

Elmer Gantry

a new American opera

Informal biographies of creators

Award-winning composer **Robert Livingston Aldridge** was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1954. He is the son of a southern preacher from the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina, where many of his family still reside. As a youth, Bob spent much time in those mountains where church hymns, gospel, folk music and bluegrass were an indelible memory and ultimately a major influence on his musical style. He began playing guitar and singing when he was quite young. Throughout his youth, he played in church, in bands, at weddings, funerals and all manner of family and church occasions.

In college, Bob played in several rock, country western and jazz bands. At this time, he also began his formal study of classical music and composing. He wrote songs for the bands and began composing instrumental music. In the late nineteen-seventies, he went to Boston to continue his composition studies. After graduate school, he co-founded the legendary new music group, The Composers in Red Sneakers. This group was dedicated to presenting accessible and entertaining concerts of new concert music.

While in Boston, he met Herschel Garfein, who eventually became a member of the Red Sneakers group. In 1990, Bob asked Herschel to write the text for an opera based on ELMER GANTRY, the famous 1927 novel by Sinclair Lewis. The story is about a charismatic preacher-salesman who rises to the top of the religious revival circuit in the early nineteen hundreds. To research the background for the opera, Bob and Herschel traveled to the mountains of western North Carolina to attend a variety of revival tent meetings and services. The original hymns and gospel choruses of ELMER GANTRY were inspired by this research and by Bob's strong memories of this music.

Over many years, Bob has composed a great deal of instrumental and vocal music, and in each work, he tries to combine the vernacular American music of his youth with the classical music tradition. ELMER GANTRY is the culmination of these efforts to fuse American folk and church music and musical theater with European opera, into a powerful, dramatic and entertaining theatrical work accessible to all audiences.

Currently, Bob is the Director of the John J. Cali Music School at Montclair State University, and is Composer-in-Residence at the prestigious Brevard Music Festival in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. He lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with his wife, the painter, Paula Stark, and his daughter, Micaela, a violinist and singer.

Herschel Garfein (librettist) is active as a writer, composer, and director. *Elmer Gantry* is the culmination of a decades-long friendship and collaboration with composer Robert Aldridge. Given that they are both composers, they are often asked two questions about their work together: (1) Which comes first, music or words? (2) How do they settle musical disputes? Answers: (1) words come first; (2) Aldridge wins disputes, but then has to make dinner.

Herschel grew up in a theatrical family (his mother is actress Carroll Baker, his father director Jack Garfein, his sister actress Blanche Baker) and for a time pursued acting as a

career. Graduate school at New England Conservatory settled him on music composition as his life's pursuit, but the theater has continued to inspire much of his best-known work. He wrote music and lyrics for choreographer Mark Morris's groundbreaking trilogy, *Mythologies*; collaborated with Mabou Mines, Boston Musica Viva and legendary mezzo Lorraine Hunt Lieberson on *Sueños*; and wrote incidental music for director Sir Peter Hall's New York production of *Troilus and Cressida*. He is proud to be composing and writing the operatic adaptation of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Excerpts were performed to great acclaim by New York City Opera as part of VOX 2006: *Showcasing American Composers* (www.rgdead.com).

Other credits include concert works *American Steel* (The Alabama Symphony), *Places to Live* (Boston Classical Orchestra) and a *String Quartet* (Lark Quartet); and libretto and direction of Robert S. Cohen's *Edison Invents*, a one-man show for baritone and orchestra. Awards from: The National Institute of Opera/Musical Theater, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Sundance Institute. Mr. Garfein is on the faculty at the Steinhardt School, NYU. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife Vicki Bernstein and their five-year-old twins, Lev and Hadi.