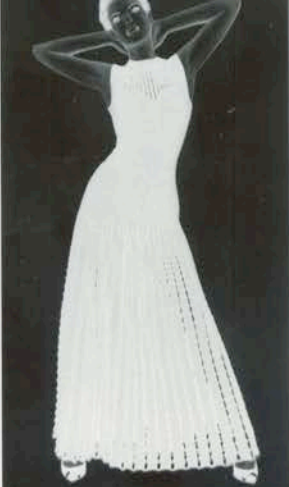


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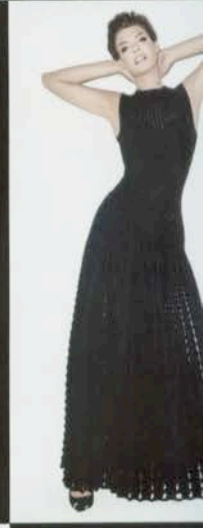
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SUPER STYLE



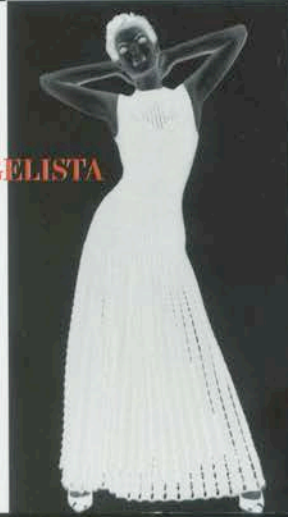
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A



LINDA EVANGELISTA



B



THE
MUSEUM
1775

FIRST
YOU ARE
BLIND
FOLDED...

Laurie Anderson embraces a composer's pioneering vision—without ever seeing a thing

Photograph by Victor Demarchelier

Dress, \$3,200, Marc Jacobs. **B** shopBAZAAR.com. Mask, Philip Treacy London. philiptreacy.co.uk.

B Available at ShopBAZAAR.com FASHION EDITOR: Joanna Hillman

LET THE MUSIC BEGIN

Ruins, symbolism, and Siberia—it's all fair game when Laurie Anderson meets Lera Auerbach

Lera Auerbach visits my studio on a sweltering summer afternoon. The composer and Renaissance woman is here to talk about *The Blind*, her pioneering a cappella opera, which made its world premiere during the Lincoln Center Festival in July—but the topic of conversation keeps shifting.

“Everywhere I go, I visit cemeteries or abandoned ruins—including one in a very small village in Brazil that you can only reach by boat. You walk in and there’s this incredible cemetery, with all sorts of flowering trees and completely disintegrating graves,” she says, gesturing like an orchestra conductor, dark curly hair flowing around her face, her eyes gleaming. “And there’s a sign at the entrance: PLEASE DO NOT DUMP BODIES UNATTENDED. It was exceptionally beautiful, in a gruesome way.”

Much about Auerbach’s career, including *The Blind*, is just that: beautiful, gruesome, devastating, and daring. Now 39, Auerbach, born on the border of Siberia, composed her first opera at age 12, and defected from the Soviet Union in 1991, when she was 17, to study at Juilliard. She also writes poetry (in Russian and English), paints, and performs as a solo pianist. With all of her projects, Auerbach has distinguished herself by pushing the boundaries of her chosen medium. (Take her previous opera, *Gogol*: the most ambitious commission ever undertaken by Vienna’s Theater an der Wien, it used pyrotechnics, actors in flight harnesses, and a tilting stage in a stadium-style spectacle.) In Auerbach’s hands, anything can become a source of inspiration.

“I once did an experiment,” she offers. “I was in a practice room, more like a storage space—extremely claustrophobic. I had to be there all day. I had my camera with me, and I thought, There must be something really inspiring here, if I can only find it. And suddenly something happened. It was the way the light reflected from the ceiling onto the piano; it fractured. It totally looked like notes. I took a photo, and it’s on the cover of my most recent CD, *Celloquy*. It’s this idea of finding beauty in the most unexpected places.”

For her latest work, Auerbach reinterpreted Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck’s 1890 one-act play, *The Blind*, as a 12-piece a cappella opera. Auerbach’s take is an immersive soundscape, sweeping attendees up into the performance. “It’s not like the opera, a concert, or a play,” director John La Bouchardière warns me before the performance. “It’s more like an installation. Everyone’s on a very individual journey.”

The experience begins in the line outside the theater, when every guest receives a blindfold. The only way to navigate into the performance space is to place my hands on the shoulders of

the woman in front of me, who leads me into a room suffused with electronic crackles and fizzes. The basis of Auerbach’s opera is the same as Maeterlinck’s story: An elderly priest leads 12 blind adults and one sighted child to an island. The priest then departs in search of a lighthouse, leaving his flock to wait for him.

There is no moment of lights slowly dimming—just sudden darkness. Chill breezes sweep through the performance space, accompanied by occasional whiffs of herbs. Singers move around, creating the disconcerting sense that nothing is solid. Prayers, calls, shouts, words whispered into ears, small skittering noises rustling along the ground—it’s an overwhelming wave of sound. After a while I realize I’m huddling in a fetal position, something I would never, *could* never do, in a more traditional concert setting.

“The audience needs to be blind too. They become characters in the show itself,” adds La Bouchardière. “Only in opera can you have each singer singing a completely different text, each singing in his own world simultaneously. In a play, it would be a disaster. But in opera it’s possible.”

By now I am freezing. The sounds disperse, flow around me. I imagine how the *bardo*, the Buddhist concept of the interval between death and rebirth, might sound, the way it’s expressed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In the *bardo*, the senses dissolve, and, as some Buddhists believe, the self disintegrates as the energy prepares to enter another life form.

At the end of the performance, the audience files out, every member wearing a blindfold pushed up onto the forehead like a bandage. And it does feel like we’ve come through an ordeal together. “It was the silence at the end that I loved—it went on and on and on,” Auerbach tells me the next day. “I was very happy about the end because of the silence. Because everyone became one.”

Auerbach, meanwhile, has moved on to the next challenge: a new work that will premiere at California’s Camerata Pacifica in spring 2014. Her enthusiasms are wide-ranging yet exacting. I share a Web site that shows sine waves being used to make water flow in zigzag patterns. “This is fantastic! Let’s make a sound fountain,” she says, seemingly on the brink of making a sketch. I tell her there are ruins you can visit on a bike path up the Hudson. “I already love it!” she says. I suggest a bike trip, and we agree to go. We discuss whether nostalgia is a disease and share our earliest memories. Talk moves to phosphenes, the patterns you see when you close your eyes, and the differences between visual and mental images.

After experiencing *The Blind*, I felt that my ears had been directly connected to my mind and that I had somehow heard the desperate and impossibly beautiful music of the *bardo*. ■