

At Cincinnati Opera, a gay love story unfolds in the shadows of McCarthy era



Aaron Blake stars in "Fellow Travelers," an opera from Gregory Spears and Greg Pierce in a world premiere in Cincinnati. It is the latest project of Opera Fusion: New Works, a partnership between Cincinnati Opera and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

(Philip Groshong)



John von Rhein Contact Reporter

With each passing year it becomes ever more apparent that the brightest hope for new American opera lies with worthy, smaller-scaled music theater works, carefully nurtured in collaborations between regional opera companies

and other institutions, cast with the best young native talent, produced at a high professional level and mounted in appropriate venues.

Such pieces can be realized within budgets much smaller than those attached to the grander operatic commissions undertaken by companies such as Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Metropolitan Opera, while playing to smaller niche audiences.

My curiosity about one such recent music theater work took me to the Queen City last week for "Fellow Travelers," the latest project of Opera Fusion: New Works, an ongoing partnership between Cincinnati Opera and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, created in 2011 to foster the development of new American opera. This was its world premiere.

Composer Gregory Spears' and librettist Greg Pierce's music drama, based on the 2007 novel by Thomas Mallon, is a poignant and moving meditation on a particularly shameful episode of gay history. A furtive love affair between two men unfolds against the backdrop of the so-called lavender scare, the government-sanctioned witch hunt directed at homosexual employees on Capitol Hill during the McCarthy era in 1950s Washington.

The "lavender scare" fanned the flames of the much better known "red scare," Sen. Joseph McCarthy's parallel campaign to root out communists and fellow travelers who allegedly had infiltrated the federal government and were undermining it from within. McCarthy and his supporters launched their inquisition on the assertion that homosexuals could readily be blackmailed into betraying classified information and were in fact doing so. An investigation later found that nothing of the sort ever occurred. But that came too late to save the thousands of gays and lesbians who lost their jobs and, in some cases, their lives.

Fast-forward to 2016 America, where opposition to same-sex marriage is a plank of the Republican Party platform, and you realize some things never really change.

Yet the 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. That the emotional bond survives social approbation and betrayal also is nothing new to opera, but the contemporary resonance the opera's creators bring to their complicated interplay of characters and situations is smart and sharp-edged.

The protagonist is Tim Laughlin, the pride of a pious Irish Catholic family who's a virgin both sexually and in his ignorance of the gossipy intrigues and paranoia of Capitol Hill. He lands a job as speechwriter to a U.S. senator on the recommendation of Hawkins Fuller, a suave if manipulative State Department employee who picks him up in a park in Dupont Circle. Tenor Aaron Blake drew the audience to Tim's side with a fresh, appealing tenor and keen dramatic nuance. The robust baritone Joseph Lattanzi delivered a compelling, multilayered portrait of Fuller.

Although the lovers take pains to keep their affair private, Hawk (as he's called) lands on the FBI's radar and he is subjected to a humiliating interrogation to determine whether or not he is a homosexual. Passing a lie-detector test, he embarks on casual flings, much to the disgust of the monogamous Tim. Hawk tries various means, including marriage to a female friend, to maintain his straight facade and distance himself from Tim. But as the net of suspicion closes in on him, he is forced to choose between his career and betraying the young man who refuses to quit him.

All of this could easily have turned mawkish in lesser hands. 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. **It was played out in the period-perfect designs of Victoria Tzykun (set), Paul Carey (costumes) and Thomas C. Hase (lighting).**

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. Moments of arioso expansion are few, with Tim getting the choicest aria, "I died last night," in which he rhapsodizes about his first night of sexual fulfillment, over sensuous woodwinds. Spears is unusually sensitive to the irregular cadences of American speech,

and his setting of words to music is masterly. The music was most effectively served by the ensemble of 18 instrumentalists under the baton of Mark Gibson.

Among the worthy supporting singers were Devon Guthrie as Mary Johnson, Hawkins' sharp-eyed office assistant; baritone and Ryan Opera Center alumnus Paul Scholten as Tommy McIntyre, a reporter; baritone Marcus DeLoach as the grandstanding McCarthy; bass-baritone Christian Pursell and baritone Vernon Hartman, both taking multiple roles. "Fellow Travelers" is one of the most accomplished new American operas I have encountered in recent years. It deserves to travel widely among the nation's smaller regional opera companies.

The work's 16 scenes (divided into two acts) are intimate dialogues of one sort or another, forming a chamber opera well suited to the small stage of the 400-seat Jarson-Kaplan Theater at the Aronoff Center for the Arts. The theater complex is serving as the temporary home of Cincinnati Opera while the Cincinnati Music Hall, the venerable venue it shares with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, undergoes a major renovation that is expected to be completed in 2018, 140 years after the opening of that gargantuan facility.