

Review:

A gay love affair in '50s D.C. plays out to touching effect in 'Fellow Travelers'

Joseph Lattanzi, from right, Jonas Hacker and Vanessa Becerra during dress rehearsals for Lyric Unlimited's "Fellow Travelers" at the Athenaeum Theatre. (Nancy Stone / Chicago Tribune) (Nancy Stone / Chicago Tribune)



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It would be easy to regard the story of a doomed 1950s gay romance that is “Fellow Travelers” as a period piece. Except for one thing: The fear and paranoia created by the steady drumbeat of untruths and intrigues that marks Washington politics never goes away. That reality lends topical resonance to the affecting music drama by composer Gregory Spears and librettist Greg Pierce.

But beyond the contemporary relevance, “Fellow Travelers,” which is based on Thomas Mallon’s 2007 fact-based novel of the same name, is a deeply human, quietly tragic love story that transcends time, place and gender distinctions.

ADVERTISING

It is the latest and best among the newer American operas that have received their Chicago premieres in recent weeks. The remounting of Cincinnati Opera’s world-premiere 2016

production, courtesy of Lyric Opera's education and outreach arm, Lyric Unlimited, must be reckoned one of the must-see events of the season. The show opened to an enthusiastic reception Saturday night at the Athenaeum Theatre, where it plays through next weekend.

"Fellow Travelers" is set in 1950s Washington at the height of the McCarthy era, when an affair between two men ensnares them in the "lavender scare," the witch hunt that purged gay employees from the federal government at the same time Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his cohorts were busy rooting out suspected communists and fellow travelers. Thousands of gay men and lesbians lost their jobs, also in some cases their lives, as a result of the officially sanctioned persecution.

The bittersweet romance centers on two men. Hawkins Fuller, a suave, handsome apparatchik in the State Department, hits on Timothy Laughlin, a wide-eyed [Fordham University](#) graduate newly arrived in the nation's capital. Hawk (as he's known) gets Timothy a job as a speechwriter to a senator close to McCarthy, and seduces the younger man. They embark on a furtive affair.

For Timothy (or Skippy, as Hawk calls him), an ardent anti-communist and devout Roman Catholic, their love affair is his first taste of sexual fulfillment. He transfers his worship of God onto his lover. Meanwhile, the older, more cynical, more sexually experienced Hawk knows their liaison could destroy his career at any moment, given the homophobia and red-baiting rampant on Capitol Hill.

Fuller in fact is subjected to a humiliating interrogation about possible deviant behavior, but lies his way out of it. In the office, only his perceptive assistant, Mary Johnson, sees beneath his macho-man swagger. Fuller is the less committed of the lovers, and Timothy's despair over Fuller's promiscuity leads him to enlist in the Army to rid himself of his obsession. It takes a devastating act of betrayal to shatter forever his dream of permanent domestic bliss.

Spears, Pierce and director Kevin Newbury created "Fellow Travelers" as a team, and these Chicago performances follow ones they created for Cincinnati in 2016 and, earlier this year, New York. So seamlessly integrated are the music, text, stage direction and scenic design that it's impossible to separate one element from the other. The heartfelt yet candid sentiment the creative team applies to the Timothy-Hawk relationship makes this rather like a gay "La Traviata," albeit without anyone dying at the end.

Pierce's smart text draws with utter naturalness on the cadences of conversational speech that Spears' score captures beautifully, making it a refreshing improvement over the gray parlando style that riddles the vocal writing in so many American operas. Not for nothing is Spears among the most admired among America's present crop of music theater composers.

His tonal, accessible, sometimes ravishing music combines the pulsing energy of minimalism with the sensuous melismas of ancient troubadour music and archaic dance forms. Particularly striking are the arioso-like set pieces that define key emotional signposts in the lovers' relationship, most notably when Timothy rhapsodizes about his sexual awakening ("I died last night"), and Hawk laments the future he and Timothy will never share.

The spare orchestration for 16 players, precisely attended to by a solid pit band under conductor Daniela Candillari, mirrors the behind-closed-doors reticence with which the lovers must conduct their forbidden affair.

Newbury's direction, with set design by Vita Tzykun, costumes by Paul Carey and lighting by Thomas C. Hase, is comparably spare and remarkably fluid.

The drama unfolds as a series of short, sometimes overlapping scenes, with file cabinets and pieces of furniture pushed into place by the singers, several of them holdovers from the premiere production I caught in Cincinnati in July 2016. The Chicago ensemble is flawless in its own right.

As Timothy, Jonas Hacker powers his lucid, focused tenor as every fraught emotional situation requires, yet registers the protagonist's inner journey with tender lyricism and poignant vulnerability. You won't soon forget Timothy's slow leave-taking before the final curtain, set against a montage of portraits of actual men and women sacrificed to the lavender scare.

Joseph Lattanzi recreates his Hawkins Fuller splendidly, bringing out the character's deeply conflicted nature with a resonant baritone and a charismatic stage presence. Like Timothy, you want to love and hate this guy at the same time.

As Mary, Fuller's assistant and Timothy's confidante, soprano Devon Guthrie, another holdover from the Cincinnati performances, is entirely sympathetic and compelling. She

handles the twisty coloratura of her difficult, high-lying vocal writing in her Act 2 showpiece with astonishing poise.

Among the strong supporting cast, Marcus DeLoach makes a suitably blustery McCarthy, and Ryan Opera Center alumni Will Liverman and Sam Handley make telling impressions in multiple roles. Reginald Smith Jr. savors the role of Sen. Charles Potter, Laughlin's boss. Vanessa Becerra is the snoopy secretary, Miss Lightfoot. Amy Kuckelman is Lucy, Fuller's oblivious wife.

The 984-seat Athenaeum provides a suitably intimate frame for a sometimes painfully intimate and touching love story.

4 stars

The Lyric Unlimited production of Gregory Spears' "Fellow Travelers" plays through March 25 at the Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport Ave.; \$29-\$55; 312-827-5600, www.lyricopera.org/fellowtravelers

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