

In St. Louis: *Awakenings* Touches the Soul

By Susan Elliott, Musical America

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Before *Awakenings* was a new opera by Tobias Picker, premiering at Opera Theater of St. Louis last week, it was a ballet, with a score also by Picker (completely different from the opera), as well as a 1990 film starring Robert DeNiro, and the basis of a 1982 play by Harold Pinter, *A Kind of Alaska*. Each owes its origins to British neurologist and prolific author Oliver Sacks's non-fiction book of the same name (1973), a series of case studies about his experience with patients at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx suffering from the aftermath of sleeping sickness (*encephalitis lethargica*), a pandemic that

lasted from 1916-1927. Many of its victims died, others lapsed into a bizarre syndrome that left them frozen for decades—often mid-transition from one movement to the next—like statues.

Dr. Sacks's work with them, administering the drug often used for Parkinson's disease called L-dopa, forms the basis for the new opera, whose librettist happens to be a neuroradiologist himself—Aryeh Lev Stollman—as well as Picker's partner of 42 years. Thus a chorus of words that hardly trip off the tongue but are fact-checked by the librettist himself: "Apomorphine! Amphetamines! Antimuscarinics! Trihexyphenidyl! That's a mouthful!" It sure is.

Timely as ever

Originally scheduled to premiere at OTSL in the 2020 season, *Awakenings* is all the more relevant for the two-year pandemic-induced delay, although its creators say it has not been altered in any way since to reflect current events. Whether relevant to the tragedies of today or those of the last century, it is a story of the human condition, of re-awakenings and the consequences of them, of life's mixed blessings, and, mostly, of love.

While Sacks's book is a series of case studies describing the effects of L-dopa on 20 patients, Stollman has condensed them to a central three: Miriam H. (mezzo soprano Adrienne Danrich), Rose (soprano Susanna Phillips), and Leonard Lev (tenor Marc Molomot). Each reacts to the drug in their own way, and we come to know and care deeply about them, not only as individuals on a journey from numb to alive to numb again, but as individuals in relationship to each other—something a series of case studies could not accomplish—and with their caretakers.

Those include members of the hospital staff (which, with other patients, form the core of the chorus), overseen by medical director Dr. Podsnap (bass-baritone David Pittsinger), who doubts Sacks's experiment and damns it when it fails; neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks (baritone Jarrett Porter); and a nurse called Mr. Rodriguez (tenor Andres Acosta).



Leonard Lev (Marc Molomot) sulks in his room, as Dr. Sacks (Jarrett Porter) looks on with concern

The vocal lines are not hard on the ear and tend to be more linear – read tonal--in sunnier or more wistful moments. Unlike some new operas, Picker treats the orchestra--OTSL uses the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO) for its performances—as support to and follower of the vocal line and its motifs, rather than the other way around. At the June 9 performance, conductor Roberto Kalb balanced his forces extremely well, though there were occasions when the chorus's sound and ensemble were scraggly. Moments of the score that linger in the memory include the duet between Rose and Miriam as their symptoms begin to return (“Let us be, we are happy now”), mournfully supported in the lower strings (SLSO’s principal cello was a particular standout). Basses are called upon to anchor the frequent, suspenseful, driving ostinatos. Orchestral motifs often echo vocal ones, and their recurrence, though subtle, form a tightly woven musical narrative.

Oliver Sacks was a gay man but did not come out until well after the book was published. Picker and Stollman have incorporated his preferences (the three men were close friends) to create a love triangle in the opera, among Mr. Rodriguez, Leonard, and Sacks, who only acknowledges his sexuality—and reluctantly at that—at the end of the opera when approached by Rodriguez. Meanwhile Rodriguez is the object of Leonard’s infatuation, and the two sing of their respective love objects in a duet (“The Flower of Love”), set on either side of a glass partition—one of the many, on wheels, that are cleverly moved about to form the opera’s different spaces, from patient common area to private room. Reflecting a hospital’s sterile image, the stage is otherwise uncluttered and cleanly lit (set design Allen Moyer, lighting by Christopher Akerlind). The only exception is the botanical garden, where the three patients wander amid Greg Emetaz’s vivid video projections, experiencing their first “awakenings” to life’s beauty after decades of being locked in silence.

Especially considering the physical demands of the patients —from frozen in place for minutes at a time to fits of screaming hysteria—this was a strong and committed cast. Susanna Phillips was a natural as the idealistic, love-lost dreamer Rose, her voice sweet-toned yet varied and expressive. Danrich inhabited Miriam as her down-to-earth polar opposite, such that their concern for each other as the brevity of the cure became clear was all the more touching. Momolot came to the role of Leonard on apparently very short notice and did a hero’s job of making him a sad, wholly believable boy in a man’s clothing.

Onstage almost throughout, Porter sang the even-tempered Sacks with requisite persuasiveness and Andres Acosta was a short, studly Rodriguez with an ardent tenor. Pittsinger was a natural as Podsnap, resistant to the upside of the revelations around him as if waiting for his “told-you-so” moment. A quick shout-out to OTSL young artist Keith Klein, who’s sturdy, true bass as Samuel Sacks, Oliver’s father, stood out, even in its very brief moment in the sun.

OTSL Artistic Director James Robinson, the go-to commissioner and director of new operas that challenge the prejudices and status quo of any era (*Champion*, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* to name two), has made a compelling case for the opera, as well-crafted musically as it is compassionate.

Top photo: Susan Phillips as Rose; bottom Miriam (Adrienne Danrich) and Rose enjoy a good laugh cheating at cards.

Photos by Eric Woolsey

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