

# Drowning in Exposition

By Heidi Waleson Dec. 6, 2005 12:01 am ET

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The best part of Tobias Picker's fourth opera, "**An American Tragedy**," commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and given its premiere on Friday, was Patricia Racette. As Roberta, the factory girl who is impregnated and then drowned by the protagonist Clyde, Ms. Racette used her appealing, plangent soprano to give depth and complexity to a character who is no mere victim, but the moral heart of the piece. Her dreams inspired Mr. Picker's most touching music, and we miss her when she is gone.

That's both the good news and the bad about "An American Tragedy," which distills Theodore Dreiser's iconic 900-page 1925 novel about the toxic effects of the American Dream into about three hours of music. For those who don't remember it, or its most famous film version, the updated "A Place in the Sun," Clyde, a poor, uneducated young man, gets a job in his rich uncle's clothing factory. Taken up by the socialite Sondra, he kills Roberta, who was standing in his way, but is easily caught, convicted and executed.



Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

Nathan Gunn is handsome, and he sings Clyde mellifluously, but this opera based on the Dreiser novel becomes rudderless once Patricia Racette's Roberta dies.

The opera is straightforward, story-telling theater (the libretto is by Gene Scheer); the music is tonal and accessible, with lots of big arias to show off its principal characters, choral numbers for contrast, even dance music. Settings for the vocal parts are carefully transparent, and Mr. Picker's deft musical scene changes give the piece a cinematic flow.

Yet the elements are not bound together in a way that speeds the listener toward inexorable tragedy. Mr. Picker's first opera, "Emmeline" (1996), with an hour less music and a slightly more modernist, astringent musical palette, deployed just that sort of energy, particularly an eternally restless orchestration, to devastating effect. "American Tragedy," bulked up, prettified and saddled with an unconvincing final scene of redemption, is amiably pictorial rather than emotionally gripping, except when Ms. Racette (who was also the poignant heroine of "Emmeline" nine years ago) is on the stage.

Part of the problem is that Mr. Picker's musical characterization of Clyde, a

charming and amoral young man on the make, is thin. Played effectively by the good-looking, mellifluous baritone Nathan Gunn, Clyde waxes rhapsodic at the sight of a fancy car that embodies all his longings for social and financial advancement, but the music is as shallow as he is. The dark, scurrying intensity of the aria in which he decides to murder Roberta comes out of nowhere; the presence of his sweet, hymn-singing younger self (Graham Phillips) gives no hint of the adult Clyde's deep resentment of his impoverished, Bible-thumping childhood or his yearnings.

We have to assume that he's driven by the women, three big characters who dominate the opera with radically different musical signatures. Open-hearted Roberta's antithesis is Sondra, whose languid, sinuous phrases depict a girl who knows she can have whatever she wants. Mezzo Susan Graham sang her handsomely, in a grandly overblown diva manner. The two compete in a pair of cleverly devised parallel ensembles; in the second, they sing their conflicting expectations of Clyde together -- "I know you can find work in some small town"/ "We'll go to Paris, all the places you've dreamed of" -- reminiscent of "Oh Happy We" from Leonard Bernstein's "Candide," but without the irony. Then there's Clyde's mother, Elvira (mezzo Dolora Zajick), a full-throttle religious zealot, who is just as deluded about "her boy" as his two girlfriends are. Given Ms. Zajick's clarion delivery of her sermon-like exhortations, it's no wonder that Clyde ends the opera back where he started -- praying.

Too many talky stretches of exposition add little musical information and make the action sag. Mr. Scheer's text is occasionally clunky and obvious -- why "over-privileged rich girls," when "rich girls" would say it better? The uninspired, declamatory music for Orville Mason, the district attorney (Richard Bernstein), makes the long trial scene tedious. The orchestra's expressive musical agony during Roberta's drowning early in the second act becomes a kind of lament: Without her, the opera seems rudderless too.

Other members of the solid cast included William Burden as Clyde's jealous

cousin Gilbert; Jennifer Larmore as his spiteful aunt Elizabeth; Kim Begley as his industrialist uncle Sam, who, unlike the rest of his family, likes Clyde's striving style; Anna Christy as the stratospherically voiced maid Hortense, subject of a brief flirtation for Clyde in Act I; and Jennifer Aylmer as Bella, Clyde's giggly cousin. Conductor James Conlon did admirable work presenting this new score in its best light.

Adrienne Lobel's attractively spare and imaginative three-level set, with sliding panels showing photographic images of trees, a church, a mansion and a courthouse, worked with James F. Ingalls's lighting and a few key props, like the car, the canoe and the electric chair, to swiftly change scenes and create atmosphere. The multiple levels suggested the different levels of society -- and moral compass -- in the story, while Dunya Ramicova's costumes, especially Sondra's lavish outfits, evoked the pre-World War I period. Francesca Zambello's direction of the cast of committed singing actors also suggested Clyde's hapless, boomerang-like trajectory from one sphere of influence to another, though her crowd scenes were static. Choreographer Doug Varone's elegantly swirling party dancers epitomized the world Clyde longs to enter; the suspended dancer portraying the drowning Roberta, struggling desperately for the surface, graphically showed the brutal end of all his hopes.

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