

2026 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the premiere of *Breaking the Waves*. Since writing the work I have been asked countless times some version of the question: What are we to make of Bess?

In my opera Bess McNeil is neither heroine nor victim. She is a woman trapped in a tragic situation who makes brave and extreme choices in pursuit of spiritual perfection and true love. Bess's repressive Calvinist community controls nearly every aspect of her external life but her spiritual and moral world, and her choices, are her own. When Lars von Trier wrote the original script to *Breaking the Waves* he set out to create a story about goodness; Bess's faith and character remain consistently "good", while those around her raise their voices and their fists in an attempt to write her story for her. Even God manifests, in Bess's earnest ventriloquism, as a stern, deep-voiced, omniscient version of the local minister. We may not share Bess's commitment to following this masculine God to the letter, or her willingness to risk her life for her husband, we may simply wish she had different choices to make or was born into a different era, but can we understand her as a remarkable product of a brutal and limited environment? Can we see ourselves in her? And at the end of the opera, do we still see her as "good"?

I do, and I chose to tell the story of *Breaking the Waves* because I feel it communicates an essential truth about my experience and that of many women I know. The patriarchal world of *Breaking the Waves* is extreme in this sense (women cannot talk in church, must get permission to marry, etc.), but it is not wholly unfamiliar to anyone alive in 2026. For the majority of women, agency and goodness are intertwined in a complex tango with sacrifice and compromise. Everyone in Bess's world has their own opinion about her behavior (the men in the church, her husband, her mother, the doctor, her sister-in-law, God), leaving Bess unable to satisfy all of them. Bess cannot obey God while obeying her mother, cannot obey the men of the church while obeying her husband. Even the doctor tells her to "go dancing" and then yells at her to "go home" when she comes to his house to dance. This feeling of constant "wrongness" is very familiar to me, and the feeling of twisting into knots to meet the nearly impossible expectations of others is very much part of my experience growing up in a female body.

While I aim to create fully formed, multi-faceted, surprising female characters who are not made one-dimensional by the oppressive forces around them, it feels disingenuous to offer them complete agency in a way that does not reference the complex position of women in modern society. The wedding vows "wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband, as unto the lord" are not in the original film; my librettist Royce Vavrek and I found that text in a Calvinist hymnal that is still used today for marriage ceremonies. I live in a country where the right to bodily autonomy has been legally stripped from women, maternal death rates are rising, and even women's right to vote has recently been called into question. As an environment becomes more brutal, news cycle by news cycle, choices become more limited and behavior more extreme.

Many of my female composer peers in America's new opera scene are similarly occupied with the extreme lengths to which women must go to make their voices heard in patriarchal societies. I'm thinking of Bibi and Lumee, protagonists in Ellen Reid's *prism*, Mrs. XE in Du Yun's *Angel's Bone*, Mary in Emma O'Halloran's *Mary Motorhead*. Why are female creators drawn to these extreme and sometimes unlikeable female characters? These characters, like Bess, represent something vital about the experience of being a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Sometimes it's a fantasy, sometimes a catharsis, sometimes an exaggeration that shines a light on a world of extreme choices and difficult decisions, and sometimes a world of feral outbursts, imagined power and violent fantasies that, for the vast majority of women can only be safely realized in fiction. Sometimes it's simply a way to start a conversation.

When the aria "Map of Jan's Body" is reprised in the first scene of Act 3, and Bess changes the lyrics to "My body is a map", I can't help but hear it as a sort of manifesto; in the end Bess is left with only herself to follow – she has been stripped of everything but her body, her inherent goodness and her ideals, to which she remains true. Neither heroine nor victim, Bess stands before us as her remarkable self - resolute, steadfast in her belief, willing to bear any scar and sacrifice along the way.

— Missy Mazzoli