



# Re-Awakenings

**A NEW OPERA BY  
ARYEH LEV STOLLMAN  
AND TOBIAS PICKER  
OPENS IN SAINT LOUIS.**

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PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN**



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**THIS MONTH'S PREMIERE** of *Awakenings*, at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, will no doubt have a resonance beyond what was originally intended. The opera—by composer Tobias Picker and librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman, who are spouses as well as collaborators—was scheduled to open at OTSL in June 2020. But the Covid pandemic has pushed its unveiling back two years, to a time when the concept of “awakenings” has acquired new meaning.

The work is an adaptation of Oliver Sacks's 1973 book, describing his breakthrough treatment of a group of patients in a Bronx hospital afflicted with *encephalitis lethargica*, a.k.a. “sleeping sickness.” They had lived for decades in a dissociated state, neither dead nor exactly alive, but Sacks's radical use of the drug L-dopa “awakened” them. Its effects, though, proved unsustainable, and the patients eventually settled back into their “sleep” state.

*Awakenings* had been complete at the time of its postponement. Not a note has changed since then—but the world has. The history of Sacks's patients has acquired fresh relevance. They contracted the disease in the years between 1916 and 1927, when a mysterious sleeping-sickness pandemic swept through the world. “*Awakenings* has a whole new layer of meaning,” Picker says. “Before this, a pandemic was just something you read about in books. So I think

that, sitting in the audience, we'll identify with it in a different way than if this hadn't happened."

Stollman brings a physician's viewpoint to the issue of pandemics: he is not just a writer but a neuroradiologist at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital. He speculates that *Awakenings's* audience will now bring a heightened awareness of the efforts of healthcare professionals. "The patients received an extraordinary amount of loving care from healthcare workers—not just the doctors but the nurses and the orderlies," Stollman says. "And we see that now, the healthcare community has risen to the occasion of the pandemic. You have to have a lot of love in your heart to help people navigate their illness and try to make them whole."

Picker and Stollman consulted this winter with James Robinson, OTSL's artistic director and the director of *Awakenings*, about whether the piece needed reworking in light of Covid. The three men

agreed that it would be an unnecessary step. "It's not an opera about Covid," says Picker. "I don't think anybody would want to come and see that—perhaps in twenty years, but not now. This is a work about a phenomenon of history that has been forgotten."

"You don't need to contextualize this thing, because we all know what we've been living through," says Robinson. "But for me, the piece now casts more of a light on Oliver Sacks, and the role of science and medicine in all our lives—because that's what we are living with, all of the time."

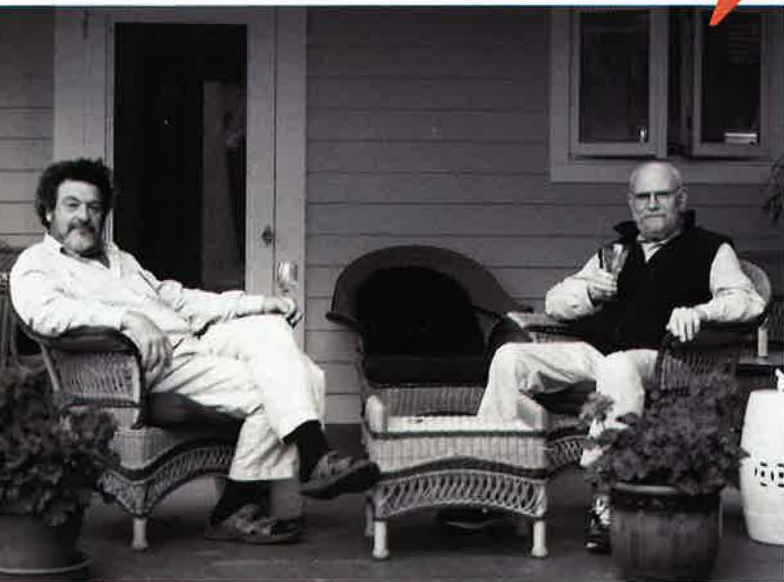
**SACKS WAS A PERSONAL FRIEND** of Picker and Stollman's. Picker has Tourette Syndrome, and early in their relationship he sought out the eminent neurologist to get insights into his condition. "Oliver said it was 'a negligible case,'" Picker says. "I felt inadequate and offended—'middling,' maybe, but not 'negligible!'" Eventually Sacks gave him a proper medical analysis and worked out a hypothesis about the causes of Picker's disorder. In the book *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, Sacks writes about the connection between Picker's Tourette Syndrome and his musical aptitude.

Sacks felt that of all his works, *Awakenings* was the most ready for operatic treatment, and he longed to see it adapted. "He saw this on a higher level than just a regular story—as an allegory, rising to myth," says Stollman. The neurologist died at age eighty-two in 2015, before the opera project got off the ground, but he did get to witness an earlier Picker *Awakenings*—a 2010 ballet version, for England's Rambert Dance Company. (No music from the ballet reappears in the operatic incarnation.) "He was speechless after he saw the ballet, but he really didn't understand dance," Picker says. "He related more to opera."

*Awakenings* in book form includes case histories of twenty patients; from that number, Stollman has chosen three as central characters. Their "awakening" and subsequent relapse into sleeping sickness give the story its shape. Within this overarching frame, the action proceeds as a series of vignettes. The book's core is a series of isolated character studies, but in the opera, the patients interact with each other and spend a bucolic day in the New York Botanical Garden before fading back into illness.

The opera begins with a chorus, "A slumber fell upon the Kingdom," that takes its imagery from the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. Set against a pulsing ostinato, Picker's music suggests both nursery-rhyme-like simplicity and the patients' state of suspension in a realm beyond time. When the action shifts to the doctors' conference room, the jittery, be-bop-informed musical discourse brings us squarely into the world that the patients will reenter, setting up a musical dichotomy that propels the entire work. "The score is like a Bach cantata in its organicism,"

From top:  
composer Picker  
with his friend  
Oliver Sacks;  
*Awakenings* in  
workshop, 2019





**Picker and Stollman, collaborators and husbands**

says Roberto Kalb, who will conduct the premiere. “The primary themes can be found later in different instruments, registers or in retrograde, so by the time the audience finishes listening to the piece, it will sound like a cohesive whole.”

Picker’s opera career began with *Emmeline*, in 1996; he wrote four more operas before *Awakenings*. He is also an administrator, serving as artistic director at Tulsa Opera. He says that as a composer he is a “prima la musica” guy. “I am inspired by words, their rhythm and the emotions they describe, but the way I have always approached composing operas

West Side apartment. “Tobias was sitting next to me, and when I looked over, he was in tears,” Kalb says. “That’s telling. It’s a subject close to his heart, because he knew Oliver Sacks so well.”

In the popular 1990 film adaptation of *Awakenings*, Dr. Malcolm Sayer (Robin Williams)—the Sacks character—is given a female love interest. The real Sacks, after a lifetime of struggling with his sexuality, came out of the closet in his autobiography *On the Move*, published shortly before his death. The opera’s Sacks is likewise gay, and one part of a triangle of unrequited love: the young nurse Rodriguez

**“I AM INSPIRED BY WORDS, THEIR RHYTHM AND THE EMOTIONS THEY DESCRIBE.” —TOBIAS PICKER**

has been to tailor the storytelling to the music,” he writes in an e-mail. “Once the music is as I want it to be, and I can feel the characters’ breath on the nape of my neck, I can then give them voice and fit their words to their music. In the end, it is music that brings a story to life.”

The closing scene of Act I depicts the reunion of the patient Miriam with her daughter Lily; the score marks the moment with a rush of Gershwin-esque romanticism. Kalb describes listening to the MIDI recording of the scene in the composer’s Upper

loves him; Rodriguez is the object of the patient Leonard’s newly awakened longings. The work also includes a flashback to a scene of primal horror, in which Sacks’s mother, on discovering his homosexuality, calls him “an abomination.”

Picker and Stollman considered it essential to acknowledge Sacks’s sexuality in their work. “It was important for him to be open and come out before he died,” Picker says. “He was a very, very shy man, so it wasn’t easy. But he was very happy when he met Billy Hayes [Sacks’s partner from 2009 on]. He wasn’t



Picker, Stollman and director James Robinson at *Awakenings* workshop, 2019

marching in parades or anything, but he was happy in his quiet way. We were impelled to work that into the story. The Hollywood movie implied he was straight—that was what Hollywood did then. But we wanted to write about the real person we knew.”

Baritone Jarrett Porter, who will play Sacks at OTSL, feels his own voyage toward coming out has given him a degree of insight into Sacks’s “awakening.” “In 2018, when Tobias was still auditioning other singers and collecting opinions, I told him that I was not yet out as a gay man,” he says. “I discussed what my struggles were, and how I felt it gave me a certain knowledge of what it was to be

*litis lethargica* patients and their emergence into wakefulness, as well as to the gay currents running through the piece.

**PICKER AND STOLLMAN** are now working on another queer-themed opera, *Lili Elbe*, about the artist who became one of the first people to undergo gender-affirmation surgery. (Elbe was also the subject of the 2015 Eddie Redmayne vehicle *The Danish Girl*, but the opera will in no way be an adaptation of that film.) The work, which the collaborators are writing as a vehicle for the transgender baritone Lucia Lucas, is due to have its premiere in October 2023 at Switzerland’s Theater St. Gallen.

“I’m a gay man who has written five operas about heterosexuals,” Picker notes. “I thought it would be nice to write about a gay character. *Awakenings* was happening, and I thought, ‘Wait a minute. Oliver was gay!’ So it felt organic. *Lili Elbe* was a natural thing to do after that, but it’s not like I’m just going to write about queers from now on.”

*Lili Elbe* will be Stollman’s second libretto. He and Picker have been partners for forty-two years, and they got married in 2016 (with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg presiding), but before *Awakenings*, they had never collaborated on a project. Still, Stollman says, it felt like a natural next step to blend his words with his husband’s music. “I had watched Tobias work with the other librettists over the years,” he says. “So I feel like I had a twenty-five-year master class in writing librettos.” Picker’s previous collaborators include J. D. McClatchy (*Emmeline*, *Dolores Claiborne*) and Gene Scheer (*Thérèse Raquin*, *An American Tragedy*). “I have worked

## “I FEEL LIKE I HAD A TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR MASTER CLASS IN WRITING LIBRETTOS.” —ARYEH LEV STOLLMAN

a not-out gay man. I think that for Oliver, having those struggles ultimately allowed him to approach the patients in the way he did.”

Porter observes that the opera is anything but “trauma porn.” The work’s measured tone reflects the sensibility of its librettist. Moonlighting away from his medical duties, Stollman is a notable writer of fiction. His works include the acclaimed 1997 novel *The Far Euphrates*, a semiautobiographical bildungsroman about a rabbi’s son growing up in Windsor, Ontario. The book is remarkable for its sensitivity and compassion; even a potentially lurid subplot, involving a man who has been sexually mutilated by the Nazis and has lived out his life as a woman, stays thoroughly clear of sensationalism and grotesquery. Stollman brings a similar degree of discretion to his depiction of the *encepha-*

with a great poet [McClatchy] and a great lyricist [Scheer],” he says. “But this is my first time working with a great novelist.”

The collaborative process was inevitably more closely coordinated than it was on Picker’s past projects. Previously, Picker would keep his librettists at arm’s length while he was composing. “At the beginning of writing *Emmeline*, I played something for Sandy [McClatchy],” Picker says. “He made a comment, and I didn’t like it. I didn’t play anything for him again until I was finished. But with Aryeh, I couldn’t just have him send me the scenes, then make him wait until I was done, because he was too eager to hear what I had done.

“This is a natural outgrowth of our long, long history together,” he adds. “We’ve got a lot of trust built up.” ■



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