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MUSIC

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Preview

Soldier's story

The Kitchen turns 25 with *Naked Revolution*

It's kind of like Hank Williams meets Puccini," says composer Dave Soldier of *Naked Revolution*, his new opera peopled by the likes of George Washington, Vladimir Lenin, Isadora Duncan, Marcel Duchamp and a multitude of other historical and cultural figures. "I mean, how would you write an aria for George Washington? What should it sound like? I think it should sound a little like Hank Williams."



Revolutionaries: Soldier, far right, and collaborators.

Opera season is once again upon us. But while the Met revives tepid productions of its standard repertory, interesting new works by contemporary composers somehow manage to sprout up in many of the city's smaller venues. Commissioned to celebrate the Kitchen's 25th-anniversary season, *Naked Revolution* is a multimedia work based on a series of dreams, both real and made up, of Russian immigrants in New York City. The combined efforts of Soldier, librettist Maita di Niscemi (a frequent collaborator with Philip Glass and Robert Wilson) and the Russian visual-art duo Komar and Melamid, the opera explores the phenomenon with falling statues, particularly those of Stalin and Lenin, which have tumbled rapidly across Eastern Europe over the past several years.

Soldier may invoke Hank Williams, but *Naked Revolution* is not a country & western opera (although that's an idea). Indeed, with his first opera composition, Soldier continues to draw on the variety of eclectic influences that have frequently appeared in his work as composer and violinist for the Soldier String Quartet, guitarist for a Memphis-style rock band and arranger for the scores to films such as *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Basquiat*. It was while working on one of his typically unusual projects that

Soldier first met friend and subsequent collaborator Vitaly Komar.

"I was putting together a record called *Smut* back in '92," Soldier explains. "It was homoerotic poetry by medieval monks, in Latin, performed by a rock band I put together, and I needed someone to do a cover. I ran into Mark Kostabi, [who suggested] Komar and Melamid. Vitaly said he really loved the music and gave me something

for the cover. We started spending time together, coming up with ideas."

One of the ideas the pair found themselves discussing frequently was the experience of recent Russian immigrants. "We found out that people who grow up in totalitarian societies often dream about political figures. They have dreams about Stalin. And when they move here, some

of them even have dreams about George Washington." In *Naked Revolution*, these dreams come to life in a series of episodes, each of which is also depicted in an original Komar and Melamid painting.

"On some level, I suppose it's sort of a ponderous subject—the Cold War, the end of the Soviet Union, desperate people trying to find an alternative way of living," Soldier says. "There's a little bit of cynicism. But mostly it's kind of warm and sweet. And it's actually a very funny work."

Like his new work, Soldier maintains a healthy balance between cynicism and humor. Although he complains that "certain things about the musical establishment make me feel creepy and sick," he also manages to poke fun at the "scary, nasty" downtown music scene of which he is a part.

Ultimately, Soldier's focus is on music-making rather than industry politics. "In opera, the music always comes first—you can't help it. What I'm trying to do is come up with a real union. For me it's important to make something that nobody else would make."—Matt Dobkin

Naked Revolution has a benefit performance on Tuesday 7. The regular run begins at the Kitchen Thursday 9 and runs through October 18. For information, call 255-5793.