

OPERA NEWS

Awakenings

Odyssey Opera *BOSTON*

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TOBIAS PICKER'S OPERA *Awakenings*—inspired by Dr. Oliver Sacks's 1973 memoir—has its own way of illuminating Sacks's familiar story. Those looking for a re-telling of Sacks's amazing breakthroughs and the devastating relapses of the “sleepy-sickness” patients will find it here, but only in part. With his husband, Aryeh Lev Stollman, as librettist, Picker narrates the dismaying story of the L-DOPA experiments conducted by Sacks. But *Awakenings* equally explores Sacks's personal turmoil, a turmoil created by the famed doctor's long-suppressed attraction to men, fueled as well by his obsession with a failed drug therapy.

Odyssey Opera, with its companion organization Boston Modern Orchestra Project in the pit, staged *Awakenings* in Boston's Huntington Theatre Feb. 25. Gil Rose, founder of both ensembles, conducted. The premiere of *Awakenings* took place at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in June 2022, and most of the original cast and creatives took part in OO's production, including director (and OTSL artistic director) James Robinson. The opera will be recorded on the BMOPSound label, which won a Grammy in 2020 for its recording of Picker's *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*.

Real-life connections informed the creation of this *Awakenings*. Publicly, Sacks only acknowledged his sexual orientation late in life. Picker and Stollman, married, met Sacks in the 1990s, and had a long friendship before Sacks's death in 2015. The trio conferred on this opera, and other projects related to *Awakenings*, including a ballet Picker also composed for Britain's Rambert Dance Company in 2010.

The turmoil for Miriam H. (soprano Adrienne Danrich), Rose R. (soprano Joyce El-Khoury) and Leonard L. (tenor Andrew Morstein), three case studies the opera focuses on, gets shadowed by a love triangle, loosely sketched but constantly present. It pivots around the intentions of a nurse (tenor César Delgado, singing commandingly), Sacks's unfulfilled longings, and the antics of Leonard, whose lusty interests revive during his burst of activity. Sacks (baritone Jarrett Porter) is not the introspective, empathetic physician of popular knowledge here. Porter sang dynamically as the anguished physician, who hopes to resurrect lives but finds failure. His sometime foil, the hospital administrator Dr. Podsnap (bass-baritone Keith Klein), plays the heavy in ending the treatments, but also ruminates tellingly into the moral ambiguity of human drug tests.

The singing stars of *Awakening* are the patients. Morstein embodied Leonard's life impeccably, transforming from a wheelchair-bound savant into an enthusiastic, vivacious man. Rose, sung thrillingly by El-Khoury, awakens to realize she's been frozen in 1926, when she was overwhelmed (as were about a million others) with *encephalitis lethargica*.

Miriam, sung by the irrepressible Danrich, sees her past return dramatically in the form of a lost daughter and granddaughter. Two “wake-up” arias—Leonard’s “It’s a Lovely Feeling” and Rose’s “I Do Not Want to Sleep,” feed the temporary exhilaration.

Picker maintains a chamber-music sensibility in the through-composed score. Simple string, horn and wind accompaniment flowed effortlessly below vocal lines. An early trio—Miriam, Rose and Leonard singing for the first time in decades, underpinned by a touching, discreet violin solo—was emblematic of Picker’s aesthetic. There were moments when the tutti instruments overwhelmed the voices. High drama—there was plenty—was sometimes colored with asynchronous, shrill blasts. Nearly every scene was poignant, but some scenes were poignant too long, often with extraneous characters cluttering the stage, distracting from the action. But Picker’s tuneful and accessible score generally supported the onstage drama gracefully, rather than emphasizing it.

Robinson’s direction was aided by the sets (Allen Moyer) and video projections (Greg Emetaz). The sets were limited to rolling glass partitions, mimicking hospital wards, and the lighting and video effectively created changes in locale and time. The versatile chorus stayed active, onstage as actors, off- and onstage as singers. The opera opens and closes with references to “Sleeping Beauty,” and draws imperfect comparisons to that fable throughout. At one point, Sacks likens himself to the heroic, rescuing prince. The flaws in that comparison—there’s no “happily ever after” here—underscore the opera’s ambivalence toward joy, and salvation. As Sacks wrote with resignation about Rose in his memoir, “She is a Sleeping Beauty whose ‘awakening’ was unbearable to her.” — *Keith Powers*