

An Oliver Sacks Book Becomes an Opera, With Help From Friends

Tobias Picker and Aryeh Lev Stollman have adapted “Awakenings,” drawing both on source material and personal experience.



By Joshua Barone

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“These are all cycads,” the composer Tobias Picker said, gesturing at a low canopy of fanned-out, pinnate leaves near the entrance of the conservatory at the New York Botanical Garden.

Aryeh Lev Stollman, a doctor and author — and Picker’s husband — pointed at a large, bright red cone of seeds and added: “They look like palm trees, but they’re not. If you really look closely at the leaves, they have these serrated, spiky ends.”

Cycads — nonflowering, unshowy ambassadors of a more mysterious, ancient world — are not the most eye-catching specimens at the garden. Yet they were beloved by the characteristically shy Oliver Sacks, the famed neurologist and writer who had an eye for finding the universal in hyper-specific, often strange case studies.

Sacks, who died in 2015 at 82, liked to share these plants with others. “It feels like yesterday, his 80th birthday here,” said Picker, a longtime friend. “It was such a beautiful evening, and we had the entire conservatory.”

The botanical garden is among the small memorials to Sacks scattered throughout “Awakenings,” Picker and Stollman’s opera adaptation of Sacks’s 1973 book, which premieres at the festival Opera Theater of St. Louis on June 5. One such nod is an ecstatic musical tribute to cycads.

“It’s appropriate,” Picker said, “that Oliver Sacks would have an aria about a cycad — the only aria ever written about a cycad.”

In the opera, Sacks takes his patients to the garden, describing it as “the world as it should be”:

A world in harmony.
Every plant in summer bloom,
to greet you all,
their fellow blossoming flowers.

Blossoming, because the people have been “awakened” from the long-lingering effects of encephalitis lethargica — the “sleeping sickness” — by the miracle drug L-dopa, which Sacks administers to them experimentally. The book “Awakenings” was his account of those years, told mostly through case histories that read like literary miniatures.

Clinical, though, and sprawling in its accumulation of stories, “Awakenings” seems an unlikely candidate for opera, an art form dependent on poetic spareness. But Sacks believed it could be done, having seen the book successfully adapted into a documentary and a fiction film, as well as a play by Harold Pinter.

And Picker, who said that Sacks “saved” him from the shame he felt about his Tourette’s syndrome, had the stage rights because about 25 years ago, Sacks had wanted to collaborate with him on a project based on one of his books. They had met through a mutual friend — the novelist Judith Rossner, whose “Emmeline” inspired Picker’s first opera — and become close. (At the botanical garden, Picker wore a red tie that Sacks had given him, on the spot, after a passing compliment.)

Picker, left, and Oliver Sacks at Picker's house in Rhinebeck, N.Y., in 2015. Bill Hayes, via Tobias Picker

“Awakenings” took form in music first as a ballet score, commissioned by the Rambert Dance Company in Britain, which premiered in 2010. After Opera Theater of St. Louis staged a revival of “Emmeline” five years later — the summer Sacks died — James Robinson, that festival’s artistic director, asked Picker to develop a new work. They eventually settled on an adaptation of “Awakenings.”

Robinson, who is directing the premiere, said that the poet J.D. McClatchy — Picker’s partner for “Emmeline” and another opera, “Dolores Claiborne,” based on the Stephen King novel — had been engaged to write the libretto. But, after McClatchy died in 2018, Stollman stepped in; “Awakenings” is his first libretto, and his first collaboration with Picker, after several decades together. (They were married, by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in 2016.)

Their process has been a new one for Picker, who in his previous five operas worked from a completed libretto. But here, Stollman would write one scene, then Picker would set it. “And then,” Stollman said, “I would write the next scene after hearing the first. I was always one scene ahead of him, because I would be inspired by the music that I had heard.”

Stollman’s primary task was to focus the plotless book’s themes into a story. The structure of it helped, particularly the arc that naturally arose from section titles like “Awakening,” “Tribulation” and “Accommodation.” “We actually all go through that,” he said. “That’s what life is.”

With little room for Sacks’s panorama of patients, Stollman combined some into composite characters. But Leonard L., who receives a long, affectionate chapter in the book, remains largely intact and is even intensified. And while Sacks describes the cases at an invested remove, the opera treats him as the protagonist, drawing on his 2015 autobiography “On the Move: A Life” for details — including his long-private homosexuality.

“We wanted to put that in,” Stollman said, “instead of making a fake straight woman love interest like in the movie.”

In the score, Picker gives Sacks a musical analogue: the note A, which the opera opens with in octaves, before being propelled by an ostinato. The move subtly establishes the doctor's presence before he arrives, as the chorus recounts the tale of Sleeping Beauty with a lilting melody. It's one of several leitmotifs attached to specific characters — and the disease itself.

Roberto Kalb, the production's conductor, said the music also draws from a variety of styles: "Some sections are reminiscent of Janacek, some Ravel. The passage in the botanical garden sounds like a blend of Couperin and Ravel." The use of a pedal tone, he added, pays off when, as the treatment starts to fail, it plunges downward. "It's so destabilizing," Kalb said. "It sounds like you're going down a tunnel."

That failure is the tragedy of "Awakenings," its most operatic quality. The miracle of L-dopa fades, along with the promise of renewed life. In parallel, Sacks has a brush with his true self in a subplot involving a male nurse, but retreats to the closet.

"He had his own journey," Picker said. "And in the end, his 'awakening' didn't come until the autobiography, which was very freeing for him."

Sacks was intensely reticent, even in the safe company of someone like Picker. So the opera's glimpse of his gay life is an invention — a double-edged one that acknowledges what could have been and what eventually would come. After what Stollman describes in the libretto as a sad smile, the Sacks character sings:

I am no longer the man I was,
but I have not truly awakened yet.
This time is not the time for me.
Perhaps one day when I've lived long enough,
love will happen.
Not with medicine but with such a simple kiss.

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