Dreiser's Chilling Tale of Ambition and Its Price

Dec. 5, 2005

MET OPERA REVIEW

For a company of such international standing, the Metropolitan Opera has had an inexcusably timid record of commissioning operas in recent decades. Consequently, when the Met presents a new work, the stakes are almost impossibly high.

On Friday night "An American Tragedy," Tobias Picker's long-awaited operatic adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's landmark 1925 novel, with a libretto by Gene Scheer, opened at the Met. What composer would not covet Mr. Picker's success at winning this commission? But this was only the company's fourth premiere since the James Levine era began in 1971. Talk about pressure.

Though "An American Tragedy" is essentially a conventional work and whole stretches of Mr. Picker's score would not be out of place in a Broadway theater, the opera is accomplished, dramatically effective and thoroughly professional. It's hard to imagine a more compelling cast. Admirers of the baritone Nathan Gunn who have been waiting for him to have a major success at the Met will cheer his portrayal of the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, the uneducated, ambitious son of street-corner evangelists in the Midwest who yearns to join the upper crust. The production by the director Francesca Zambello could not be more gripping.

Still, in getting behind this project, the Met was playing it safe. The subject is taken from a lofty, though still relevant and troubling literary work. Mr. Picker embraces opera as a populist art form. Those wary of contemporary music will find Mr. Picker's Neo-Romantic idiom much easier on the ears than, say,

that garish shocker Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk." While John Adams (in "Doctor Atomic"), Thomas Adès (in "The Tempest") and Poul Ruders (in "The Handmaid's Tale") have pushed at the boundaries of the genre, Mr. Picker hews to melodramatic and operatic conventions. Yet he does so with undeniable skill.

This is Mr. Picker's fourth opera ("Emmeline" is among the others) and in a recent interview he said that by now he had learned how to write for the voice, to pace the drama, to structure arias and ensembles. Many composers with greater musical originality could learn from Mr. Picker's know-how about the theater.

Yet you almost always sense his controlling hand at work. By the end of the long second scene, Mr. Picker and Mr. Scheer obviously decided that Clyde, who -- in a potentially big break -- has just started a job as a low-level manager in his rich uncle's shirt factory in upstate New York, needed a revealing aria to tell the audience who he is. So they invent a monologue about motorcars, a tour de force in which Clyde imagines a future for himself "as bright as polished chrome." But the rousing music is generic and superficial. Paradoxically, the revealing moment seems a standard set piece with an applause-line final flourish, one of many set pieces in the score.

There is a similar heavy-handed moment in Scene 3, when Clyde begins courting Roberta, a sweet, wistful young factory worker in his department. As their voices mingle, we see a flashback with the young Clyde being warned against temptations by his stern mother, Elvira. A quartet begins -- a traditional operatic device, effectively rendered. Yet the music, though lushly lyrical and tinged with pungent chromatic harmonies, seems beholden to the dramatic moment, not inspired on its own terms.

Every time Mr. Picker summons his modernist vocabulary, closer to the idiom of his days as a young serialist, the music becomes more involving. For example, in Act II, when Roberta, who is pregnant by Clyde and desperate for him to marry her, appears at the church where he is worshipping with Sondra Finchley, the society beauty who has enchanted him, the congregation sings an ardent hymn, but the harmonies are gritty, astringent and wonderfully strange, with weirdly high chords in the orchestra. There are other such moments when you sense Mr. Picker working harder, taking more chances -- for example, the chilling scene in which Clyde takes Roberta on a canoe ride, intending to drown her. Below deceptively placid vocal lines, the orchestra erupts with quietly scurrying counterpoint and lurching, unhinged harmonies. Such moments stand out in a score that is mostly too eager to please with its undulantly lyrical outpourings and film-scorish flourishes. The bustling scene when we first see the chorus of women working at the shirt factory is very derivative, like pale Prokofiev.

Yet this opera, at nearly three hours, holds your attention and conveys the story. Mr. Scheer's libretto must necessarily compress Dreiser's complex 900-page novel, with its long ruminations on status, envy and compulsion. But the essential elements are there. The cast seemed to relish singing Mr. Picker's opera, and that says much in its favor.

In the novel, the moneyed set in upstate New York embraces Clyde partly because of his wholesome good looks. Yet Clyde is not conceited; he does not preen and strut. Shamefaced about his background, he is genuinely delighted to find that people think him handsome. The hunky Mr. Gunn ideally conveys this quality in Clyde in his intelligent and vividly acted portrayal. Though he may not have one of those sizeable "tree-trunk Verdi baritone voices," as Mr. Gunn has put it, he sings with virile sound, rich nuances and utterly clear diction.

The soprano Patricia Racette brings her throbbing, dusky-toned voice to her poignant portrayal of Roberta. The mezzo-soprano Susan Graham makes a

vocally radiant and coquettish Sondra. As Clyde's officious uncle and his snippy aunt, the tenor Kim Begley and the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Larmore are excellent, as is the tenor William Burden playing their son, Gilbert, the heir apparent, who is so threatened by his dashing cousin with "no education and no experience," as Gilbert keeps reminding everyone.

Graham Phillips is endearing as the young Clyde. The powerhouse mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick has scene-stealing moments in the old melodramatic style as Clyde's strong-willed and long-suffering mother. The bass-baritone Richard Bernstein proves a stentorian district attorney at Clyde's murder trial.

Adrianne Lobel's striking three-tiered set allows panels and flats to be slid into place and lowered and raised. While quite elaborate, in another way it's magically simple. And the tiers become a metaphor for social strata, so crucial to this story. Ms. Zambello has choreographed the staging so that scenes flow, merge and shift hauntingly. As always, she elicits detailed and believable portrayals from the cast, though the Met has given her attractive singers who can also act. James Conlon draws a colorful, sweeping and incisive performance from the Met orchestra.

"An American Tragedy" is an effective piece; it works as an opera, you could say. But an opera is also a musical score, and on that level this score does not grab me like those of many operas that work much less effectively.

Yet critics and opera buffs who want the Met to do its part to make opera a living art form have to be heartened that it presented this work, and that an audience on Friday gave a prolonged ovation to a living composer.

An American Tragedy Runs through Dec. 28

Opera in two acts. Music by Tobias Picker, libretto by Gene Scheer, based on the novel by Theodore Dreiser; conductor, James Conlon; production by Francesca Zambello; sets by Adrianne Lobel; costumes by Dunya Ramicova;

lighting by James F. Ingalls; choreography by Doug Varone. At the Metropolitan Opera House.

WITH: Patricia Racette (Roberta Alden), Susan Graham (Sondra Finchley), Jennifer Larmore (Elizabeth Griffiths), Dolora Zajick (Elvira Griffiths), William Burden (Gilbert Griffiths), Kim Begley (Samuel Griffiths), Nathan Gunn (Clyde Griffiths), Graham Phillips (Young Clyde) and Richard Bernstein (Orville Mason).