

THE BEEKEEPER

Music by Wang Lu

Libretto by Kelley Rourke

Commissioned by Chicago Opera Theater

Noah and Phoebe leave the city when he inherits his grandparents' orchard. The young couple dreams of the life they will create together, but they are unprepared for what lies ahead. In addition to the never-ending demands of the house and the land, Noah is haunted by memories of his last visit to the orchard, many years ago.

CAST

NOAH CADER, JR. Late 20s/early 30s. Baritone.

Recent inheritor of his grandfather's apple orchard.

PHEOBE CADER. Late 20s/early 30s. Soprano.

Noah's wife. They have not been married long.

MELISSA MEVROS. 50s or older. Mezzo.

Has lived next door to the orchard since before Noah was born.

THE VOICES OF THE LAND. Three women.

These wise beings have been around since before the Noah and Melissa were born, and they will be around afterwards. They are narrators, collaborators, judges, recipients of care, setters-of-scene. They often sing together, creating musical textures that instantly bring us into a parallel reality, but they also have individual moments – wise, funny, stern, tender. Their spare text is designed for repeating and overlapping in varied textures.

Scene 1. Arrival

Winter. Phoebe and Noah are on the large front porch of the old Cader home. We can see traces of the house's former grandeur, but it has obviously been neglected for some time. On the other side of the stage, we see a suggestion of a smaller, simpler home's front porch. It is tidy and well-loved, alive with an assortment of flowerpots and windchimes. Downstage of this house are suggestions of two trees, each with a distinctive shape. Upstage, sweeping behind the Cader home, is the suggestion of a large, orderly old apple orchard.

PHOEBE

Here we are!
A new beginning.

NOAH

Here we are.
So many memories.

PHEOBE

How long, Noah?
How long has it been?

NOAH

When my grandparents were alive,
we used to come every summer, but then—

Last time, I would have been nine, ten.

PHOEBE

And then you stopped coming—why?

NOAH *to himself*

Nine, I would have been nine.

They don't build them like this anymore, Phoebe.

So much space.

PHOEBE

So much detail.

BOTH

So much....

PHOEBE

...dust.

NOAH

It's like I never left.
So much history...

PHEOBE
So much ahead of us.
One day...

NOAH
One day at a time.

PHOEBE
I still can't believe all this is ours.
All this is ours.

The sound of the bees rises up.

PHOEBE
What is that?

NOAH
What?

PHOEBE
That sound.

NOAH
It seems to be coming from that wall.

Noah and Phoebe press their ears to the siding, listening, unsettled.

Scene 2.

An older woman approaches the house, with a cheerful, bustling energy. She is carrying a dish of homemade cookies, which she hands to Phoebe.

MELISSA`
Hello! Hellooo!

to Phoebe

I'm Melissa, Melissa Mevros.

PHEOBE
Oh, hello! My name is

MELISSA
... Phoebe. We've been waiting for you.
And Noah!
I haven't seen you since you were a little boy.

I hope you still like oatmeal cookies.
Well, as you can imagine, the village is buzzing
Noah, Jr., coming home after all these years.
I always knew you weren't meant for the city
Always knew the orchard would call you back--

The sound of the bees rises up again.

MELISSA
"That's right," I told the bees,
"just you wait."

PHOEBE *alarmed*
The BEES?

NOAH *realizes what they've been hearing*
Your bees! I remember...

Didn't they fly away...

MELISSA
...that day. Yes.

NOAH
Your bees were your livelihood,
weren't they?

MELISSA *gentle laugh, practical, not heavy*
The bees gave me something to do
in the endless evenings
after my husband passed away.
A little supplement to my salary, yes—

slight pause, a new feeling, sense of mystery and rightness
but mostly, a kind of grace.

back to easy feeling of the beginning
And then one day
it was time for them to go.
Amazing they've stayed so long
in this place.
Maybe they were waiting—
waiting for you, for this day.

Anyway, don't be strangers. Noah knows where to find me.

Melissa exits.

PHOEBE

Well! I never knew you liked oatmeal cookies.

playful

What else have you kept from me?

NOAH

It's so strange—

In my mind, Miss Mevros

was always the The Beekeeper Next Door.

Nothing less, nothing more—

PHOEBE

Strange what sticks

in the mind of a child.

You will have to learn this place all over again.

VOICES

Nothing less, nothing more...

NOAH

Do you hear that?

PHOEBE

What?

VOICES

Remember...

NOAH

Nothing. Never mind.

VOICES

Remember...

PHOEBE

I love you.

NOAH *distracted*

Me, too.

Phoebe and Noah go inside as the Voices rise up.

First Tree Interlude

As the Voices remember, time passes, moving us out of winter and toward early spring.

VOICES

too

too

too

too

too small

too small

two small boys sow apple-seeds

two small boys

two small boys

two small seeds

two seeds

two small boys sow apple seeds

two wild saplings grow

too wild

too wild

too

too

too

too

two wild saplings grow

two small boys

long ago

go

go

go

Scene 3: To work!

Noah and Phoebe are coming to realize the magnitude of the project they have taken on. The Voices are excited to see the change of season – of everything.

PHOEBE

A leak in the roof.

VOICES

Spring!!!

Snow melt!

NOAH

The trees need pruning.

Growing!

PHOEBE

Tools need oiling.

Moist! Moist! Moist!

NOAH

Gutters need cleaning.

Mud!

PHOEBE

I found mushrooms
growing in the bathroom!

Spring!

MELISSA

Hello! Helloooooooooo!
Looks like you're.

PHOEBE

Hardly! There's a leak in the roof.

NOAH

Trees need pruning.

PHOEBE

Gutters need cleaning

NOAH

Tools need oiling.

PHOEBE

And there are BEES—

MELISSA

Sounds like you're a little overwhelmed.
Best thing for it: start doing. Who wants a lesson in pruning?

PHOEBE

Go on, Noah, I've got plenty to do here.

VOICES

to do

to do

two

two

two bodies

four hands

wisdom passing from hand to hand

hand to hand to hand to hand

wisdom and memory

hand in hand

MELISSA *to Noah*

Hand me the loppers.

No, those are shears.

The loppers. The big ones.

This limb will need three cuts.

We hear one – two – THREE cuts.

NOAH

Ouch! You sure are cutting a lot.

MELISSA

Got to let in the light.

You need to let in the light.

Got to make space.

Got to make space for the sun—

to make space for life again, for life!

As MELISSA and NOAH continue working, they each become absorbed in their own thoughts.

From her porch, PHOEBE watches them as she continues paperwork.

MELISSA

I remember children running through this orchard,

I remember

Trio

NOAH *lost in thoughts of the past*

I remember –

I remember –

The Beekeeper 2/13/23

VOICES

Remember...

Remember...

PHOEBE *lost in thoughts of the future*

Already

I see what this place could be.

MELISSA *observing Noah and Phoebe*

They are so young.

Distracted as only the young can be.

NOAH

Nine years old.

We were nine years old,

PHOEBE

So much work,

So much work ahead.

MELISSA

Looking back –

Looking ahead –

NOAH

Everything felt so certain then

as we chased each other through the orchard

without a care in the world.

PHOEBE

I see a thriving family farm

I see our children running through the orchard.

I feel the warmth of the summer sun.

NOAH

We chased, chased

each other through the orchard

without a care in the world.

PHOEBE

I see a thriving family

I see our children running through the orchard

I feel the warmth of the summer sun.

MELISSA

Can't see what is right in front of them.

By the time you learn to see

your time is almost done.

The people retreat to their houses and the Voices begin to speak.

Second Tree Interlude

the earth tilts her face
to the warming sun

the snowmelt runs
to wake the creek

run run run run

pink and white petals
unfurl
and then drop

pink white pink white pink white pink white pink white petals

the flesh of the fruit
swells 'round the seeds

the flesh the seeds

the seeds the flesh

no one knows
how a seed will grow

no one knows

no one knows

Scene 4: The inspector says

PHEOBE *businesslike, with an edge*
The inspector says
the addition
is going soft

NOAH *absently*
Mmm hmmm

PHEOBE
The inspector says
we should consider
just tearing it off.

NOAH
Mmm hmmm

PHOEBE
What do you think we should do?

NOAH
What?

PHOEBE
What do you think—

NOAH
I think... I'm pretty lucky
to have married
a woman like you.

PHOEBE
HmMMM *relaxing, playful*

NOAH
You know I trust you
completely, Phoebe.
You always know what to do.

PHOEBE
HmMMMM

PHOEBE *back to business, increasing intensity*
The inspector says
moving the bees
will be a costly, difficult job

NOAH *caught off guard*
Moving the bees?
Why? They're not causing any trouble...

PHOEBE *upset, no longer businesslike*
They haven't caused any trouble yet.
But when we start work on the porch—
I am not going to battle a swarm
of venomous insects.

NOAH
Oh Phoebe—

PHOEBE

It's only a matter of time
before someone gets stung.

NOAH

Oh Phoebe—

PHOEBE

You want to raise children
inside a beehive?

NOAH

Melissa says
they won't hurt anyone.

PHOEBE

Melissa? Melissa says?
This is our house now!
What does Melissa know?
Her inability
to keep her bees
is how this house
got infested
in the first place!

furious—all the stress of the renovations boiling over

NOAH

I'm going for a walk.

Noah heads toward Melissa, leaving Phoebe alone.

PHOEBE

Noah...
Not the most practical man
He never had to be
Plenty of room for dreaming
When you come from a family with means.

Never knew a man like Noah
He's like a little boy in so many ways
So stubborn – and so tender –
Such a mystery.

Never knew a man like Noah,
like Noah. He feels so deeply.

Drives me crazy sometimes.
But... that's Noah.

I never knew a man like Noah
He will be a father like I never had.

Noah...

VOICES
Remember. Dream. Remember. Dream.
Children running through the orchard
Can't see, can't see, can't see....
blinded by the sun.

Scene 5

MELISSA
If I remember right
the time to move bees
is just before spring.
when the early apples bud.

That would be these trees.
The last in the ground,
the first to fruit.

Do you remember planting them?

NOAH *puzzled*
I don't think I ever planted any trees.

MELISSA
We started the seeds in my greenhouse.

NOAH
Oh!

I think I remember...

MELISSA
You do remember.

NOAH
You said every seed carries
a unique set of genes.

Every seed that takes root
makes something new.

VOICES

But an orchard is a manmade thing.
An orchard is a manmade thing.
Macintosh, Honeygold, Jonathan, Idared,
Cortland, Crispin, Gala, Pippin,
Granny Smith, Fuji, Baldwin,
Beacon, Braeburn, Ginger Gold...

MELISSA

Once in a while,
a wild seed takes root
and produces something new—
a special fruit that somebody wants
to reproduce.

Your grandfather made his choices,
raised up row upon row of orderly clones.

VOICES

Macintosh, Honeygold, Jonathan, Idared,
Cortland, Crispin, Gala, Pippin,
Granny Smith, Fuji, Baldwin,
Beacon, Braeburn, Ginger Gold...

MELISSA

But these two trees are special.
Unique.

VOICES

A tree
grown from seed
only knows
its own way.

Every tree
grown from seed
is unique.

Wild
Crisp
Bitter
Tender

Third Tree Interlude

VOICES

Summer....

The apples swell in the summer rain,
red and gold and russet and rose
But something else grows in the orchard
carried on the rain and wind
from leaf to limb to leaf to limb...

something

something else grows

something else blows from leaf to limb

something else grows and blows on the wind

something

summer

something

Scene 6: Gabe

NOAH

Gabe.

After that day,
our parents
never said your name.

Not around me,
anyway.

Gabe.

Do you remember that day
in the greenhouse, Gabe?
Remember what Melissa said?
"All those seeds look exactly the same,
Just like you two, today.
but plant them—
just wait and see—
Each of these seeds
will go its own way—
Each of these seeds,
unique—"

Gabe.

Who were you supposed to be?

Why couldn't we say your name?

Gabe.

Why you? Why not me?

Gabe.

PHOEBE *entering, sparkling with good news*
Well, my love, it's official.

NOAH
Phoebe! When?

PHOEBE
We'll be welcoming our new baby
Next time the apple trees bloom.

Hand in hand, Phoebe and Noah step off the porch, looking toward the orchard.

VOICES
pink white pink white pink white petals
seed to flesh
limb to leaf
seed
flesh
leaf
limb
run run run run

NOAH
That's odd...

PHOEBE
What?

NOAH
The tip of that limb—
It's shriveled, bent.

PHOEBE

How strange...
And we've had so much rain.

MELISSA *arrives, assorted pruning implements in hand*
Hello, helloooooo!
Noah, we've got work to do. MELISSA *as voices continue*
There's a blight spreading through the county
Got to nip it in the bud.
Got to snip out
all the infected tissue
If you want to save your trees.

VOICES
two bodies
three
two bodies
three
hand to hand to hand

The three disappear into the orchard behind the house and go to work.

Phoebe and Noah return from their work, physically and emotionally exhausted.

PHOEBE
No apples this year.
But maybe next...

NOAH
Maybe. I'll haul the debris
to the creek tomorrow.

Phoebe goes in, leaving Noah outside. A storm blows up and transitions to Noah's next scene.

7. I should have known

NOAH
I should have known
we couldn't make it here

I should have known
I couldn't shake the ghosts

I should have known
I couldn't outrun death

We should never have gone to the creek that day.

“Stay away from the creek,”
the grown-ups told us.
Going to the creek
was my idea.
Gabe wouldn’t have gone
if not for me.

VOICES
Noah...
Gabe...

creek sound becoming stronger, stormier under the voices

NOAH
I’ve never stopped hearing
that creek in my dreams.
It never stops calling,
calling my name.

VOICES
Noah...
Noah...

NOAH
I’m coming!

*Music reaches an unbearable intensity as Noah runs offstage in the direction on the creek.
Blackout. Silence. When the lights come up, Melissa is leading him back from the direction of the
creek, toward his house.*

MELISSA
Listen to me, Noah.
You couldn’t have saved him.
You were only nine years old.
The creek was too fast, too deep.

NOAH
I tried –

MELISSA
Let it go, Noah. Let it go.

Melissa's Aria

MELISSA

Children reach
for shiny things
before they know their names.
An earring – an apple – a tumbled stone.

Grown-ups reach
and grownups cling
as they try to work out who they'll be
while they make this earth their home.

Comes a time
you realize
to take up something new
you have to let something go.

Life is a long letting go.
Life is a long letting go.

Scene 8: The bees tell us

PHOEBE

To lose a brother, a twin—
how awful that must have been.

NOAH

I'm sorry, Phoebe.
I don't know why
I didn't tell you.

PHOEBE

Don't be sorry, Noah.
We all process grief in our own way.

NOAH

Grief.

I never had a name for it.

Grief.

My parents never let me see their grief.
All I saw

was silence.

PHOEBE

How lonely that must have been.
How awful that must have been,
to lose your brother...

NOAH

My twin.
Melissa says,
the bees always know
when a spirit slips away.
When her bees took off, that day,
Melissa knew,
but by then it was too late.

I tried, Phoebe! I tried so hard!

PHOEBE

We don't have to stay here, Noah.
We've done our work well.
All the house needs now
Is a fresh coat of paint—
And it's ready to sell.

NOAH

Is that what you want?

PHOEBE

I don't know...

Scene 9: Some reading for you

MELISSA

Hello! Hellooooooo!
Some reading for you.

PHOEBE

"The Philosophy and Practice of Beekeeping?"

MELISSA

You were planning
to move the bees,
Were you not?
Spring is not so far away.
And you can't lean on me
forever.

Whether your orchard bounces back or not
there's plenty of forage in these fields
to produce a honey crop
next year.

PHOEBE
If we are still here.

MELISSA
You'll be here.

I've pulled out my old equipment. I'll have it cleaned and ready soon.
Start studying! You'll want to get started on the first day of spring.

Fourth Tree Interlude

VOICES
we draw into ourselves in winter

to rest

rest

prepare

restore

repair

prepare

to rest...

PHOEBE, MELISSA
to rest...

NOAH

It's ours now.

Life. Death.
The memories. The dreams.

NOAH
repair

PHOEBE, MELISSA
to rest

Scene 10

The first hint of spring. A new day is barely beginning to dawn, with a faint light that gradually brightens over the course of the scene. Two hives, along with other beekeeping equipment, are stacked neatly on Melissa's porch. Phoebe, now heavily pregnant, points over to Noah and Gabe's trees.

PHOEBE

Look, Noah!
Your tree, and Gabe's,
covered in buds, about to unfurl.
That's two that survived the blight, at least.

NOAH

My tree – and Gabe's –
Soon to be in bloom.

PHOEBE

The day has come to move the bees
Melissa always knows--
She put everything out for us.

NOAH *laughing*

Look out, there's
a new beekeeper in town!
All winter, you couldn't
put Melissa's book down.

PHOEBE

Just think –
this colony is a link,
a living link
to your childhood.

NOAH

Look at her!
One little bee....

PHOEBE

One bee is no bee.
That's what the book says.
"One bee is but a particle
A purpose unfulfilled.
The constant is the colony.
Workers and drones,
even queens come and go
But the hum of the hive goes on."

NOAH

Amazing how much can change in a year.
You were so afraid –

PHOEBE *gently*

We were both afraid –

The sound of the bees rises up and grows louder. Phoebe and Noah look toward the opening in the house's siding that the bees use for an entrance, then follow a swarm with their eyes, watching it travel out of their house and over to the waiting hive on Melissa's porch.

PHOEBE

Look, Noah!

The bees moved themselves.

It's like they knew—

NOAH

“The bees always know
when a spirit slips away.”

Melissa—no!

The façade of the Melissa's house is lit in such a way that we see through it to Melissa, in silhouette, still -- at rest. The sky by now is a brilliant pink and gold, and we see the three humans silhouetted against the dawn, as the Voices come downstage.

VOICES

seeds

flesh

reach

keep

dreams

cling

rest

life is a long letting go

life is for holding

and letting go

rest

open your hands

let go

open your hands

rest

open

hold