

# An 'Awakenings' opera that shows Oliver Sacks as his friends knew him — a gay man

St. Louis Public Radio | By [Jeremy D. Goodwin](#)

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Dr. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist played by Jarrett Porter, sings on Tuesday during the first act of the opera "Awakenings" at the Opera Theater of St. Louis in Webster Groves.

Dr. Oliver Sacks received worldwide acclaim for writing about his experiences with people who had unusual neurological conditions. His work spawned several adaptations for the stage and screen.

A 1990 film adaptation of his 1973 book "Awakenings" featured Robin Williams as a doctor based on Sacks and Robert Deniro as one of his patients. It garnered three Academy Award nominations, including one for best picture.

Months before Sacks' [death in 2015](#) at 82, he disclosed something he hadn't previously felt comfortable talking about publicly: He was gay.

Now two of Sacks' longtime friends have written an opera based on "Awakenings." For the first time, an adaptation of Sacks' writing will portray him, accurately, as a gay man.

"Awakenings" [makes its world premiere at Opera Theatre St. Louis](#) this weekend.



*Brian Munoz / St. Louis Public Radio*

Composer Tobias Picker, left, and his husband librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman on Tuesday at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis in Webster Groves. Picker and Stollman have adapted the Oliver Sacks book "Awakenings" about his experiences treating patients with encephalitis lethargica.

"I knew the private Dr. Sacks. The fact that he came out meant that we could really write about him, as we knew him personally," said composer [Tobias Picker](#). "He wanted the world to know who he really was, as much as possible. That became integral to telling the story."

Picker wrote the opera with his husband, [Aryeh Lev Stollman](#), who also knew Sacks. Stollman is an acclaimed novelist who had never written a libretto before. But he had a different qualification on his resume: A neuroradiologist, he works at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

James Robinson is the opera's director, and Roberto Kalb conducts members of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

"Awakenings" chronicles Sacks' time with encephalitis lethargica patients at a hospital in the

Bronx. The mysterious disease had left them functionally asleep for decades. Sacks tried an experimental therapy, which temporarily roused them from slumber.

“There's a large weight of responsibility that falls upon all of us involved in the project. We all want to treat these people with the utmost respect, because what they went through is so tremendous,” said Susana Phillips, who appears in the opera as Rose, an encephalitis lethargica patient.



*Brian Munoz / St. Louis Public Radio*

Susanna Phillips rehearses as Rose, a patient who pretends to dance with the love of her life, on Tuesday during a scene set at the New York Botanical Garden in first act of the opera “Awakenings.”

At the time of the events described in the book, Sacks was still 46 years away from coming out publicly. By revisiting the story now, the people behind the opera aim to paint a fuller, more accurate picture of the man.

“There's a chance to go back and tell that story again, with the perspective of where he got to

later in his life," said baritone Jarrett Porter, who portrays Sacks. "It makes me feel this immense responsibility and sensitivity to that."

## A doctor and a friend

Picker was already a successful composer of European classical music when he first reached out to Sacks years ago, hoping the doctor could help him with his Tourette syndrome.

The composer still experiences symptoms, which he describes as a burden. But Sacks was the first person to show genuine interest in how Picker felt about his own condition.

"He did help me come to terms with Tourette syndrome, and just feel that it was OK to have it," Picker said.



*Brian Munoz / St. Louis Public Radio*

Composer Tobias Picker ahead of the world premiere of the opera "Awakenings" on Tuesday at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis in Webster Groves

Sacks wrote about his new friend in two books, theorizing about a connection between

Tourette syndrome and Picker's early compositional style, which could feature abrupt shifts in tone and dynamics.

Picker returned the favor, teaming with choreographer Aletta Collins to write a ballet inspired by "Awakenings." It premiered in 2010 and toured the U.K. He also longed to write an opera based on Sacks' life — something the neurologist encouraged.

## **'It explains so much about him'**

The missing piece was Sack's decision to come out publicly as a gay man, which he did in his 2015 memoir. It was published months before his death.

For their opera, Picker and Stollman augment the book's real-life events with a triangle of unrequited love among Sacks, a doctor known as Mr. Rodriguez (Andres Acosta) and patient Leonard Lev, sung by Marc Molomot. Adrienne Danrich and Susanna Philips portray two other patients, Miriam and Rose. In a workshop performance last year at Opera Fusion in Cincinnati, Matthew DiBattista sang Leonard, and Joyner Horn sang his mother, Iris.



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Leonard Lev, a patient played by Marc Molomot, sinks into his thoughts on Tuesday during the first act of the opera

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This “Awakenings” includes a flashback to an incident Sacks recounted in his memoir. When he was a teenager, his mother discovered that he was gay and became enraged. She called him an abomination and said she wished he’d never been born.

This episode is key to understanding Sacks and the empathy he had for people whose medical conditions made them outsiders, Picker said.

“It explains so much about him, and his attitude toward his work and his attitude toward wanting to help these patients,” he said.

For years, Sacks spoke freely in interviews about [his decades-long celibacy](#). But traumatized by his mother’s response those many years before, he lived most of his life unready to live openly as a gay man.

It’s a struggle that burdened multiple generations of men associated with the opera — including its subject, librettist and star.

“As a gay man, I also had a struggle with how I’m going to live my life,” Stollman said. Like Sacks, Stollman grew up in a family of Orthodox Jews. His father was a rabbi. “Am I going to pretend my whole life? Or have a life that’s filled with love, which I have. So to me, that is actually a very personal aspect of this story.”

Porter had a comparable experience.

“In my generation, I felt late to coming out as a gay man — I’d just turned 29. That’s very different than Oliver, who came out when he was in his 80s.

“But I certainly understand that struggle and what that felt like. It makes me feel like I have a lot to hang onto, with him,” Porter said.



*Opera Theater of St. Louis*

Tobias Picker and Oliver Sacks became friends after Picker approached the doctor for help with his Tourette syndrome. Sacks wrote about Picker in two books, and Picker has adapted "Awakenings" into a ballet and now an opera.

## **A missing friend**

Sacks paid careful attention to how Williams portrayed him in the 1990 film of "Awakenings," attended Picker's ballet and occasionally asked his friend about the status of his plans for an opera.

He would have shown up for opening night at Opera Theatre of St. Louis this weekend, the composer said.

"I think he would have been a little embarrassed and shy about it, but I think he would have been just thrilled — and extremely excited, and nervous," Picker said. "He loved opera, he loved music, and it would have been a great pleasure for him, I think. And for me, to be with



him here.”

Sacks did eventually find the love of his life. For the last six years of his life, he was in [his first romantic relationship](#) — a happy pairing with the writer Bill Hayes.

After spending decades struggling to acknowledge his sexuality, the great storyteller finally devised himself a happy ending.

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