

# Avant-garde film opera explores two Hamilton Fishes

Museum to screen film about two very different men called Hamilton Fish

By Paul Grondahl

Published 5:40 pm, Thursday, January 22, 2015

It may be one of the most mysterious film experiences you'll encounter this year, a mesmerizing mashup of music, opera and dance that was inspired by a historical coincidence — the deaths, on the same day in 1936, of two men named Hamilton Fish, one a serial killer of children and the other a revered politician.

"The Lives of Hamilton Fish" is hard to describe or categorize, but surprisingly easy to be drawn into. And it is coming to the Albany Institute of History & Art on Thursday for a free showing, a reminder that the 224-year-old institution is not afraid to push boundaries.

The 69-minute avant-garde operatic film is sung entirely by filmmaker and songwriter Rachel Mason while strumming an acoustic guitar, a soundtrack that is lip-synced by actors moving through Hudson Valley historic sites. Mason delivers spare, evocative tunes with touches of Tori Amos and Tom Waits, girded by a peculiar narrative power.

The highly choreographed scenes merge elements of modern dance, kabuki drama and the fractured planes of cubist painting — echoed by cubist-styled whorls of colored paint on the actors' faces.

The screening also represents a homecoming for one of the lead actors, Theodore Bouloukos, a 1980 graduate of the Albany Academy, a former staffer at the Albany Institute and founder of a late- 1980s literary journal, the Albany Review.

"I hope to see familiar faces," said Bouloukos, 53, who has lived in Manhattan for 20 years and has

been cast in numerous small indie films. "I look back with fondness at Albany for all the wonderful friends and benefactors who supported my creative and artistic endeavors there. Those years running the Albany Review were some of the happiest of my life. It was like throwing a great dinner party with wonderful guests every month who added their voices to an ongoing conversation about art and culture."

Bouloukos plays the statesman Hamilton Fish. "I had to do my homework, because I didn't know much about him," he said. "The lip-syncing was really challenging. I'm not a musical person. Plus, I'm in mourning the entire movie and have to look like a sad sack. I play the very doleful Hamilton Fish and Bill (Weeden) gets to play the animated Hamilton Fish."

The seed for was planted in 2005 when Mason, 36, of Queens, was working at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, Westchester County, as a volunteer with the Rehabilitation Through the Arts program.

She was researching the prison's history at the Peekskill Public Library and looked at microfilm from the Jan. 16, 1936, edition of the Peekskill Evening Star. The front page carried a story about the execution at Sing Sing of a notorious serial killer, Hamilton "Albert" Fish. He murdered children and cannibalized his victims, earning the monikers "Werewolf of Wysteria" and "Brooklyn Vampire." He told reporters that his death by electrocution was to be "a supreme thrill."

Mason was repulsed and fascinated by the macabre nature of Hamilton Fish's crimes. She happened to glance at the bottom left corner of the front page of the Evening Star and a headline caught her eye: "Hamilton Fish, 86, Dies in the South; of Famous Family." The obituary described the Albany-born scion of a New York political family who was Assembly Speaker, assistant U.S. treasurer under President Theodore Roosevelt and a powerful Republican boss from Garrison, Putnam County.

"I thought there must be an error," she said. "It was so random and strange that two men named Hamilton Fish died on the same day in such different ways, and their stories were both on the front page of the newspaper."

She made a photocopy and let the bizarre Fish juxtaposition steep in her songwriter's imagination. A year later, a friend introduced her to a descendant of the political figure, Hamilton Fish V — the recurring first name resulted from the family patriarch's friendship with Alexander Hamilton. He told Mason he'd never heard of that other Hamilton Fish and dismissed it.

"I found it odd that he didn't show any interest in this serial killer with his name, who became a folk legend for the depths of his depravity," Mason said. The musicality of the names was the first impulse that caused her to start writing songs about the two Fishes.

"When I read 'Werewolf of Wysteria,' that's a ready-made song title, and the

name Hamilton Fish is very poetic to my ear," she said. "It felt like I'd stumbled upon a piece of American mythology. The film is a musical journey through the mind of a newspaper editor, which is how I felt as I researched

their lives. The songs seemed to write themselves and I just had to be there to receive them."

Mason grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from Yale University in 2004 with an MFA in sculpture. She has exhibited her artwork widely, but she's also a performer and has produced 10 albums.

"Music was kind of an aside to my art process," Mason said. "But lately, it's been more a happy marriage between music and art and this project is a culmination of that." "The Lives of Hamilton Fish" started as a few music videos to promote an album of the same name. The concept of a lip-synched cinematic experiment came to Mason in a rush of dreamlike images. Funding a movie was a grim lesson. She solicited donations, crowd-sourced and scraped together a \$100,000 budget.

"That number makes me shudder even now," said Mason, who has a 2-year-old son, Jonah, with her husband, Dmitriy Ivolgan, a computer programmer. "It was really stressful, because I never spent that kind of money before."

Bouloukos praised Mason's artistic vision. "It's a dream-nightmare, a phantasm," he said. "It jumps around like dreams do. We had a certain plan of action, but she also gave us license to improvise. The challenge is that you have to hit your timing perfectly in lip-syncing. You're walking the chasm between songs that are free verse with a rigid iambic pentameter rhythm."

Bouloukos and Weeden will be available with Mason to answer audience questions after the live performance and film screening.

Mason said "The Lives of Hamilton Fish" passed muster with her most discerning critic, her grandmother from Pittsburgh.

"She is really tough to please, and she told me she loved it," she said. "That told me that cutting-edge art can connect with a mainstream audience."

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**If you go**

**"The Lives of Hamilton Fish," film and performance by Rachel**

**Mason.**

**When:** Thursday, 6-7 p.m.

**Where:** Albany Institute of History & Art, 125 Washington Ave., Albany.

**Info.:** Free. [www.albanyinstitute.org](http://www.albanyinstitute.org). 463-4478.