

The RIVERDALE PRESS

August 13, 2014

For a Bronx composer, opera rises out of identity struggle

by Maya Rajamani

For Judith Baumel, science and poetry are inextricably linked.

“What we think of as facts in science are often kind of metaphors,” said the poet, a 2014 Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) winner. “Although I don’t know how many scientists out there would agree with me,” she added with a laugh.

A lifelong writer who founded the creative writing program at Adelphi University, Ms. Baumel filled her first book of poems, *The Weight of Numbers*, with scientific imagery. She began her studies at Radcliffe College as a physics major before realizing her calling was in the English department.

The book — a compilation of poems she started in college and continued working on afterwards — won the 1987 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. In one poem, the narrator describes a trip she took during a summer physics program to watch the Perseid meteor shower. She describes a connection forged with a fellow stargazer after falling asleep on the hillside.



Judith Baumel a Bronx Council on the Arts BRIO winner for poetry, at her home on August 6.

Photo: Marisol Diaz/Riverdale Press

In the morning he told her she was beautiful.

She considered Einstein’s paradox:

*If I hold a mirror in front of myself
arm’s length away*

*and run at nearly the speed of light
will I be able to see myself?*

A self-described “Bronx girl,” Ms. Baumel grew up in the Pelham Parkway area. Her writing career began early; she recalls writing about trash she observed on the street as a first grade student.

“I find things that are leftover or ignored really interesting,” she said.

But the poet does not limit herself to either the scientific or the forgotten, delving into myriad subjects in her work. Her second book of poems, *Now*, reflects at times on motherhood — her relationship with her own mother, as well as her experiences with her three children, now ages 26, 23 and 22.

She draws inspiration from her native borough. Her third book, *Kangaroo Girl* — a picture of the author in a kangaroo costume graces the cover, a photo her father carried in his wallet for years — deals with subjects like tensions between Irish Catholic and Jewish neighborhoods.

On the Radcliffe-Harvard campus, her professors became her literary influences. Ms. Baumel studied under the likes of Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell and Robert Fitzgerald.

“All three of them are still deeply in my work,” said Ms. Baumel, who also builds upon writers of antiquity like John Milton, Virgil and Theocritus.

Her current book-in-progress, *Eclogues of Broadway*, uses poetic strategies similar to those of Virgil and Milton, but applies them to the Bronx and its history. The volume focuses on the borough’s Sicilian ties.

On a trip to Sicily, where Theocritus was born and Milton and Virgil traveled, she discovered Virgil’s descriptions had stood the test of time.

“It’s all there — the same landmarks Virgil has his sailors looking at,” the poet said.

Still other poems in *Eclogues of Broadway* evoke Revolutionary War battles in the Bronx, Anne Hutchinson and an early Audubon Society in Van Cortlandt Park.

Ms. Baumel said she tries to write briefly each morning. Throughout the day, she jots down ideas on scraps of paper or in a notebook; at night, she tries to compile the day’s thoughts.

“I’m always aware in my head that I’m going to be putting something down at night,” she says.

She credits visits to writers colonies like Saltonstall in Ithaca, New York, as well as breaks from her busy teaching job at Adelphi, with giving her the time to weave the ideas she works on all year into cohesive pieces.

“Poems are puzzles for me,” she said. It is a visual way to describe poetry — the author often brings her love of paintings and sculptures into her works.

Between writing and doing translation work — she translates both Italian and Ukrainian poems into English — much of the poet’s time is devoted to her students at Adelphi.

“I don’t know,” she said when asked if her students were inspired by her own work, as she was by her Radcliffe professors. “But I get inspiration from them.”