters: Baritone Paul An as Raj, the hyper hacker-turned-tech-mogul who sees only how cool (and profitable) CheckUOut is; tenor Brandon Snook as Ethan, who explains his actions in a poignant ballad with the refrain "You don't know how naked you are." Mezzo Blythe Gaisert persuasively shows Dorothy grappling with the consequences of her creation. A backup trio—Adrienne Danrich, Mikki Sodergren and Eric McKeever—are the geek engineers who groove along with Raj...until they don't. Ms. Danrich in particular shines in a soul-inflected aria that concludes, "Because you're white / You're not accustomed / To being surveilled." The accompanying piano and three saxophones sound like a much more varied ensemble; they, along with the computer-generated backup chorus that emanates from the tablets on the tables, give the whole piece an insistent bass beat and murmuring background that contribute to the overall feeling of foreboding.

Nic Benacerraf's scenic design is dominated by seven screens, with video by David Bengali, that bombard the audience with scrolling text messages, TV news reports, Facebook posts and, most sinisterly, the bits of personal information piling up and the dots that represent the data points swirling into shapes as "the algorithm learns." Raj's clownish pink-shorts tracksuit, with giant pockets in a contrasting fabric for his devices, belies his single-minded, amoral pursuit of cool (Kate Fry did the costumes). Director Kristin Marting, who helped develop the piece, and music director Samuel McCoy wove the live performers and the video into an absorbing, frightening whole.

—*Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal and is the author of "Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America" (Metropolitan).*

NATIONAL SAWDUST LOG



There was a moment during [Looking at You](#), a new opera by [Kamala Sankaram](#), that sent me scrolling through the work's libretto after the first preview at [HERE](#) on Sept. 6: Three Geeks are troubleshooting a faulty app pre-launch, against the news-cycle backdrop of a massive data-breach.

"We just didn't know that our phones are on all the time, Alexa is on all the time," sings one. "Our thermostats are connected to our watches and our blenders and the government."

"That's what the future was supposed to be like!" counters another. "The kitchen has the tea ready for Captain Picard! The bathtub has the bubbles ready for Jane Jetson."

"I get it," replies the first geek, echoing an aphorism common in Silicon Valley: "It's a feature, not a bug." She then launches into the first few verses of a trio that, on Friday night's performance, was sung a cappella.

It seemed to make sense in the arc of Sankaram's opera, which had relied up until this point on a small ensemble of saxophones, electronics, and piano, but was, plot-wise, reaching a breaking point. It wasn't until music director, Samuel McCoy, rose from his perch to consult with the production's technologists, and the performance was subsequently held, that we realized it was unplanned.

Or was it? As genuine as the game and endearing reactions from the three singers (Mikki Sodergren, Eric McKeever, and Adrienne Danrich) seemed for the minute or so that the glitch was worked out, I also wondered whether this was another feature, not a bug. When the performance resumed with Danrich's titanium soprano, steering the trio from warm, spiritual riffs from Soderren and McKeever into an ecclesiastical apex, the break seemed all the more organic.

This, in and of itself, is a recurring theme in Sankaram's devastatingly smart, immersive techno-noir opera (written with librettist Rob Handel). At its heart, *Looking at You* questions the reliability of technology. As we increasingly give up our data to digital retailers, social media platforms, and our mobile devices, how much can we trust the corporate entities to which we surrender our privacy?



Sadly, for the conspiracy theorists among us, the libretto gives no indication that this feature (or bug) was intentional. I also doubt that director [Kristin Marting](#), who is credited with developing the work alongside Sankaram and Handel, added this in with the staging—mostly. The performance is architected to gradually fold in the audience's own data in real time and make it part of the production. With input from Carnegie Mellon's Privacy Economics Experiments Laboratory as well as software platform BluPanda and music stalwart Bandcamp, audience members' public-facing social media posts gradually appear on screens. Cue the shocks of recognition as selfies and hot-take Tweets resurface, like ghosts of social media past.

But that this glitch could even be a matter of debate is indicative of how immersive the world of *Looking at You* becomes in just under 90 minutes. A cabaret-like setting calls to mind WeWork-style common areas, with audiences seated at cafe tables. The opening sequence, which introduces both the characters and the setting (the corporate headquarters of fictional Silicon Hills power-player Rix), is performed with all the badge-twirling religious fervor of a CTO who got into [Elon Musk's surprise SXSW talk](#).

Yet while the lampooning of our Mountain View culture does, at times, take on the satirical aura of a contemporary empire teetering on a precipice (*McSweeney's* via Lorenzo daPonte), it's merely the landscape for the central drama. Dorothy (Blythe Gaissert, in red pumps and Lauren Bacall hair) joins Rix as chief engineer, and feels the pressure to succeed both as a coder and (even more pressing) as a woman. Shortly after her onboarding, news breaks out that 1.7 million classified documents, revealing a surveillance program that implicates 13 governments, were leaked to the media. The whistleblower? A systems administrator named Ethan Snyder—who happens to be Dorothy's ex.

If all of this sounds a little Snowden-esque, that's one of the sources of inspiration for Sankaram and Handel. But rather than opt for a John Adams-style "CNN opera" based on the facts of that 2013 NSA leak, Sankaram and Handel go for allegory. Snowden's narrative is spliced with a post-modern retelling of *Casablanca*. Dorothy is Ilsa, the woman caught between two worlds. Ethan is Victor Laszlo, the champion of civil liberties. And Rix (say that name out loud) is Rick—or, perhaps more accurately, the algorithms that Rix trains as a tech company are Rick. Claiming to be aloof and impartial, the algorithm becomes a partisan tool over time. Without giving away how things end, it also becomes the saving grace for Dorothy and Ethan.

This nod to 1940s noir also serves to underscore the opera's point that, while the tools may change over time, they're all essentially telling the (same old) story. There are touches of our time—an early aria from Dorothy retraces her last conversations with Ethan before he disappeared, but in the reverse-chronological order of text histories.

In the end, however, the fundamental rules apply: Humans will continually become victims of their own hubris, especially those who become too reliant on tools to succeed. We've seen this movie before. To quote Shoshana Zuboff, author of *Surveillance Capitalism*, "Columbus simply declared the islands as the territory of the Spanish monarchy and the pope. The first surveillance capitalists also conquered by declaration. They simply declared our private experience to be theirs for the taking."



The success of *Looking at You* also relies on the strength of its performers, with no small share of the praise going to Sodergren and McKeever for tackling their sections of the aforementioned Geek Trio a cappella and with the sense that all was going according to plan. Paul An is tireless as Rix CEO Raj, and Brandon Snook brought a heldentenor-ish brawn to Ethan. Gaissert's Dorothy, who is onstage for much of the opera, traces a trajectory that is recognizable for any woman in tech — or classical music, for that matter. Her drive for success, for the feeling of "enough-ness," is fueled by the need to work twice as hard and twice as well because of her gender. By the end, she's equal parts Brünnhilde and Tosca.

Admittedly, the comparisons to Wagner and Puccini seem a bit counterintuitive for an opera so ardently of our time. Opening after a summer wherein the discussion around relevance and representation in opera gained momentum due to several high-profile controversies (most notably involving race and #MeToo), *Looking at You* could be seen as the antidote to works that rely on cultural appropriation or glorify outdated and harmful gender norms. That its opening coincided with [a Dutch musicologist Tweeting on Sunday](#) that those who push for diversity in repertoire and representation in classical music are comparable to Nazis makes *Looking at You* seem even more vital.

But its success doesn't come at the expense of the operatic tradition that predates it. It's hard to ignore the echoes of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Götterdämmerung* that resonate among Sankaram's EDM impulses and sax riffs. What *Looking at You* suggests is that all art forms die, and are in fact in a continual state of death and regeneration. The old iterations of the art form provide fertile ground for the new.

This is an especially prescient point made in the context of tech, in which products become obsolete almost as soon as they're launched. "Your future is the past," the chorus of Geeks sing in the opening sequence. But, to quote author (and notable film noir screenwriter) William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

It's not a bug, it's a feature.

Kamala Sankaram's Looking at You runs through Sept. 21 at HERE; [here.org](#)

Olivia Giovetti has covered music and arts for Paper, the Washington Post, NPR, VAN, and beyond. She's previously served on staff at Time Out New York and WQXR/Q2 Music, and her writing has been heard onstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of the Next Wave Festival. She combines her love of the arts and meditation practice on [The Meditation of Art](#).

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

Here's spying on you, kid: High-tech opera premiere casts a wide net

By [Eric C. Simpson](#)

Sat Sep 07, 2019 at 1:19 pm



Blythe Gaissert and Brandon Snook starred in the world premiere of Kamala Sankaram's "Looking at You," Friday night at HERE, presented by Opera on Tap & Experiments in Opera.

Photo: Paula Court

Looking at You is a contemporary opera about a very contemporary concern.

The new work, with music by Kamala Sankaram and a libretto by Rob Handel, certainly isn't the first opera to explore the problems of life online. Yet few others have so fully embraced what feels like a digital-age idiom.

The world premiere, presented by Opera on Tap and Experiments in Opera at HERE in SoHo on Friday night, showed remarkable creativity on the parts of its authors and producers, even if this work still needs a good deal of polishing.

Looking at You is set primarily inside the corporate headquarters of Rix, a grotesquely hip tech startup with all the latest employee amenities. Dorothy, the company's newest hire, makes a brilliant pitch for a new app called "Check U Out," designed to evaluate people in real time by using facial recognition to look up their social media profiles and public records.

Yet at the same time, her long-missing boyfriend Ethan Snyder—a thinly disguised Edward Snowden analogue who has just leaked 1.7 million classified documents on government surveillance programs—resurfaces and causes her to have second thoughts about her work and its privacy implications.

If that sounds a little confused, it is. While Handel's libretto mostly manages to keep the narrative on track and features a number of beautifully crafted scenes (including one of Dorothy reading both sides of a long text conversation in reverse), it never quite settles on a main point. This work variously critiques Big Data, government surveillance, social media, startup culture, workplace harassment, artificial intelligence, racial inequities, and more. While many of these issues are related to one another in some way, by taking aim at all these targets at once, Handel fails to score a hit on any of them.

Still, the overall presentation was startlingly creative, incorporating a number of inventive elements into a unique visual presentation. At any given time, Kristin Marting's digitally innovative staging features many stimuli competing for attention: screens showing four or five different newscasts about Snyder's document dump; social media posts flying by; the tablets on our tables singing at us while the action on stage progresses. All of this is carefully stitched together, giving the audience a feeling of information overload without actually distracting from the scene.

Still, the overall presentation was startlingly creative, incorporating a number of inventive elements into a unique visual presentation. At any given time, Kristin Marting's digitally innovative staging features many stimuli competing for attention: screens showing four or five different newscasts about Snyder's document dump; social media posts flying by; the tablets on our tables singing at us while the action on stage progresses. All of this is carefully stitched together, giving the audience a feeling of information overload without actually distracting from the scene.

The most unusual conceit, and one that really brings home the ideas of the piece, is the incorporation of audience members' public social media posts (researched from the ticket list) into the presentation. In the climactic product launch scene, pictures from audience members' feeds flash across the various screens and tabletop tablets in a demonstration of the app's power to evaluate people in real time. What could easily have come off as a cheap gimmick was surprisingly effective, eliciting nervous laughter from audience members as their personal photos showed up in front of a room full of strangers.

Sankaram's music combines forceful rhythms with a tart tonal style that varies according to the dramatic needs of the moment.

The chorus that opens the piece, introducing Rix's unbearably hip workplace environment, has an almost candied quality, while there is something more sinister in the mellow saxes and creeping vocal melody of Dorothy's initial product pitch.

Especially impressive is Sankaram's ability to keep an initially unfocused idea moving forward for an extended time; in the scene in which Dorothy begins to have her doubts, as her machine-learning algorithm begins to spin out of control, Sankaram spins an unsettling chorus from bizarre snippets of status updates ("Dorothy liked bacon," "something about zebras"), strung together into a flow of sound. Sankaram's scoring is necessarily simple but effective, blending electronics with a small band of a few saxophones and a piano. Samuel McCoy led the performance with confidence, keeping a tight rein on the music in spite of a few technical glitches.

Blythe Gaissert, who shone brilliantly in On Site Opera's production of Ricky Ian Gordon's *Morning Star* last year, was formidable as Dorothy, with her powerful, caramel-colored mezzo-soprano. Her role as written feels a little flat, but Gaissert still managed a convincing performance, resolving the conflicting tensions of her past career struggles with her crisis of conscience now that she has achieved her goals. As Ethan, Brandon Snook showed a flexible, airy tenor in a difficult, wide-ranging part.

Adrienne Danrich brought a penetrating soprano as Annina, one of Rix's other engineers. Soprano Mikki Sodergren showed a focused, blazing sound, and found different characterizations for Dorothy's coworker Brooke and the journalist who blows open the Snyder story. As Rix employee Charlie, Eric McKeever offered a muscular baritone and showed off superb patter chops. The biggest personality among the supporting cast was the CEO, Raj, portrayed by Paul An as an "alpha male" tech type, with a robust, viscous bass.



Looking At You – HERE Arts Center, New York City

Posted by: The Reviews Hub - America in Immersive, New York, Opera 11 days ago 0

Music: Kamala Sankaram

Libretto: Rob Handel

Developer and Director: Kristin Marting

Music Director: Samuel McCoy

Reviewer: Maridee Slater

In an age where the cognitive distance between humans and our screens is diminishing, it is inevitable that theatrical liveness and the definition of immersive theatre will deconstruct itself, re-examine its role, and (hopefully) take strides towards a new actionable interface. In HERE Arts Center's latest investigation of the nuanced possibilities of the present theatrical event, the immersion (or is it invasion?) begins far before the proverbial curtain is drawn. An email appears in one's inbox the day of, advising them on the proper attire, expectation, and myriad ways one might engage. Imagination can take over from there: What exact information will they mine? Where is this information coming from? Should I delete any texts from my phone? Am I made up of more than my relationship to my screen? Kristin Marting, Artistic Director of HERE and Developer/Director of *Looking At You*, is no rookie when it comes to strategic and effective audience communication. Yet this feels different somehow. This email is distinctive, a cheeky side-eye.

The atmosphere of the lobby pre-show is one of excitement, anticipation, and gratitude. Gratitude that in the ever-increasing anxieties of This Gradual Apocalypse, we still gather. We are still human, not only clinging to our humanity, but championing it. In spite of our technological overlords and our supposed isolations, we still have our Selves, our Bodies, and our Ability to Choose. Don't we?

Do you have
a view? Tell



us below!

The (important) danger of *Looking At You* lies in this premise, in the prologue/email and the bustling of the crowd leading up to the first note that fills the space. Of course, this is the magic of HERE. Screens engulf the ever-transformational space, not so much overbearing but comforting, like an unsettling hug. There is an element of choose-your-own-adventure sprinkled throughout, but one is never quite sure what those choices lead to or have led to. Ever. This could be a flaw in the structure of the piece, but it feels pertinent commentary to the blind willingness we have of throwing our information into the ether willy-nilly, only reserving caution when something goes wrong.

Kudos to the entire team for cultivating an entrancing and innovative operatic piece that feels at once an audio-visual surprise party, secret, and sincere rally cry. David Bengali's video design is particularly enigmatic (and this reviewer will see anything that designer works on), and serves as a poignant centerpiece to not only the storytelling but also is the crux of the event itself.

The performers all radiate with passion and a sense of urgency throughout the evening, helmed by the magnanimous Blythe Gaissert as Dorothy. The process of any production can be felt in its performance, and with *Looking at You*, the rigor and fun are palpable. Rob Handel's libretto is peppered with one-liners that ring like protest signs clashing into personal texts, serving a delicious pairing with Kamala Sankaram's electrifying music. For anyone timid of wading into the world of opera, this is the perfect plunge.

HERE'S "LOOKING AT YOU": EXPOSURE & REVELATION

Posted by Abigail Weil | 17th Sep 2019 | Immersive Theatre, Musical Theatre, New York, Participatory Theatre, Review, Theatre and Opera, Theatre and Science, Transmedia, United States of America



Photo by Paula Court

My instinct is to describe *Looking at You*, the new opera from librettist Rob Handel, composer Kamala Sankaram, and director Kristin Marting, a work of sci-fi, but that would be naïve. I want to call it a cautionary tale, but the moral would be moot. The creators describe the show, now in its world premiere at HERE Arts Center in SoHo as “an immersive techno-noir opera experience.” Each of those descriptors brings you a little closer to understanding what the show aims for, but even that long-phrase can’t capture what it accomplishes. *Looking at You* is the most fun I’ve ever had while being scolded for my vanity and indifference.

While the look and feel of the show is futuristic, in fact, it deals squarely with the present day. The app designer Dorothy (mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaissert) has just begun her new position at Rix, a media company with the self-congratulatory attitude of a start-up run by 20-year-olds who dropped out of MIT after they made their first million. The show opens as she’s onboarded by her boss Raj (bass Paul An) and the rest of the staff, sopranos Adrienne Danrich and Mikki Sodergren and baritone Eric McKeever in a song that describes the company as the place “where the winners end up.” Dorothy is talented and full of promise, but she has a skeleton in her encrypted closet – a relationship with Ethan Snyder (tenor Brandon Snook), an Edward Snowden-type whistleblower who ghosted her right around the time he leaked millions of classified government documents.

There are a number of sinister elements in the show, but the real antagonist is Big Data, the twenty-first-century heir to Big Brother. Dorothy’s breakthrough idea is an app called Check-U-Out. You aim your phone at anyone who catches your eye, snap their pic and an all-knowing algorithm analyzes their online activity, including social media but also, for example, banking, to determine compatibility. The opportunities for corporate abuse of such a technology are obvious but so is its consumer appeal. That’s how they getcha.

Looking at You wedges itself right into this conundrum. So much of the data that companies harvest to target us with ads is information we voluntarily surrender, or at least, we grant permission every time we lazily opt to “log in through Facebook.” We rely on websites and apps for instant validation of a new haircut or a kale salad with a perfectly poached egg, we check-in at hyped-up restaurants, we repost buzzy articles with comments. If *anyone* wanted to track us, wouldn’t none of us be hard to find. And that’s the optional stuff. All of us carry with us, at all times, pocket-sized audio-visual recording devices. Many of us would be quite literally lost without our phones. But what is the cost of convenience? And when we live so much of our lives in public, do we still retain the right to privacy?



Photo by Paula Court

Amazingly, *Looking at You* isn’t bitter or self-righteous. Although its concerns are serious, it yields to playfulness, romance, and even hope. The use of technology in the design is truly the best I’ve ever seen in the theatre, a testament to the research and dedication of the creative team, which includes a whopping four technologists, Alessandro Acquisti, Ralph Gross, Joe Holt, and Daniel Dickison. There are bespoke Rix tablets, visualizations of algorithms that dance across screens and even live data-mining that happens before your very eyes. It doesn’t look like a set designer trying to imagine a computer program, on the contrary, it’s as dazzling as anything you might see in Silicon Valley. The detailed design even extends to the ticket, which addresses you as a Rix engineer and includes the following provision:

We are committed to respecting your privacy. We adhere to the following fair information principles: Accountability, lawfulness, fairness and transparency, purpose identification and limitation, data minimization, accuracy, storage limitation, and integrity and confidentiality. To further your enjoyment of the experience, it is necessary for us to obtain certain information about you. By submitting personal information (including email addresses) to us or to our agents, you agree that we may collect such personal information for the purpose of populating our proprietary software.

If you’re asked, when you arrive at the theater, if you want the “enhanced experience,” go for it. You’ll be confronted with the implications of all this in your own life. For me, it was simultaneously thrilling and terrifying.

There is a risk with this conceit of verging into a gimmicky territory, but tech design is fully woven into the texture of the show. A particularly moving number has Dorothy recalling her relationship with Ethan via their text exchanges. The texts appear on the screen behind her as she sings both parts and we realize she's reading them, like we all have when we're heartbroken, in reverse, back from now to when she was happy.

The libretto sounds remarkably natural, a real feat given the conversational tone. That is aided, no doubt, by the cast, singers who overwhelm with their talent. I only wished I heard more from the ensemble performers, Danrich, Sodergren, and McKeever, but I'll count it as a success that this show left me wanting more. The band features Mila Henry on piano and three saxophonists: Jeff Hudgins on alto, Ed Rosenberg III on tenor and Josh Sinton on baritone. The conductor Samuel McCoy, who seemed also to be giving cues for the tech and lighting, was the busiest person on stage.

When the show began, I thought it was like a musical episode of *Black Mirror*, the sci-fi anthology show that imagines terrifying scenarios based on technologies and behaviors that already exist today. But *Looking at You* doesn't spin-out from a dark twisted fantasy; it stays firmly in the realm of the real. A better comparison may be *The Net*, a 1995 thriller featuring prime Sandra Bullock as an IT specialist whose life was threatened when all her online data was vindictively erased. At that early point in the Technological Revolution, Bullock couldn't convince anyone of the danger of cyberterrorism; her insistence that this was a very real threat made her look crazy, like Sarah Connor. In 1995, the sight of Bullock ordering a pizza online was akin to a tech bro wearing a Google Glass: plausible, but fringe.

Today, we all know that all our banking information and medical history is online and could be deleted, or worse yet, shared, with push of a digital button. So what are the codes of conduct now, for consumers/citizens and for corporations/governments? And if you're good at tech, do you have a responsibility to wield that talent for the greater good? No spoilers, but at the end of the opera, Ethan rhapsodizes about the early days of the internet. He sings:

This isn't the world we were making.

Remember? Remember how it was?

Some kid in Bangladesh

Could play chess with some kid in Ohio.

A girl in Baghdad

Could tell the truth about our soldiers.

Remember? Remember how it was?

Remember how it was?

A wild place for the free people.

It meant we were safe.

It meant privacy.

The historian Melvin Kranzberg formulated a set of philosophical dicta known as the laws of technology. The first one states, "technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral." *Looking at You* is not neutral. But it is very, very good.

This post was written by the author in their personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the view of The Theatre Times, their staff or collaborators.

PLAYS TO SEE

International Theatre Reviews

Looking at You

👤 Gillian Russo 📅 11/09/2019

HERE Arts Center, New York City

3.0

REVIEWER'S
RATING



“I have nothing to hide,” said multiple characters on repeated occasions throughout *Looking at You*, a “techno-noir opera” that immerses you in a tech company and its dance with surveillance capitalism. So, too, said I when I registered for my free drink fully knowing it was a gimmick to collect my data somehow. I decided that whatever information would make it into the show as a result, it was all part of the experience and posed no real threat to my privacy. Yet when my friend’s (totally public) Facebook profile picture and multiple of my (also public) Instagram photos appeared on one of the many TV screens on the walls, I can’t say it wasn’t unsettling.

Everything about the fictitious company in question, Rix, exudes unsettling from every pore in its quest to be a utopia. One look at the ivy on the walls and ultra-modern metal chairs make it instantly clear that Rix is Silicon Valley pretentiousness at its pinnacle: team bonding outings at spin class, employees who wear matching athleisure sets to work, a boss (Raj, played frenetically by Paul An) that is the human embodiment of five cups of sustainably-sourced coffee with oat milk, and, oh yes, a cutting-edge project: a hot new app that uses an algorithm to find out everything about you and spit out a number that quantifies your desirability as a person.

The (fictitious, thank goodness) app, CheckUOut, is developed by Dorothy (Blythe Gaisert), a talented Rix newbie whose “brilliant” idea and coding talent lets her quickly climb the ranks. There’s only one hitch: a former employee, Ethan Snyder (Brandon Snook), has just been revealed as the whistleblower who exposed a B3-government conspiracy to mine people’s information from large companies. Not that this stops Rix from moving forward with the app. What does hinder things is the actual hitch: Ethan is Dorothy’s boyfriend, putting Dorothy in the age-old dilemma between love and fortune. With, of course, the fate of humanity’s personal data also hanging in the balance. And did I mention that all this plays out as an opera?

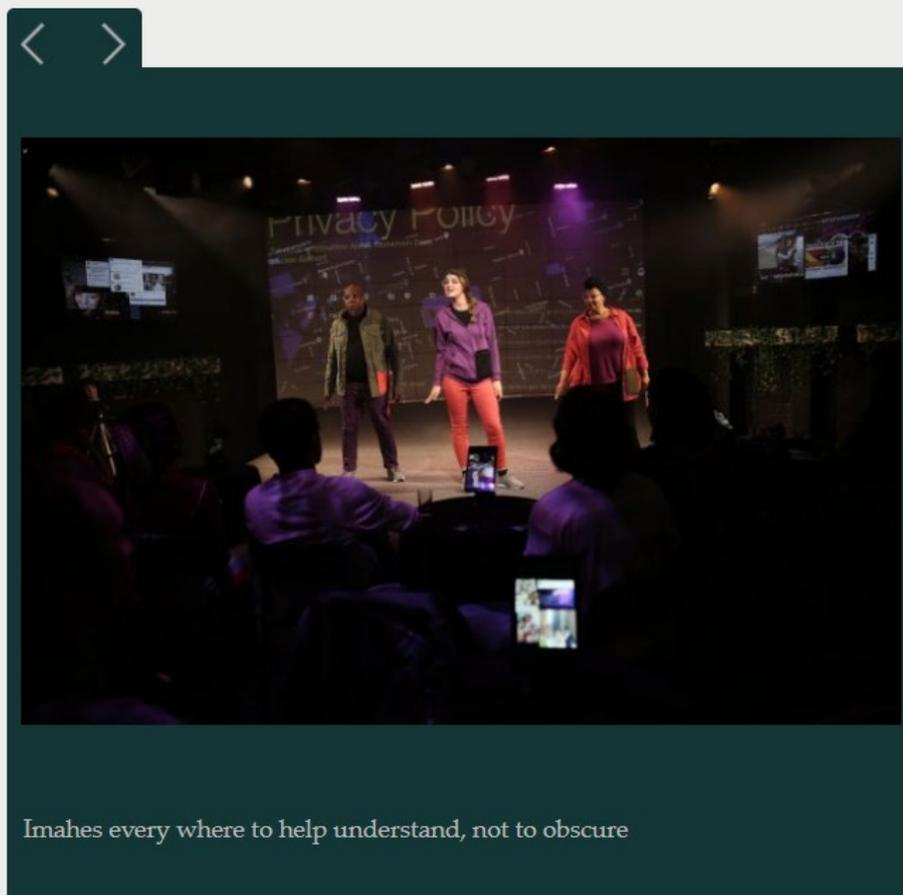
Looking at You occupies this odd space between “Why is this an opera?” and “I’d feel like I never left the office if it wasn’t an opera.” The show felt surprisingly pedestrian – between the copious corporate jargon in the lyrics, the TVs and tablets bombarding the audience with news of an information leak, and even the talk of the morally dubious sale of personal data, I felt like I could walk into a conference room at my college’s business school and hear the same kind of chatter, if not for the fact that it was sung. That’s what sticks. The performers are on, their voices could occupy a place in the Met Opera, the set successfully transported me to California for two hours. But none of that is exceptionally memorable. What’s memorable is watching your face appear on one of those TV screens as the actors casually sing about espionage and feeling like you’re not just in an immersive show – the show, too, is immersed in you.

Every table has a tablet on it, in which photos and news flashes appear throughout the show, but most of the time it just showed an avatar of a man. It was drawn in such a way that made it seem like he was looking back upon me with pity, as though sorry I was willing to play along. I looked at it and I realized that if nothing else, Looking at You surely made its point: we make our information an easy target, and the only way to escape is to disappear completely. Bleak and evocative of conspiracy theories, but true. You don't necessarily need this show to understand that truth, but if you'd rather swallow it down with a free drink as it's belted to you in falsetto, that's an experience you'll only get at HERE. Perhaps delete your search history first – but then again, you have nothing to hide, right?

Kamala Sankaram's New Opera at HERE

Kristin Marting, Opera on Tap and Experiments in Opera Join Forces

By: Susan Hall - Sep 08, 2019



Looking at You

music by Kamala Sankaram

libretto by Rob Handel

developed with and directed by Kristin Marting

Blythe Gaissert Dorothy, a coder
Brandon Snook Ethan, a coder turned whistleblower
Paul An Raj, head of the company
Adrienne Danrich Annina, a geek/Agent
Mikki Sodergren Brooke, a geek/ journalist/agent
Eric McKeever Charlie, a geek/agent

HERE

New York, New York

September 6-21, 2019

HERE and Opera on Tap are presenting Kamala Sankaram's *Looking at You*, an opera which takes a provocative look at the end of privacy as we have known it. We wittingly and unwittingly allow cyber companies to strip us. Rob Handel's brilliant libretto is in the tradition of Experiments in Opera productions. Its narrative arc and the apt language combine with thick orchestration using whatever musical style fits to convey issues embedded in a story. For *Casablanca* fans, a sisyphian romance, "Here's looking at you," and "Of all the the joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine." Well, we always have Silicon Valley. If we stop breathing, we'll die.

Ilsa is Dorothy, with a touch of the wizard. Rick is Edward Snowden, her lover. After liberating 1,700,000 secret government documents, he tells Dorothy that where's he's going. She can't follow, however, because she can have no part of it. The six people on stage feel that their problems do not amount to a hill of beans in this world of invasion into our personal lives.

HERE's *Looking at You* takes place in the corporate headquarters of the software developer, RIX. The cafe the audience sits in is RIX (Rick's) too! Scenic designer Nic Benacerraf keeps us in both worlds with skillful image projections and table top tablets.

The ultimate irony is of course that Americans say, "I have nothing to hide, so why not sign up for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter?" The final stanzas explain: " We need to meet in the dark, Maybe not today, Maybe not tomorrow, But maybe soon, maybe very soon. There's part of me nobody knows, There's a part that belongs just to me, And that means, I've got something to hide."

Blythe Gaissetrt is a commanding stage presence. She sings in a rich mezzo. Her range can move from a querulous and tentative sense of her job/assignment to a bossy lover and promoter of a big new App *CheckUOut*. The basic facts of a prospective date, including the date's bank balance and credit report, are revealed. Dorothy has developed the algorithm and playful, informative graphics punched up on multiple screens indicate its magic.

The evening is full of neon lights, swirling galaxies, and modest table tablets. They provide subtitles and basic moods expressed on a face outline.

Paul An is Raj, a bass whose slithering movement commands his Silicon Valley geeks and encircles. His boss mode is carried by his rapid fire tones.

All the actors perform superbly. Direction by Kristin Marting moves the characters through the space of the theater-made-into-a-nightclub. Movement to the beat of alto, tenor and baritone saxophone, drums and a miced piano help the storytelling work. The drama emerges from the story.

All the actors perform superbly. Direction by Kristin Marting moves the characters through the space of the theater-made-into-a-nightclub. Movement to the beat of alto, tenor and baritone saxophone, drums and a miced piano help the storytelling work. The drama emerges from the story.

We hear Ethan Snyder, Rick's stand in sung by Brandon Snook, deliver dark messages in a bright voice. It's not the laid back honor of Bogart as Ethan too gives up the girl for the greater cause. Snook is in many forms, on video. long distance and up close and personal. His are the loveliest lyric lines, perhaps because he is the hero of the piece.

Kamala Sankaram's eclectic score ranges through the most appropriate styles for any given moment, jazzy and also eloquent. A highly entertaining evening also raises profound questions about the theft of our identities. It is a cautionary tale about giving yourself away.

Hi! Drama

<https://www.facebook.com/hidramas/>

JAKE GOLDBAS

Kamala Sankaram's "Looking at You" is a brand new neo-opera playing at the HERE Theater in SoHo. It's quite the show and you should go see it.

"Looking at You" tells the story of Dorothy, a Sheryl Sandberg Type A personality who makes it to the Rix Corporation, which is a stand-in pastiche for any number of big tech companies including Google, Apple, Amazon, Twitter, and others, and in key plot points, smaller famous tech companies like Tinder and Elon Musk's Neuralink. When Dorothy's boyfriend Ethan Snyder rebels in the way of Edward Snowden, the company's CEO and team of programmers must do damage control. Dorothy must choose between her own aspirations and the evils of the Rix Corporation.

Blythe Gaissert's Dorothy and Brandon Snook's Ethan deserve credit for masterful singing and acting. Snook looks identical to Edward Snowden from the start. Likewise, Paul An's Raj is fabulous as the company's devil-may-care CEO. His puckish enthusiasm is contagious. Although dangerous, his charisma makes him more sympathetic than villainous, which is the point. As a supporting character he Paul An has nailed it.

"Looking at You" concerns privacy, and explores these conflicts in a few ways. In HERE Theater's progressive telling of this story, audience members can volunteer their social media profiles before the show. In an eye-opening joke, one audience member was taken away during the play by the Department of Homeland Security as his social media profile picture played on LCD television screens. The audience laughed because anyone's profile picture can be looked up, however the joke is so close to home about the world we live in. If the play were more tragic or more realistic, the satire might dip that much more on the side of terror.

These scenes always build the plot consistently, nevertheless at any given time the opera's one-off humor vignettes work well as parables. A Tinder subplot, here called Check U Out, talks about looking at someone's entire online history. This isn't so far from the present day, because lovers do stalk their acquaintances on social media, but the unlimited information of Check U Out is so much more that learning every detail about one's amour would finish off any mystery of having a crush in the first place. Romance means mystery, and "Looking At You" kills that. A one-off joke about Transit killing a person's entire biological body resonates with real-life Neuralink, which again is spooky, and makes the viewers take a hard look at life outside of the opera. Check U Out and Transit allude to these problems without spending too much time on them, and the production is all the better for it. Audience members might be surprised — from laughing so hard — when they aren't terrified after leaving the play.

The show is super effective as a neo-opera, too. Sankaram, Marting, and Handel have accomplished something excellent. In one of the best of these humorous plot points, Dorothy contacts Ethan using text messages. An LCD projector displays the text messages between Dorothy and Ethan as Dorothy sings her text messages. Audience

members will empathize with the vain banter of these texts in their own lives, and when Dorothy sings, “Where are you?” in operatic soprano there’s an emotional break the way opera — and only opera — can.

This is a great production and excellent social commentary. HAPPY FACE PLUS

JAN EWING

Jake has done such a fine job with the details that it leaves me free to focus on my overall impressions, the most significant being that this incredible opera is a work of genius. Primarily, it is a true opera; through composed as a single work from beginning to end. No “songs” here; no colorful tunes arranged into familiar patterns. The bold conception, the dystopian narrative, the integration of the music with the brilliant libretto, are spot on “classical” in the best sense of the word. This is not a work that will (or can) be taken up by small theater groups. The score is academic; extremely difficult and demanding, and it requires trained musicians in every aspect of its presentation. I don’t think I’m overstepping here to say that I sincerely believe it to be worthy of the Metropolitan Opera.

All the performers are absolutely first rate. They are opera singers, but they are also terrific actors, representatives of a younger generation that is rediscovering this great art thanks to digital broadcasts, recordings, and a growing recognition of the banal repetition that financial interests have forced upon our popular culture for over fifty years. Not one minute about this spectacular piece is stuffy or boring, misconceptions that have plagued the opera world for most of my lifetime. It is dynamic, informative, exciting, and unsettling in its message, which is something great art should be. Sung in English, every word is clear, every note powerful and demanding. The libretto is written with intelligence and a great understanding of the vocal demands of such difficult music.

The technical work at the HERE Arts Center is almost uncanny. It is definitely the best I have seen Off- or Off-Off Broadway since I began reviewing. Director Kristin Marting has skillfully designed the production in the round, with the audience sitting at tables in the playing area. The action moves rapidly through and around the audience, and Ayumu Saegusa’s incredible lighting manages to keep the actors lit. That, alone, is amazing.

The set includes eight large video monitors that constantly display Websites, eMails, TV programs, and information both specific to the play and drawn from current popular media. I was astounded at one point when my own Facebook picture started flashing from screen to screen, and when one of the singers ran by the table singing “it’s Jan,” which certainly reinforces the work’s basic premise. In the center (between the monitors) was an enormous screen — I’m guessing about twenty-five feet wide and eighteen feet high — used throughout for LED projections coordinated between the material on the monitors and the live action. In front of the screen was a three-quarter thrust “stage,” and on each table an iPad-type monitor featuring clever animations that provided additional information as to what was happening offstage to the live characters as they proceeded through the narrative.

All of that, including Nathaniel Butler's exquisite sounds effects, were brilliantly coordinated by the HERE technical staff, with remarkable accuracy. At one point, the conductor did stop the action briefly because of some technical glitch, which wasn't really obvious to the audience, but that lasted only a moment and was readily appreciated by the audience when some wag at one of the tables said "technology is great when it works."

In case it isn't clear I really liked this. Opera is one of the great arts of the Western World, after all, and to see it being pursued by brilliant, young artists in new and stylish ways is a great joy. I agree wholeheartedly with everything Jake said. HAPPY FACE PLUS.

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The Visionary, Sardonicly Hilarious, Grimly Dystopic New Opera Looking at You Debuts in the West Village

by delarue

Kamala Sankaram and Rob Handel's new opera [Looking at You](#) is as funny as it is dystopic – and it's extremely dystopic, and just as visionary. George Orwell predicted that people would become so enamored of technology that they'd willingly let it enslave them, and so far western society seems to be on the express track. The premise of this outlandish multimedia extravaganza extrapolates from that observation, and although it's a grimly familiar story, it keeps the audience guessing, adding layer upon layer of meaning until the inevitable, crushing coda. The New York premiere was last night; the show continues at [Here](#), 145 Sixth Ave. south of Spring, and west of the park in the middle of the block, tomorrow night, Sept 8 at 4 PM and then Sept 11-14 and 17-21 at 8:30 PM. Cover is \$25

Billed as a mashup of the Edward Snowden affair and Casablanca, this satire of Silicon Valley technosupremacists falling for their own bullshit is ruthlessly spot-on, right from the first few seconds. The first of many levels of meta occurs as the audience becomes the crowd at a breathless product launch for the app to kill all other apps. See, it connects not only your Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Tinder, ad nauseum, but also your phone camera, Amazon Alexa, the spycams outside your door, inside your apartment and your bathroom...and presumably every other spycam in existence. Access is universal: the miracle of face recognition technology gives you unlimited data on everyone, and vice versa. Full disclosure: as an April Fool joke several years ago, this blog published a [spoof](#) which reached the same conclusion that Sankaram and Handel do here.

The Snowden stand-in (Brandon Snook) sees where all this is leading and decides to spill the beans. His ex-girlfriend (Blythe Gaissert) isn't convinced: her refrain, heard over and over from several voices throughout the show, is "But I've got nothing to hide!" A brief media circus ensues – Kristin Marting's haunting backdrop leaves no doubt what's behind those cold, flickering screens – followed by a long cat-and-mouse game with Homeland Security.

In a delicious stroke of irony, Gaissert's get-out-of-jail-free card turns out to be the enterprise's crown jewel: it erases every electronic footprint you've ever left (mirroring the the real-life Silicon Valley cynicism of how it's considered bad form to give children screen time until they reach school age). This little gizmo is bestowed on Gaissert by her wide-eyed, relentlessly exuberant, boundaryless boss, played with relish by Paul An. His supporting cast – Adrienne Danrich, Eric McKeever and Mikki Sodergren, in multiple roles – are just as cluelessly dedicated to the cult of Big Data, spouting ditzy homilies in perfect techno-speak about how benign it all is.

Snook imbues the Snowden standin with a steely determination: he seems less interested in reigniting the relationship with his careerist girlfriend than simply persuading her to come over from the dark side. Beyond the acting, we get to watch their affair unravel – in reverse, via text message. An aborted clandestine meeting between Snook and a reporter brings Homeland Security in for the first time; the black-jacketed team's interview technique stops short of torture but is eerily accurate.

Meanwhile, at many intervals throughout the narrative, Instagram photos and Facebook posts made by audience members play on several screens behind the stage. In a brief Q&A after the performance, the directorial crew explained that they promise not to show anything embarrassing they discover about those in attendance. As an incentive to share your "socials," you get a free drink for signing into the system operating from the tablet at your table. It takes about an hour to datamine everything available on a given individual, legally, the opera company's head spy explained. If you don't want your mug and your stupid pix and who knows what else up onscreen for everyone to see, show up on the night of the show and pay cash like a sensible person.

Beyond the suspense involving the characters, we all know how this is going to end. It's been said that humankind's ability to reason is what differentiates us from animals, but in this tale it's denial that makes us unique among the species. Although the dialogue doesn't address it, the computer-generated alerts flashing across the many screens reinforce, over and over, how the most seemingly innocuous online or social media interaction has sinister consequences. After all, there's no human reason involved with this dystopia's magic algorithm. As Gaissert finally screams, contemptuously, "It's a fucking *computer!*"

Trouble is, that computer was programmed by people with a very specific agenda. Big Data was not devised to exonerate anyone. It's a snare. And as Sankaram and Handel remind, again and again, it's working better than ever. More than anything, *Looking at You* reaffirms how its creators' bleak vision is as vast and shattering as Sankaram's five-octave vocal range.

Her original score, played by a diversely talented ensemble of keyboardist Mila Henry with saxophonists Jeff Hudgins, Ed RosenBerg, and Josh Sinton, is fantastic, from the cartoonish faux-techno of the opening scene, through ominous noir tableaux, snarky pageantry and brooding neoromantic interludes. It isn't until the end that Sankaram draws on the Indian raga themes that she mashes up with cumbia when leading her slinky, surfy rock band [Bombay Rickey](#). Even Kate Fry's costumes are priceless: these true believers sport shimmery pseudo-lab outfits with circuitboards embedded in the fabric. And while the quasi-disguise that Snook wears in the next-to-last act is hardly subtle, it might be the opera's cruellest and best joke.

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AMERICAN THEATRE

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The cast of *Smoke & Mirrors* at "Black History Museum."

FEATURE | GOOD THINGS, SMALL PACKAGES | OCTOBER 2019 | SEPTEMBER 24, 2019 | 0 COMMENTS

Small Is Beautiful

We asked leaders at some of the nation's small theatre companies which shows, both large and small, they were most looking forward to in the coming season.

REBECCA AYRES, managing director, Mildred's Umbrella Theater Company, Houston

I'm not super familiar with a lot of theatres outside of Houston, but I've always admired [HERE](#) in NYC. This year I'm especially excited about *Looking at You* and *Black History Museum*, and might make the trip up to see them if my friend will let me crash on his couch. I really like art that confronts issues in society, because otherwise what's the point? Closer to home, I've liked *Rude Mechs* in Austin since seeing *Get Your War On* in 2003 or '4. I don't know what they're doing this year but their philosophy against the ideology of scarcity and supporting the arts community is really awesome.



Eric McKeever, Mikki Sodergren, Paul An, and Adrienne Danrich in "Looking at You" at HERE. (Photo by Paula Court)

Seen and Heard International

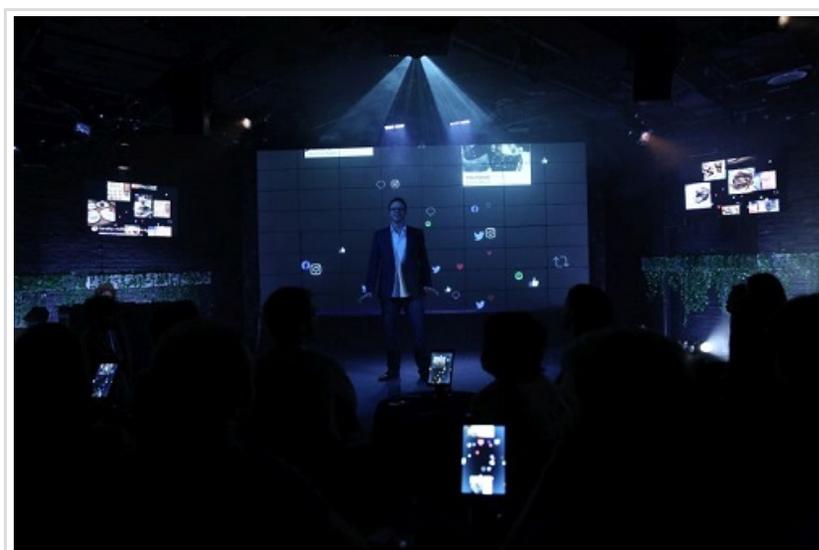
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In New York, a tech-drenched look at data mining and privacy

25/09/2019

 **United States** **Kamala Sankaram**, *Looking at You*: Rob Handel (libretto); soloists; Mila Henry (piano); Jeff Hudgins, Ed RosenBerg, Josh Sinton, Matt Blanchard (saxophones); Samuel McCoy (music director); Kristin Marting (co-developer, co-choreographer, and director), HERE Arts Center, New York, 11.9.2019. (BH)



Brandon Snook as Ethan Snyder in *Looking at You* (c) Paula Court

Production:

Video Designer – David Bengali
 Technologists – Alessandro Acquisti, Ralph Gross
 Tablet Technologists – Joe Holt, Daniel Dickison
 Scenic Designer – Nic Benacerraf
 Costume Designer – Kate Fry
 Lighting Designer – Ayumu “Poe” Saegusa
 Choreographer – Amanda Szeglowski
 Sound Engineer – Nathaniel Butler
 Production Stage Manager – Westie Productions

Cast:

Dorothy – Blythe Gaissert
 Ethan – Brandon Snook
 Raj – Paul An
 Annina – Adrienne Danrich
 Brooke – Mikki Sodergren
 Charlie – Eric McKeever

When signing up for a smartphone app, how many people actually read the Terms of Service (ToS), to see what they are agreeing to? ‘Basically none,’ said a panelist onstage after *Looking at You*, the

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startling new opera by composer Kamala Sankaram and librettist Rob Handel, directed by Kristin Marting.

As ticket-holders stood in line before the show, a staff member asked them to pre-order a free drink with an electronic signature on a tablet. Though people could decline — assuming they were aware of the option — virtually all agreed, which gave consent to a long ToS (adapted from Facebook's template).

Little did any of us know that, behind the scenes, staff were diligently researching facts about the audience, which later appeared in the show itself. In the question-and-answer session afterward, Marting offered reassurance that the data were not captured, but deleted after each show. Still, the point was made, playfully but arrestingly. For audience members to see personal photos flashed on screens around the room — never mind having cast members address them by name, seemingly out of the blue — was mildly unnerving.

The plot orbits around Rix, a fictional Silicon Valley company investigating a product called Check-U-Out, developed by an engineer named Dorothy, winningly sung by mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaissert. The software analyzes photographs of people across the room and reports on their likeability or desirability. (Readers may want to reference China's nascent Social Credit System, intended to maintain statistics on citizens' reputations.) Meanwhile, Dorothy is having an affair with Ethan Snyder, an Edward Snowden-type character (they even share the same initials) played with uncanny verisimilitude — and a pure tenor — by Brandon Snook.

Their colleagues were equally engaging. As the head of Rix, bass Paul An had the force of a demagogue, buoyed by an entertaining Greek chorus of three Rix employees — soprano Adrienne Danrich, baritone Eric McKeever, and mezzo-soprano Mikki Sodergren — all merrily in sync with the show's upbeat-yet-slightly-sinister tone.

For a relatively modest venue like HERE, the technological achievements were ingenious. In addition to the data-mining at the beginning, audience members sat at tables, each with a small tablet to register for a 'team-building activity.' (I signed up for a string band rehearsal.) A central Orwellian screen was flanked by smaller ones, confronting the audience at every turn. (The creative pedigree was impressive: HERE Arts Center and Opera on Tap were the presenters, with Experiments in Opera listed as a collaborator.)

Sankaram's score was entertaining on its own — a smart amalgam of techno beats, minimalism, and occasional, brief flirtations with Indian accents. She gave the cast many gratifyingly soaring vocal sequences, and the vocalists wore head microphones, all-too-apropos for the subject matter. Music director Samuel McCoy adroitly led an ensemble of five, with unusually spare instrumentation: Mila Henry (piano), and Jeff Hudgins, Ed RosenBerg, Josh Sinton, and Matt Blanchard (saxophones).

Of the many issues facing the world at the moment — climate change, political instability, income inequality, healthcare availability, gun control, and on and on — issues of data collection and privacy can seem not urgent. But *Looking at You* deliberately places the audience in a vulnerable spot. Like many on the premises, I wandered home feeling a little more fragile than when walking in.

Bruce Hodges

Posted by Bruce Hodges | Filed Under [International Opera](#), [Opera & Ballet](#), [This Week's Review](#)

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