

Gregory Spears
Fellow Travelers

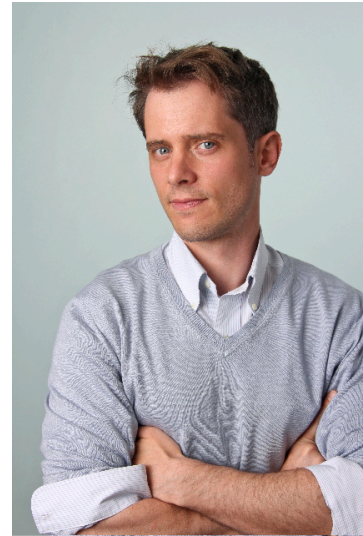
(2016)

an opera in two acts
libretto (Eng) by Greg Pierce, based on the
novel “Fellow Travelers” by Thomas Mallon

Developed and Co-Commissioned
by G. Sterling Zinsmeyer & Cincinnati Opera

World Premiere: June 17, 2016
Cincinnati Opera; Aranoff Center for the Performing Arts

Creative Team:
Director: Kevin Newbury
Executive Producer: G. Sterling Zinsmeyer
Stage design: Vita Tzykun



Roles:

Timothy Laughlin · tenor
Hawkins Fuller · baritone
Mary Johnson · mezzo-soprano
Miss Lightfoot · soprano
Tommy McIntyre · baritone
Lucy · soprano
Estonian Frank / Interrogator / Senator Joseph McCarthy · baritone
Senator Charles Potter / General Arlie / Bartender · baritone
Potter's Assistant / Bookseller / Technician / French Priest / Party Guest · bass

Instrumentation:
fl.ob.cl(bcl)-2tbn-pno-str

Duration:
105'

Synopsis:

Based on the best-selling 2007 novel by Thomas Mallon, *Fellow Travelers* takes place in 1950s Washington, D.C., and follows Timothy Laughlin, a recent college graduate and devout Catholic eager to join the crusade against Communism. A chance encounter with a handsome State Department official, Hawkins Fuller, leads to Tim's first job in D.C. and—after Fuller's advances—his first love affair. As McCarthy makes a desperate bid for power and investigations focus on “sexual subversives,” Tim struggles to reconcile his political convictions, his love for God, and his love for Fuller—an entanglement that will end in a stunning act of betrayal.

Fellow Travelers in the press:

[A] **heart-wrenching** yet **musically lucid drama**...

The opening act is a **near-perfect** example of **fast-flowing musical drama**. The budding attraction between Tim and Hawk has all the infectious warmth, humor and sweetness of the early scenes in “La Bohème.” The music, libretto and sure-handed stage direction by Kevin Newbury create **a tidal pull that rushes the action along and the audience’s sympathies with it**.

Spears’s music is characterized by the **tonal freshness** and **propulsive momentum** of Minimalism. But his vocal writing is **charmingly idiosyncratic**...

With its **smart music** and **sharp-edged** romantic drama, *Fellow Travelers* seems **assured of lasting appeal**.

– *The New York Times*, Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim



... A **moving** opera with a **seductively beautiful** score ...

[Spears has] **a distinctive musical voice** that blends consonance, minimalism and Baroque and pre-Baroque subtleties with feathery filigree and intimations of Janáček’s internal repetitions. The orchestral colours reveal **a rare ear** for **subtle, arresting combinations** and **sonorities**. The music has a flow, somewhere between Cavalli and Wagner, in which the vocal lines, without losing their melodic shape, blend into the instrumental textures, and the action moves subtly from recitative-like conversation to quasi-arias ... It is all **very beautiful**. Internationally, maybe even nationally, Gregory Spears is the best unknown opera composer in America.

– *Opera Magazine (UK)*, John Rockwell



Fellow Travelers is made all the more potent by the restraint of its presentation. [The opera] **elicits tears not because it demands them**, but through its **understated treatment** of an impossibly sad situation.

Fellow Traveler’s libretto and its musical treatment are often deliberately prosaic, [with arias] marked by **neo-Puccinian lyricism** ... Spears wisely avoids 1950s pastiche; instead...he invokes archaic dance forms—a waltz, a sarabande—to conjure the formality of the capital’s manners. Throughout, the **precision of his operatic technique is formidable**: this is **music that breathes** along with the story it tells.

Fellow Travelers’ delicacy came through in full, and so did its **emotional wallop**.

– *OPERA NEWS*, Fred Cohn

Deeply felt ... *Fellow Travelers* makes [a] **powerful impression**.

... a **ravishing** musical score ... **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... Many in the audience lingered long afterward in the lobby of the Aronoff's Jarson-Kaplan Theater to discuss it and, in some cases, hug each other.

– *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Janelle Gelfand



[*Fellow Travelers*] is a **poignant and moving meditation** on a particularly shameful episode of gay history. ... [T]he opera, **moving tautly across the rapid-fire scenes** of Kevin Newbury's staging, shuns polemics in favor of doing what so many operas have done before — telling a deeply human love story...

[T]he **contemporary resonance** the opera's creators bring to their complicated interplay of characters and situations is **smart and sharp-edged** ... Here words, music, staging and the skills of a flawless ensemble of nine young singing actors came together to illuminate a **tightly constructed music drama**.

Spears' **eclectic score** floats open tonal harmonies and pulsing minimalist patterns in the orchestra. The vocal writing, mostly text-driven parlendo, makes effective use of twisty melodic melismas. ... Spears is **unusually sensitive to the irregular cadences of American speech**, and **his setting of words to music is masterly**.

Fellow Travelers is **one of the most accomplished new American operas** I have encountered in recent years. It **deserves to travel widely** ...

– *Chicago Tribune*, John von Rhein



[*Fellow Travelers*] has history and timeliness going for it, but **it ultimately succeeds as a sad, tender love story of two men** ... Greg Pierce's **taut, clean libretto** keeps just enough of the political background to evoke the atmosphere of secrecy and paranoia of the period, but it zeroes in on the central relationship.

Mr. Spears's **subtle, lyrical music** is **beautiful** without being obvious or sentimental. It captures Tim's superficial shyness and hesitancy as well as his deeply passionate nature ... In Act I, their love affair unfolds **dreamily** in 6/8 time; in Act II, it comes apart as Hawk,

unable to truly commit, perpetrates a stunning act of betrayal. Yet **such is Mr. Spears's talent** that we feel for Hawk as well: In the **poignant, revealing** aria "Our very own home," the rhythmic heartbeat on the piano shows that Hawk is suffering too. Mr. Spears also **writes exquisitely for vocal ensembles**: The large ones have a madrigal-like quality that makes the world around Tim and Hawk multidimensional.

Mark Gibson led the 17-member ensemble in Mr. Spears's **alluringly transparent orchestration** ... Kevin Newbury's directing, particularly of the love scenes, was as **honest and touching** as the opera.

– *The Wall Street Journal*, Heidi Waleson

Greg Pierce's libretto is **a superb adaptation**, limning the most crucial episodes into words that are conversational, elegiac or horrifying. They form an ideal framework for Gregory Spears' **powerfully compelling** score.

I'm still pondering exactly what makes Spears' score so **effective** and the best answer is that the music genuinely allows the text to be sung, something I've rarely experienced with contemporary operas. It's **accessible in the best sense of the word** and flows seamlessly from scene to scene. ... **The opera surpasses the novel** in making this gay love story **a story about all of us**: the truths we hide from ourselves and our complacency in the face of oppression.

– *parterre box*

[T]he tangled web of politics, love, religion, and betrayal is ripe for the operatic genre and ultimately produces...an opera that is **more relatable than many works in the standard canon**.

The music of Gregory Spears is an amalgam of styles including romanticism, minimalism, and early music, all of which are clearly perceptible in *Fellow Travelers* ... Spears' treatment of **carefully-controlled dissonance** recalls both Renaissance polyphony and minimalism and proves crucial to the support of the libretto.

The **outstanding orchestration** creates a full ensemble sound from a group of 17 musicians.

Though the term "transcendent" when applied to music often suggests some sort of Straussian journey beyond the physical realm, *Fellow Travelers is transcendent* in its own way—the music transcends style and influence to create **an accessible opera for contemporary audiences**, and **the libretto transcends time** to bring new, present-day relevance to haunting events of our nation's past.

– *I CARE IF YOU LISTEN*, Amanda Cook

Tales of forbidden love are as old as storytelling itself, but **rarely are they told with as much painstaking heartbreak as *Fellow Travelers***.

Librettist Greg Pierce has done **a remarkable job with character depth**. He has adapted Mallon's fictitious leading roles into multi-layered men of complexity ... Composer Spears has created a score that is often **hauntingly beautiful** yet **simultaneously tuneful**.

By the time the curtain fell, there were stifled tears, caused not only by the events on stage, but because **they inspired serious reflection** about the state of our nation ... Thankfully, stories like this provide a civil, but extremely powerful catalyst for change and help reinforce a defiant pride suggesting that we will not remain invisible, bullied, or powerless. Not only does love ultimately win; music shares in the triumph.

– *The Broadway Blog*, Ryan Leeds

Fellow Travelers achieves a universality ... because there are elements in it that speak to our common humanity in subtle yet palpable ways. It is **the finest new opera** I have seen since Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking* premiered in 2000. The music is **gorgeous** but also very specific to the dramatic narrative.

– *WQXR*, Fred Plotkin