

CLASSICAL MUSIC

# Sartre's 'No Exit' chamber opera to have West Coast premiere in San Diego



Soprano Mariana Flores Bucio, left, and mezzo-soprano Leslie Ann Leytham rehearse for Project BLANK's "No Exit: A Chamber Opera." (Courtesy of Project BLANK)

Mezzo-soprano Leslie Ann Leytham reprises her role in the existential dark comedy presented by Project BLANK

**By Beth Wood**  
Contributor

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Mezzo-soprano Leslie Ann Leytham spent some time in hell in 2008 and she's returning soon. By choice.

Leytham, co-founder and artistic director of San Diego's Project BLANK will play Inez, one of the three main characters ushered into a windowless room — for eternity — in “No Exit: A Chamber Opera.” It is based on the existential, dark comedy by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Leytham played the same role in the 2008 world premiere of the one-act opera in Boston. It was produced by Guerilla Opera Company, which Leytham co-founded when she was a Boston Conservatory student. The company commissioned noted Boston composer Andy Vores to put Sartre's biting words to music.

Leytham will come full circle next weekend when Project BLANK present the West Coast premiere of “No Exit” at Bread & Salt Gallery in Logan Heights.

Why is Leytham eager to revisit the character?

“Inez is a piece of work,” she said from her home office in City Heights.

“Of the three, she's the one who lies the least, is the most honest — definitely to a fault,” Leytham said. “She has been dealt a tough hand as an out queer woman in the 1940s, which is when the play was written. She's aggressive and she doesn't suffer fools gladly. It's fun to play not-nice people.”

Born in a small border town in south Texas, Leytham moved with her family to Las Vegas when she was 14. Her high school and college years were spent there before attending Boston Conservatory.

Leytham met Project [BLANK] co-founder and general director Brendan Nguyen in 2008, when they were graduate students at UC San Diego. They discovered they shared a dedication to interdisciplinary work and continued their collaborations after college.

## **Immersive collaborations**



The intrepid pair officially established Project BLANK in 2019. While not affiliated with UCSD, the school is a source of energy and talent for the nonprofit.

Current UCSD grad students Mariana Flores Bucio and Miguel Zazueta (a Tijuana-based married couple) play the other two trapped main characters in “No Exit.” The fourth cast member, UCSD alum Jonathan Nussman, is also on Project BLANK’s board of directors.

Directing “No Exit” is Robert Castro, who is on UCSD’s acting and directing faculty. He is working with Project BLANK a second time — both stints on top of his full-time job as professor.

“I love the name Project BLANK — insert whatever you want there,” Castro said from his home in Vista. “They have impeccable taste and their collaborators include technologists, visual artists, designers.

“What’s singular about Project BLANK is their flexibility and how they model their creative process. Music is their starting point and from there they create immersive collaborations on social justice, making connections between artists and communities.”

The last two years Project BLANK’s mainstage season included a chamber opera, along with multiple performances of theatrical productions and a January group art-music exhibition called “Working Title.”

Project BLANK also sponsors Salty Series, which features a different creative person putting together their own program each month.

Its most recent theatrical production, “The Tragedies of Space Travel,” was a brainchild of Project BLANK general director Nguyen. Leytham directed the April concert, which

was based on Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time."

As Project BLANK's artistic director, Leytham is responsible for the organization's programming and for finding visual artists and musicians (who are paid). She also chooses the creatives who rotate curating the Salty Series concerts.

"We're still running on sweat equity," she said. "Most of our funding goes to pay for musicians and artists. If I'm performing, I get a payment. But we don't plan to stay volunteer forever!"

In a positive sign, next year Project BLANK will expand its previous January to June schedule to a full September to June season.

## **Heightened drama**

Leytham believes this weekend's performances of "No Exit," will demonstrate the power of chamber opera. No stranger to full-scale operatic productions, the mezzo-soprano prefers the more intimate genre.

"The smallness of chamber opera can make more complex emotions clear," said Leytham, whose husband, Joe Cantrell, coordinates the tech side of the performances.

"You're so close in a chamber opera. Seeing the spirit, the sweat and the breath — how the body is working. Having that closeness heightens the drama and experience for the audience. In 'No Exit' specifically, it's going to feel a little claustrophobic."

The lighting design by Elba Emicente Sanchez promises to intensify the atmosphere. The opera will be sung in English with supertitles in both English and Spanish. It's likely Sartre would approve.

“Sartre speaks to us today,” Castro noted. “He had a history of social justice and was part of the French resistance. His efforts were so admirable — it’s moving to hold hands with him on this project.”

Castro and scenic designer Victoria Petrovich, also a UCSD faculty member, had virtual discussions with composer Vores about his musical adaptation of “No Exit.”

“Andy gave us the liberty to reinvent the world and to add extra music to cover theatricalization,” Castro said. “He’s super-supportive.”

Along with the four singers, “No Exit” will feature four instrumentalists, violist Batya MacAdam-Somer, saxophonist Paul Roth, cellist Robert Bui and leading percussionist Nathan Hubbard.

Leytham stresses that the play isn’t all doom and gloom, despite “No Exit’s” characters falling apart and coming back together in the hellish room.

“Even though these three people are damned to suffer forever,” she said, “there is a lot of humor in it.”

## **Project BLANK: ‘No Exit: A Chamber Opera’**

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 p.m. June 11

**Where:** Bread & Salt Gallery, 1955 Julian Ave., Logan Heights

**Tickets:** \$15 - \$25

**Online:** [projectblanksd.org](http://projectblanksd.org)



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