

# Deeply felt ‘Fellow Travelers’ makes powerful impression



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(Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

Government worker Hawkins Fuller sat in a chair under a light, dwarfed by shadows. He was being investigated for “deviant behavior.” He had to prove that he was not gay – and therefore also not a Communist sympathizer – by walking across the room, taking a lie detector test and reading an excerpt from “Of Human Bondage.”

Fuller had no sway and no lisp. He passed with flying colors.

The scene from Cincinnati Opera’s “Fellow Travelers,” which was given its world premiere Friday at the Aronoff Center, put a spotlight on the humiliation and fear suffered by gay people in the 1950s in America.

While Sen. Joseph McCarthy was conducting hearings to root out communists, there was also a parallel witch hunt in the State Department known as the “Lavender Scare.”

The new opera, “Fellow Travelers,” set to a ravishing musical score by Gregory Spears with a libretto by Greg Pierce, is based on the 2007 historical novel by Thomas Mallon. Mallon was at the opening to take a bow with the cast during the premiere’s lengthy ovations.

Provocative, well-sung and inventively staged by Kevin Newbury, it is an important work, and the kind that invites dialogue. Its impact was one of deep sadness, made fresher in light of the horrific shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando last weekend.

The company dedicated its entire run (through July 10) to the victims of the massacre.

Many in the audience lingered long afterward in the lobby of the Aronoff’s 400-seat Jarson-Kaplan Theater, where the premiere took place, to discuss it and, in some cases, hug each other. Seen in the crowd were Jim Obergefell of Obergefell v. Hodges, which resulted in a U.S. Supreme Court ruling to legalize same-sex marriage, and his attorney, Al Gerhardstein.

Set against this political turmoil of the McCarthy era, “Fellow Travelers” is, at its heart, a love story. We meet the two protagonists, Timothy Laughlin, performed by Aaron Blake, and Hawkins “Hawk” Fuller, performed by Joseph Lattanzi, on a park bench in Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C.

As Hawk, a handsome State Department official, Lattanzi exuded the swagger of the office charmer. He easily seduced the ladies (he eventually marries one) as well as the younger Timothy. During their first encounter, he sang in a mellifluous baritone, “I own you” to the inexperienced Tim, whom he called “Skippy.”

Their initial love scene was passionately staged, with long, soft chords in the orchestra for their first kiss, and rapturous music as they dreamed of going to Bermuda. But the emotion was most poignant near the end of their story, as Hawk held Tim and sang “Let me hold you for an hour. That’s what we get.” The opera’s most revealing moment, it indicated that for them, real, open love would always be forbidden.

Tim, from a working-class Irish family, is devoutly Catholic and ironically also staunchly anti-communist. He is a bit star-struck when he eventually meets McCarthy as part of his new job as speechwriter for Sen. Charles Potter (sung in a blustery baritone by Vernon Hartman). Communicating in a light-toned tenor, Blake perfectly captured Tim’s fragile, nervous nature, as he prayed, “How many sins did I commit?”

Devon Guthrie was a warm-hearted Mary Johnson, Hawk’s assistant who warns Tim to be careful in an achingly lovely aria. Later, she was riveting as Hawk confessed what he had done and she screamed at him, “You swine.”

The action unfolded cinematically over 16 scenes, which seamlessly overlapped. Cast members theatrically criss-crossed the stage, pushed set pieces on and off, and sometimes carried on several conversations at once.

There were no McCarthy hearings. But the tension of the McCarthy era was felt in whispers during the Christmas party, office suspicions and finger-pointing, particularly by Fuller’s secretary, Miss Lightfoot (well performed by Alexandra Schoeny). McCarthy, performed by Marcus DeLoach, turned up in a powerful scene with Sen. Potter as they discussed Roy Cohn and Cohn’s friend David Schine.

Other cast members made fine contributions, sometimes in multiple roles, including Christian Pursell (notably as the priest who takes Tim’s confession), Paul Scholten as Tommy McIntyre and Talya Lieberman as Lucy, who marries Hawk.

Spears’ music for the singers was conversational, and he set Pierce’s poetic text in long streams of arioso. The composer’s lyrical orchestral score was anchored by minimalism. Its propulsion helped to move the action along, while melodic fragments in winds and piano added glints of color.

The lean orchestration sometimes recalled neo-classical Stravinsky, and once Britten. There was also the unexpected element of music inspired by medieval troubadours, with the strumming of chords under a lyrical melody. Singers and orchestra had ornamented phrases, lending an antique flavor.

The composer inserted other interesting touches, such as a slightly dissonant “Silent Night” that was woven into the undulating music of the Christmas party scene. The occasional soaring of a clarinetist recalled the clarinet player in Mallon’s novel.

In his company debut, conductor Mark Gibson captured those nuances of the score with a sure hand and propelled the music with an exacting feel for the drama. It’s too bad, though, that the 17-piece orchestra often overpowered the singers, perhaps due to the difficult acoustical properties of the small theater.

Victoria Tzykun created the spare but effective scenic design, with atmospheric lighting by Thomas C. Hase. Costume designer Paul Carey captured the era nicely, particularly with his full-skirted party dresses for the women.

If there was one shortcoming, it was that, despite the fear and necessity to live double lives, one didn’t feel the very real danger of the period. Yes, McCarthy and the Washington players were there. But the music lacked the ominous undercurrent that, in the end, might have made Tim’s character all the more tragic.

Still, we were reminded that the threat of loss of reputation, livelihood and even life – often by suicide – was very real. As Tim walked off, a wall of photographs was projected, representing those who were victimized.

Developed and co-commissioned by G. Sterling Zinsmeyer, who brought together the creative team, the opera was presented in partnership with the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

*“Fellow Travelers” continues through July 10 (evenings 7:30 p.m.; matinees 3 p.m.), Jarson-Kaplan Theater, Aronoff Center. Content advisory: It is intended for adult audiences. Tickets: 513-241-2742, [my.cincinnatiopera.org](http://my.cincinnatiopera.org); also at Aronoff Center Box Office.*

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