



## Cincinnati Opera's 'Fellow Travelers' Is a Triumph

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.

[Anne Arenstein](#)

July 6, 2016 10:59 a.m.

Cincinnati Opera presented the world premiere of *Fellow Travelers* last Friday (June 17), and I'm here to tell you that not only does the opera have legs, it has balls. I first heard *Fellow Travelers* in a 2013 workshop production as part of Opera Fusion: New Works, and I was not impressed. What a difference two and half years and a lot of hard work can make.

We know about the Red Scare, but even before McCarthy stirred up anti-Communist paranoia, gays and lesbians working in the State Department were victims of a witch hunt that continued for years after McCarthy was gone. David K. Johnson's book *The Lavender Scare* documents this little known segment of queer history in chilling detail.

In 1953, Executive Order 10450, with its vague wording, enabled the federal government to fire workers or contractors who appeared to be gay or lesbian, equating homosexuality with “sexual perversion,” costing more than 5,000 men and women their jobs, to say nothing of mental anguish.

The opera is based on Thomas Mallon’s 2007 novel about a love affair between Hawkins Fuller, a highly placed State Department official and D.C. newbie Tim Laughlin, from 1953 to 1957. Author and playwright 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.

Pierce’s concision and dramatic skills render fully believable characters, realized by a remarkable cast. The opera begins with Tim and Hawk’s fateful encounter on a park bench in DuPont Circle, where Tim is reviewing notes for an article on McCarthy’s wedding (“Who gets married at lunch time on a Tuesday?”). He doesn’t know this particular bench is a meeting place for gay men, according to Johnson’s book, and he’s an easy mark for the appropriately nicknamed Hawk, who is clearly a veteran cruiser.

Tim is eager to land a job on the Hill or in the State Department and just as eager to be part of the anti-Communist battalion. He’s the innocent in the corrupt cesspool of Washington politics, oblivious to the machinations of McCarthy and his henchmen. Thanks to Hawk, Tim lands a job as a speechwriter for Senator Charles Potter.

Hawk enjoys a reputation as the most eligible bachelor in the District, but only his secretary Mary Johnson knows the real reason he’s single. She soon realizes that Hawk and Tim are in love, but Hawk ignores her warnings. Miss Lightfoot, another secretary with romantic designs on Hawk, observes Hawk and Tim at the office Christmas party and turns informer.

Hawk’s interrogation is a frightening, cringe-inducing exercise in humiliation, lifted straight from the transcripts author David Johnson obtained during his research. Hawk passes inspection, but his recklessness appalls Tim, who escapes by joining the Army. During his two-year absence Hawk gets married, but when Tim returns they resume their affair until Tim asks for help landing a job. Hawk commits the ultimate betrayal and the opera concludes where it began, on the DuPont Circle park bench.

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. There's no percussion in the 17-piece orchestra, which gives each section more power to convey tension, drama and passion.

In a pre-performance talk, Spears said he drew on Wagner's use of leitmotifs with a difference. He creates melodic fragments that recur in different contexts, creating a structure connecting events and situations throughout the opera. These recurrences are subtle, often ironic and, ultimately, heartbreaking. As Tim and Hawk make love for the first time, hints of the balcony scene from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* ballet score are heard and recur during Hawk's interrogation.

Spears also uses the modal conventions of the medieval French *trouvère* tradition to powerful effect in arias for Tim and Hawk. The melismatic phrases sung over orchestral accompaniment of harp-like strings or drones add poignancy to expressions of unattainable, passionate love.

The mostly youthful cast is superb all around and the two leads are vocally and physically convincing. Many were in the workshop production and have had the chance to grow with their parts. Aaron Blake's Tim develops from the sweet innocent strengthened by his love for Hawk to a man who refuses to deny who he is.

Blake's plangent tenor reinforces the tragic longing in his confessional arias and his anguish over losing Hawk. Joseph Lattanzi embodies Hawk with the requisite good looks and a predatory swagger, as well as an awareness of the character's self-deception. When he pleads with Tim to accept things as they are and not hope for anything better ("Our Own Home"), Lattanzi's understated delivery packs an emotional blow to the solar plexus.

Devon Guthrie is the long-suffering and compassionate Mary Johnson, Alexandra Schoeny is the conniving Miss Lightfoot and Talya Lieberman is the empty-headed Lucy, whom Hawk marries. Several cast members take on multiple roles and the luxury casting prize goes to baritone Vernon Hartman who sings Senator Potter, General Arlie and a bartender.

Conductor Mark Gibson was part of the team that workshopped FT here in 2013 and his intimacy with the score paid off with a powerful performance, drawing out the subtleties without overwhelming the singers. This is Gibson's debut with Cincinnati Opera and it's about time.

Using the 400-seat Jarson-Kaplan Theater at the Aronoff Center, director Kevin Newbury's staging is grounded in the score's fluidity, underscored by Victoria Tzykun's stage design, a deep blue scrim with set pieces wheeled on and offstage by the cast members. **Thomas Hase's lighting design creates the right atmosphere of shadows and half-light.** Newbury doesn't allow polemic to override the doomed love story, saving the judgment call for the end: as Tim walks off in the opposite direction from Hawk, the scrim lights up to reveal images of those who lost their jobs during the Lavender Scare years.

Barely a week after the Orlando massacre and a year after marriage equality became the law of the land, the opening of *Fellow Travelers* had an eerie resonance. Cincinnati Opera dedicated all performances to the Orlando victims; James Obergefell was at the premiere, singing copies of his book, *Love Wins*. I overheard a lot of discussion about young gays and lesbians needing to know about this part of their history.

An even more telling remark came from Mallon, speaking at the pre-performance talk. Even he admitted that the opera is better than the book (and he's correct). But he said that when Greg Pierce approached him about adapting the novel for an opera, Fallon replied, "An opera? The book isn't gay enough?"

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. Cincinnati Opera is raising funds to produce a recording within the year. Bravi to the company for bringing this work to the stage and to the creative team and performers. The timing, sadly, could not have been better.

---

Anne Arenstein [previewed \*Fellow Travelers\*](#) in the June 8 issue of *CityBeat*. This review is courtesy of *parterre box*, James Jorden, editor. It ran on its site, [www.parterre.com](http://www.parterre.com). *Fellow Travelers* is being presented by Cincinnati Opera tonight (July 6), Friday night and Sunday afternoon. More info/tickets: [cincinnatiopera.org](http://cincinnatiopera.org).