



*Penelope* is rooted in longing. In missing someone you can't be with. In a long wait that drifts into a what if...? During the long quarantine months of the Covid pandemic, Alex Bechtel asked Eva Steinmetz to help develop some songs and instrumental pieces he had written into a concept album. A musical riff on *The Odyssey* with Penelope at the center. The concept album got more fleshed out *and* further developed with support from the Orchard Project and eventually found its form as a cabaret musical.

Grace McLean had seen Lightning Rod Special's abortion musical *The Appointment* – which Eva directed, and Alex composed songs for – and reached out to express her appreciation for the work and an invitation to be in touch if there were ever future projects that might be a good fit for her. When *Penelope* came along, Alex says they were looking for “this sort of impossible combination of rockstar frontwoman of a band, classical actor, clown, and lyrical mover slash modern dancer.” Grace checks all of those boxes, brilliantly, and also has the ability to fully hold the stage, showing us Penelope's unrest even when she's not moving or singing or talking. She's a “coiled fucking spring” without lifting a finger.

There's lots that you'll be able to hear on this live album. You'll get the yearning and the desire, Justin Yoder's cello breaking your heart more than once, you'll get the fun and feisty, the drinking song with the lounge lizard undertones. You'll find your own favorite parts. The lines that stab you in the gut. The song you'll be singing in the shower. For me I can't get enough of the absolute pointed spear of a fulcrum in the smack-dab-middle of the show, when Penelope demands, “Why wait here for him to rescue me when I've got all I need right here inside of me?” The return to Penelope's opening theme, the shift from a minor key to a major key, the switch from sneaky syncopation to heavy accents right on the downbeat, combined with the idea in the

lyrics of finding one's own power: for me it all adds up to a deep rumble of satisfaction in my soul. A vision of saddling up a horse, cleaning the entire house of any last traces of dirty suitors, and eating celebratory French toast? Has there ever been a more emancipatory daydream in a musical?

If you listen closely, you'll hear the quality of attention that was in the air at Joe's Pub that night. Everyone leaning forward, breathing carefully, quiet and rapt. It was the kind of performance alchemy you always hope for, where the people on stage and in the audience are so clearly part of the same project and pointed in the same direction with no distractions. At one point while Grace as Penelope was describing her home, I couldn't help but take a look over my shoulder. Somehow it felt possible that a house on a Greek cliff had actually materialized in the bar, just behind me.

Even with the emancipation, there's no easy resolution. This cautionary tale warns us that, "I've kept the home fires burning here so long the smoke has damaged all the walls." With the pandemic origins of *Penelope*, I can't help but think of where we are in our collective pandemic timeline. Smoke damage is everywhere and the bonfires set by reckless brutes are raging in every room. The other day I read a piece by journalist Anya Kamenetz with a clarion call: "Nothing is ever going back to normal. So let's turn to the work ahead." Just as Penelope breaks through her stagnation, tapping into anger and fear and what ifs and daydreaming by the sea, we can all turn to the tasks ahead, accepting that we're never going back to the time before Odysseus left. We're never going back to an imagined pre-pandemic golden age or a less broken timeline. This is where we are. This is when we are. Just as Penelope channels the sea and the rocks and the mist into a sense of galvanizing forward motion, may this one perfect jewel box plucked and preserved from one evening of art in one corner of New York City help lead you forward into whatever lays ahead. When the record is over, go ahead and flip it over and let's just hear it again. It's morning once more. What if...

Ellen Chenoweth

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