

OPERA NEWS

In Review (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/review.aspx?date=7/1/2022>) > North America
July 2022 — Vol. 87, No. 1 (http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2022/7/July_2022.html)

Awakenings, Harvey Milk, Carmen and The Magic Flute

ST. LOUIS

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

6/22



Jarrett Porter's Dr. Oliver Sacks, Elissa Pfaender as Dr. Muriel Elsie Landau and Keith Klein as Samuel Sacks in Tobias Picker's *Awakenings* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

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AFTER A YEAR of enforced hibernation followed by an abbreviated outdoor season, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, known for its curation of new works, returned to its full festival production schedule with not one, but two premieres. Originally planned for 2020, Tobias Picker's *Awakenings* is an adaptation of Dr. Oliver Sacks's 1973 book of the same name, which chronicles his pharmaceutical experiments with survivors of sleeping sickness. Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk*, postponed from 2021, explores the life of the country's first openly gay politician, assassinated by a homophobic rival soon after taking office. *Carmen* and *The Magic Flute* completed the slate (all OTSL's productions are sung in English), with all four works united by the underlying theme of—if not awakening, precisely—liberation.

The Spanish flu was not the only epidemic raging one hundred years ago; from 1917-1927, *encephalitis lethargica* sent its victims into extended slumber. Years later, many of those who survived developed life-altering symptoms related to Parkinsonism, living in a suspended state of frozen animation, hearing and understanding but incapable of responding. In 1969, Sacks used a new Parkinson's drug, L-DOPA, to reanimate a group of these patients at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx. Sacks's successes, which he documented as a series of case studies, were temporary but significant. Sacks and Picker became lifelong friends after the doctor diagnosed the composer's Tourette's Syndrome, and it was Sacks's idea to adapt his work as an opera.

Awakenings (seen June 11 matinee) features a libretto by Picker's husband, author and neuroradiologist Aryeh Lev Stollman, who frames the story with allusions to *Sleeping Beauty*, casting Sacks as the prince who will revive, in this case, multiple sleepers. Stollman often telescopes the action, which keeps things moving along. After the awakening of Leonard, Sacks's trial subject, Stollman fast-forwards over the awakenings of the other two principal patients, Miriam and Rose. However, the late-breaking, somewhat dutiful revelation that Sacks's parents rejected him because of his homosexuality does little in retrospect to illuminate his character. A triangle involving Leonard's unrequited romantic impulses toward Mr. Rodriguez, a hunky male nurse, and Rodriguez's toward Sacks doesn't develop enough to justify its inclusion.

Picker's busy, varied score effectively mirrors the revived patients' internal states as they grapple with a world both alien and familiar. When Leonard awakens, he sings in stilted staccato in contrast to the fluent expression of his private thoughts, heard briefly in the first scene. The waltz becomes the musical symbol of liberation, and when Sacks and Rodriguez take Leonard, Miriam and Rose to the Botanical Garden, the orchestral *perpetuum mobile* underscores the headiness of their constant discovery. The lively, rhythmic music of a celebration on the ward re-activates the patients' ties, jumpstarting their inevitable regression. The least fraught music was in the orchestral interludes. Conductor Roberto Kalb stayed impressively on top of the kaleidoscopic score, which sometimes veered into sensory overload with its constant churn and overlapping vocal lines.

Jarrett Porter's sensitivity, intelligence and smooth baritone made Sacks equal parts passionate upstart and introspective scientist. But Sacks is principally an observer, parsing his patients' experiences, and the opera makes its strongest impact illuminating their feelings about their lost lives. The newly formed, unlikely friendship between the earthy, astute Miriam (a soulful Adrienne Danrich) and former flapper Rose (the radiant Susanna Phillips) yielded two lovely duets. Phillips's vitality and optimism were balanced by Danrich's acute sense of betrayal, manifested by a sense of entitlement that includes stealing orchids and cheating at cards. Miriam, who recognizes that her awakening is both a blessing and a curse, is reunited with her daughter (Melissa Joseph, a bright spot) and a surprise granddaughter. Picker and Stollman give this scene emotional heft, demonstrating how the loss of years is tragic also for those left behind. Phillips was especially touching in her aria recalling her fleeting happiness with a young man who wanted to marry her.

Marc Molomot's brash tenor was a perfect vehicle for Leonard's childlike insistence, which morphs into mania and delusions of grandeur. Mezzo Katharine Goeldner was a warm but wary presence as his mother, while David Pittsinger made a jaded, authoritative hospital chief. Andres Acosta demonstrated a sheer, pointed tenor as Rodriguez, and Jared V. Esguerra made a strong impression as Frank, another revived patient. Soprano Rachel Blaustein's social worker and mezzo-soprano Angel Azzarra's speech therapist were sympathetic presences. Allen Moyer's institutional beige brick and bleak gray walls provided a useful surface for Greg Emetaz's projections of newspaper headlines and greenery. James Robinson's sensitive direction accentuated the poignancy of the story, whether introducing flashbacks of Leonard as a healthy child and Rose being courted by her fiancé or underscoring the patients' sense of imprisonment by immuring them behind glass panels at the beginning and end.