

OPERA NEWS

In Review (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/review.aspx?date=7/1/2016>) > North America
July 2016 — Vol. 81, No. 1 (http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2016/7/July_2016.html)

Fellow Travelers

CINCINNATI
Cincinnati Opera
6/17/16



Kevin Newbury's production of Gregory Spears and Greg Pierce's *Fellow Travelers* at Cincinnati Opera, featuring Mary Johnson (Devon Guthrie), party guest (Christian Pursell), Hawkins Fuller (Joseph Lattanzi), Timothy Laughlin (Aaron Blake), Lucy (Talya Lieberman), Tommy McIntyre (Paul Scholten), Miss Lightfoot (Alexandra Schoeny) and Senator Charles Potter (Vernon Hartman)
 Photo by Philip Groshong

THE MELANCHOLY THAT PERMEATES

Fellow Travelers is made all the more potent by the restraint of its presentation. Gregory Spears's opera,

given its world premiere by Cincinnati Opera on June 17, elicits tears not because it demands them, but through its understated treatment of an impossibly sad situation.

The work, with libretto by Greg Pierce based on Thomas Mallon's novel of the same name, chronicles a doomed gay romance in McCarthy-era Washington, D.C. Hawkins Fuller, a well-born apparatchik in the State Department, hits on young, working-class Timothy Laughlin at a Dupont Circle park bench, helps him get a job on Capitol Hill, then seduces him. Fuller is slightly older, cynical about politics and considerably more experienced with sex; the innocent Laughlin, an ardent anti-Communist, is an all-too-willing mark for his attentions, and falls hopelessly in love. He reconciles his mortal sin to his devout Catholicism by transferring his worship of God onto his lover.

The affair plays out against the backdrop of the era's gay purges; Hawk is even interrogated about possible deviant behavior, but bluffs his way out with patrician assurance. He is the less committed of the two; Timothy, despairing over Hawk's detachment, eventually joins the army in an attempt to shake free of his obsession. Fuller, meanwhile, gets married. But the affair continues after Laughlin's military stint, until Hawk puts a decisive end to it through an act of deliberate betrayal: he blocks Timothy from a State Department appointment by turning him in to the witch-hunters. Laughlin, a broken man, leaves D.C. and Fuller behind.

Mallon's novel is filled with corridors-of-power intrigue, including a comprehensive treatment of Joseph McCarthy's downfall. In adapting the 368-page book into two fifty-minute acts, Pierce has necessarily discarded much of its political machinations. (The character of the political fixer Tommy McIntyre is so tersely telegraphed that you wonder why Pierce included him at all.) The opera's least successful scene shows Joe McCarthy strategizing for his upcoming battle with the Army: we simply haven't been given enough context for its action to register.

But the effect of Pierce's pruning is to focus the action sharply on the two lovers. In this, he has affected a notable change in the character of Fuller. In the novel, Hawk is a rapacious, charismatic scamp, flattered but unnerved by Timothy's devotion. The operatic Fuller is a tenderer fellow: the era's homophobia shoulders the much of the blame for the affair's ruin. This adjustment may simplify the dynamics of the relationship (the novel's hints of sadomasochism have been banished), but it makes it sharply intelligible as operatic drama. By tapping a vein of abundant, heartrending sentiment, the creators have created a gay *La Bohème*.

Fellow Traveler's libretto and its musical treatment are often deliberately prosaic. Spears's word setting is so exact that much of the sung text, consisting of recitative delivered over quasi-minimalist ostinatos, registers as speech. These characters mostly converse in the buttoned-down argot of their bureaucratic milieu, which makes it all the more telling when the lovers' music takes flight: most notably in Timothy's Act I aria "Last night," and Hawk's Act II "Our very own home," both marked by neo-Puccinian lyricism. The opera's spare orchestration suggests both emotional reticence and the sense of events heard from a distance, echoing across time. Spears wisely avoids 1950s pastiche; instead, in moments of public interaction, 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.



Lattanzi and Blake, Hawkins Fuller and Timothy Laughlin in *Fellow Travelers*
Photo by Philip Groshong

Kevin Newbury's staging, with scenic design by Victoria (Vita) Tzykun, is as spare as Spears's musical treatment, and as fluid. A few pieces of furniture, pushed into place by the actors, conjure the settings for the work's sixteen short scenes. The production's most audacious maneuver is in its presentation of the protagonists' lovemaking: the men make out unabashedly, and twice head half-naked to bed. (They may keep their boxers on, but by operatic standards, this is racy stuff.) The explicitness seems not the least prurient; instead it makes palpable the convergence of flesh and spirit at the core of the work.

Timothy's unhappy inner journey is the element that gives *Fellow Travelers* shape and focus, and at the premiere performance Aaron Blake delivered it in full. He cast an achingly vulnerable figure, never more so than when Laughlin ritualistically marked his renunciation of the affair by dropping a milk bottle off a rooftop: a moment both comic and tremendously poignant. The lyrical climaxes elicited a lucid, ringing tenor in full cry, but Blake never overwhelmed either the line or the text in sound: these passages were clearly sung by the same voice as the naturalistic recitative, but now overwhelmed by uncontrollable emotion. Joseph Lattanzi brought similar virtues to Hawk: a confident, handsome presence, and a resonant baritone suggesting wells of feeling that the character might prefer to leave untapped.

The vocal writing for Mary—Fuller's assistant and Laughlin's confidant—unfolds mostly in recitative, with flights of coloratura punctuating moments of high emotion. Soprano Devon Guthrie was especially effective in the former, the inherent smokiness of her lower range making the character thoroughly sympathetic. Paul Scholten was a suitably reptilian McIntyre; Alexandra Schoeny, a venomous presence as Miss Lightfoot, Fuller's homophobic secretary; Vernon Hartman, blustering and funny as Senator Charles Potter, Laughlin's boss. I found myself out of sympathy with the opera's—or perhaps the production's—misogynistic presentation of Fuller's wife Lucy: in Mallon's novel, she is fully complicit in the bargain her husband has made with the world, but here she seemed woefully clueless. Still, Talya Lieberman embodied the conception with relish.

All in the cast are to be commended for their diction: a tribute to Spears's attention to text as well as to the care with which the production was prepared. It was also a testament to conductor Mark Gibson, eliciting consistently transparent textures from his seventeen-player orchestra, and staying finely attentive to the conversational pace of the music. *Fellow Travelers'* delicacy came through in full, and so did its emotional wallop. —*Fred Cohn*