

# Lavender Lament

by Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim

**A**s the time drew near of the June 17, 2016 premiere of Gregory Spears and Greg Pierce's opera *Fellow Travelers* about a gay love story in Washington, D.C. during the McCarthy era, the time must have seemed auspicious. After all, since the idea of an operatic adaptation of the eponymous novel by Thomas Mallon had first been floated, America seemed to be irreversibly set on its course toward equality and acceptance. Barely a year earlier the Supreme Court had issued a landmark ruling on same-sex marriage.

Then, on June 12 a gunman claiming allegiance to the Islamic State entered the Pulse nightclub in Orlando and killed 49 revelers in what became the deadliest incident of anti-gay violence in U.S. history. Pierce recalls receiving the news as the cast and creative team were deep into tech rehearsals at Cincinnati Opera. His libretto has a character gossiping about a man who lost his job for having been caught in the "wrong" bar. Half a century of presumed progress later, dozens had lost their lives for much the same reason. "We started to hear everything differently," Pierce says. "Suddenly there were these parallels."

*Fellow Travelers* presents a slice of American history that is rarely examined. It is set during the "Lavender Scare" of the 1950s, when anti-Communist paranoia fueled the targeted persecution of gay and lesbian government workers, who were considered easy targets for blackmail by enemy agents. But the instant popular and critical success of the opera has a more simple explanation.

*Fellow Travelers* is a love story that is at once deeply romantic and unsentimental, set to music that manages to be beautiful without appearing glib and sounds familiar, yet fresh.

It follows the emotional maturing of Timothy Laughlin, a wide-eyed Fordham graduate newly arrived in Washington, who falls under the spell of the suave and worldly Hawkins Fuller. Hawk, as he is known, works in the State Department and helps Tim get a job as a speechwriter for a senator close to McCarthy. He also initiates a love affair that is Tim's first taste of sexual fulfillment.

At work the atmosphere is poisoned by gossip and suspicion. Hawk successfully lies his way through an intimidating cross-examination of his sexuality. His secretary, Mary, is the only sympathetic character, casting a protective eye on the two men's relationship even as an unplanned pregnancy brings her up against the cold restrictions of her society.

And the men's relationship itself unravels as Tim's yearning for monogamous security rubs up against Hawk's promiscuous restlessness. To wrench himself free Tim enlists in the army. While Tim is stationed in Europe Hawk marries the bubbly, oblivious Lucy. Tim returns to Washington and the two men resume their love affair, but by now the layers of lies and dissimulation have grown stifling. In a stunning act of betrayal, Hawk denounces Tim, ensuring that he is cast out of town and out of Hawk's life.

The opposition of political forces and private lives is reflected in music that juxtaposes the forward-pressing energy of Minimalism with the sensual arabesques and turns of troubadour music, a tradition that Spears says fascinates him in part because it was developed to express private and forbidden love in a public and ritualized setting. A strong pulse runs through the score, often tapped out on a piano, that conveys something of the mechanical impatience of a newsroom teleprinter of yore. The vocal writing, mirrored in the woodwinds, seems to revolt against that horizontal thrust with music that is extravagantly melismatic, virtuosic and willfully individual.

Spears' compositional style is studded with references to the past, including Baroque dance forms that capture the courtly formality of the 1950s in social scenes like the office Christmas party. As Hawk sets up the love nest for his trysts with Tim in Act II the music momentarily turns neoclassical with chirpy Stravinskian winds. At this point the men's relationship is in its second go-around, beset by compromise and disillusionment, and the neoclassical sound captures something of the artifice and rationed nostalgia of their situation.

The transparency of the orchestral texture, created by a chamber-sized ensemble of strings, winds, brass and piano, allows the words of Pierce's smart dialogue to come through with stenciled clarity. Few composers are as adept as Spears in making conversational American English singable in a way that is both idiomatic and psychologically astute.

Tim's vocal lines are especially revealing of his inner state: music for someone prone to blushing. Take, for example, his job interview, where the words come out in a nervous jumble, one tripping over the next, his voice an unsteady wobble on some words, or shooting up in a pubescent squawk on others. Or listen to the emotion he is trying so hard to bottle up as he shops for a thank-you gift for Hawk in a bookstore. A melismatic tremor catches him off-guard as he mentions the "great man" he is gift-shopping for; you can guess at the effort it takes for him to iron it out as he repeats the words more plainly.

One reason *Fellow Travelers* lends itself so well to opera is that the idea of the voice as a conveyor of multilayered meaning is so central to the story. A telling scene is the interrogation of Hawk, designed to test his sexual orientation. Not only is he subjected to a lie detector and ordered to walk the length of the room ("normally. Whatever you would consider normal"), but he is also asked to read out loud. Hawk is first given a news brief, then a passage from Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, in which the male protagonist burrows into a closet full of women's dresses.

The idea that a man's speech melody, rhythm or intonation can reveal carefully concealed truths that could undo his career is chilling, of course. But it's also wonderfully operatic. As it happens, Hawk reads the first text in dead monotone, but turns the literary extract into a flamboyantly expressive performance that just happens to be set to the same music we first hear when he flirted with Tim on a park bench. His interrogators are clearly none the wiser: he passes the test.

Spears often plays with recurrence of musical material, setting up pairs of scenes as mirror images of each other. Music from Tim's job interview reappears in a scene involving Senator McCarthy in Act II, reinforcing, as Spears says, "the feeling that Tim has learned a lot: The first time Tim thinking, 'here is my future.' And of course McCarthy is where it's all curdled."

For all the oppressive social and political forces weighing on the main characters, the opera's heart remains wide open—reflected also in the frequent use of guileless octaves and open fifths. Where Mallon's novel is a dark web of intrigue and blackmail, the opera feels intimate. Pierce remembers being struck by the way Spears set the duet between Tim and Hawk as they dream of Bermuda, shortly before tumbling into bed together. While Hawk reminisces about his adventures there with "bronze boys on the beach—biceps you wouldn't believe," Tim is fantasizing about "sand as white as milk."

"Gregory set it in a way that it overlaps," Pierce says, "so they're almost not listening to each other. And then suddenly they are singing together. It was remarkable to me. I thought they would be listening to each other and sharing ideas, but they are really in their own worlds. And that feels so true: When we fall in love we are both seeing the other person but we are also creating that person, we want so badly for them to be 'that' person that we aren't really listening to what they're saying."

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