

Mark Streshinsky: You and Allen based your opera *Middlemarch in Spring* on a classic of literature. Do you have a similar purpose in basing an opera on *Howards End*?

Claudia Stevens: Well, like *Middlemarch*, *Howards End* is a great novel that has captured the imagination of others - there's an important Oscar-winning movie from 1992 and a new four-part *Howards End* BBC series. It's a work that resonates over time and the story is really quite wonderful. Our opera is based fairly closely, but not in every way, on the story line of the novel.

MS: Tell about that story and what you did with it.

CS: It's the story of three families within different social positions in Edwardian England. In America we might not grasp those in quite the same way. So, I made some alterations to make the class differences more accessible. There are two sisters and their family, a wealthy industrialist who is mean-spirited and greedy and his family. And then the poor people, who are "the Basts." In the novel they are struggling, lower-class folks who get the short end of the stick. I saw the possibility to do a lot with all that, particularly by making some changes - having the Basts be African-American and setting the story here, not in England - the Boston of the mid-1950's with the McCarthy era sensibilities and horrors looming over everyone. So, the setting is different, but essentially it is the same story.

MS: Was it difficult to transform the book? How did that process compare to *Middlemarch*?

CS: Our *Middlemarch* opera is an offshoot of one story line of a very long, complex novel. So, it is not really "the book," and that's true with *Howards End* as well. But with *Howards End* we do retain all of the plots - it's a shorter novel, so that's easier to do. There are a few similarities with the *Middlemarch* plot: the younger of two sisters falls for a man outside her social group - in our *Howards End* he is also married and of another race - and this creates a misalliance, with the potential for disaster. But the overall feeling is very different, and so is the ending. In the *Howards End* novel, Leonard Bast is murdered rather freakishly by an avenging member of the Wilcox family - he's murdered with a sword, actually. In our opera he's killed with a golf club. But nevertheless, killed. That ends up being pretty horrific and tragic, so in that way, and a number of other ways, this is quite a different opera from *Middlemarch*.