

SHUMAN ASSOCIATES INC

---

**Tobias Picker's**  
**AWAKENINGS**



**A co-production of Tulsa Opera and  
Opera Theatre of Saint Louis**

**June 5-24, 2022**

# Critical Acclaim

“...a tightly woven musical narrative” – *Musical America*

"[a] kaleidoscopic score" – *Opera News*

“...there was no denying the opera’s emotional wallop.” – *Dallas Morning News*

“Strange, exciting, often beautiful music, and wonderful voices.” – *Broadway World*

“‘Awakenings’ Is the Sleeper Hit of the Season” – *ReviewsSTL.com*

“*Awakenings* will stand the test of time.” – *OperaGene.com*

“‘Awakenings’ is a dream” – *PopLifeSTL.com*

---

“... a sensitive adaptation of the eminent neurologist Oliver Sacks’s 1973 book about a group of institutionalized patients who, stricken during the 1920s with *encephalitis lethargica* (sleeping sickness), had been locked into mostly speechless, motionless lives for decades...Mr. Picker’s elegiac, autumnal score, with its eloquent writing for solo string players, treads delicately in these stories of unrealized possibility...”

Heidi Waleson, [Wall Street Journal](#)  
June 27, 2022

“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’ tics, jumpstarting their inevitable regression. “

Joanne Sydney Lessner, [Opera News](#)  
June 22, 2022

“The vocal lines are not hard on the ear and tend to be more linear--read tonal--in sunnier or more wistful moments. Unlike some new operas, Picker treats the orchestra...as support to and follower of the vocal line and its motifs, rather than the other way around...Orchestral motifs often echo vocal ones, and their recurrence, though subtle, form a tightly woven musical narrative.”

Susan Elliott, [Musical America](#)  
June 16, 2022

'Awakenings' takes on the difficult task of turning a plot-free nonfiction work into a dramatically coherent piece of musical theatre...it succeeds splendidly...the work hearkens back to the musical theatre pieces of legendary teams like Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Lowe, or Flaherty and Ahrens. I often come away from newer operas with the feeling that the composer and librettist inhabited different worlds. Not so with "Awakenings," which feels like the true partnership that it is."

Chuck Lavazzi, [KDHX](#)  
June 10, 2022

*Awakenings* is a touching, resonant, important new piece of lyric theatre. May it have many more productions."

James Sohre, [Opera Today](#)  
June 26, 2022

"The varied score painted the tense scenes with dissonance and its tender moments with lovely melody, always steady in enhancing the emotions on stage. While the music never competed with the drama for attention, the music did grow lush and especially beautiful... The best operas make it personal by giving us glimpses of ourselves in others. I think *Awakenings* is among the best."

[OperaGene.com](#)  
June 12, 2022

"The most celebrated operas tend to have their greatness attributed to a particular identifying distinction. There is the vivid storytelling of Puccini's *La Bohème* and the musical and emotional rollercoaster of his *Tosca*. There is the scope of music and themes within Mozart's *The Magic Flute*...and the character richness of his *Marriage of Figaro*. But there is also a category of operas made spectacular by the sum of their parts. These works display a cohesiveness – and create a perfectly aligned, well-rounded musical and theatrical experience. Such can be said about the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis world-premiere of *Awakenings*."

Kenya Vaughn, [The St. Louis American](#)  
June 25, 2022

Picker's music is straightforward and highly accessible, as haunting and melancholy as the true story itself, less sonorous on the upbeat visit to the botanical garden. Stollman presents his libretto in snippets which move the scenario directly forward, from the bureaucratic villainy of Podsnap to the bewilderment of the patients and their profound, simple appreciation for nature at the botanical garden.

Mark Bretz, [Ladue News](#)  
June 14, 2022

"...Tobias Picker, who has joined his partner Stollman to bring the opera to life, *Awakenings*' powerful score marks the time as it frames the esoteric sterility of Beth Abraham Hospital with an atmospheric tone that touches on the themes of reflection, hope, jubilation, and melancholy."

Rob Levy, [ReviewsSTL.com](#)  
June 13, 2022

# Table of Contents

## FEATURES

<i>The New York Times</i> : An Oliver Sacks Book Becomes an Opera .....	5
<i>Opera News</i> : Re-awakenings .....	9
<i>BBC World News</i> : Awakenings opera opens three decades after Hollywood movie .....	15
<i>BBC Radio</i> : Awakenings featured on Talking Movies with Tom Brook .....	16
<i>NPR's Here &amp; Now</i> : 'Awakenings' opera shows Oliver Sacks as he was – a gay man .....	17
<i>St. Louis Post Dispatch</i> : OTSL world premiere recalls 'sleeping sickness that attacked brains a century ago' .....	18
St. Louis Public Radio, NPR: An 'Awakenings' opera that shows Oliver Sacks as his friends knew him – a gay man .....	22

## REVIEWS

<i>The Wall Street Journal</i> : 'Awakenings', 'Harvey Milk' and 'Carmen' Review .....	28
<i>Musical America</i> : In St. Louis: Awakenings Touches the Soul .....	30
<i>Opera News</i> : Awakenings, Harvey Milk, Carmen and The Magic Flute .....	32
<i>Opera Today</i> : OTSL: Awakenings Rouses Empathy .....	34
<i>KDHX</i> : Perchance to Dream: Opera Theatre's "Awakenings" puts a human face on a mysterious pandemic .....	40
<i>St. Louis American</i> : A home-grown awakening .....	44
<i>ReviewsSTL.com</i> : Awakenings Is the Sleeper Hit of the Season .....	46
<i>OperaGene.com</i> : OTSL premiere of Awakenings: tragedy or was it? .....	48
<i>Ladue News</i> : Haunting Music, Touching Story Propel Opera Theatre's World Premiere of 'Awakenings' .....	54
<i>PopLifeSTL.com</i> : Opera Theatre's 'Awakenings' Is a dream .....	59

# 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.



Aryeh Lev Stollman, left, and Tobias Picker at the New York Botanical Garden, where a key scene in their opera adaptation of Oliver Sacks's “Awakenings” is set. Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times

By [Joshua Barone](#)

May 25, 2022

“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.)

“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.”



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

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:

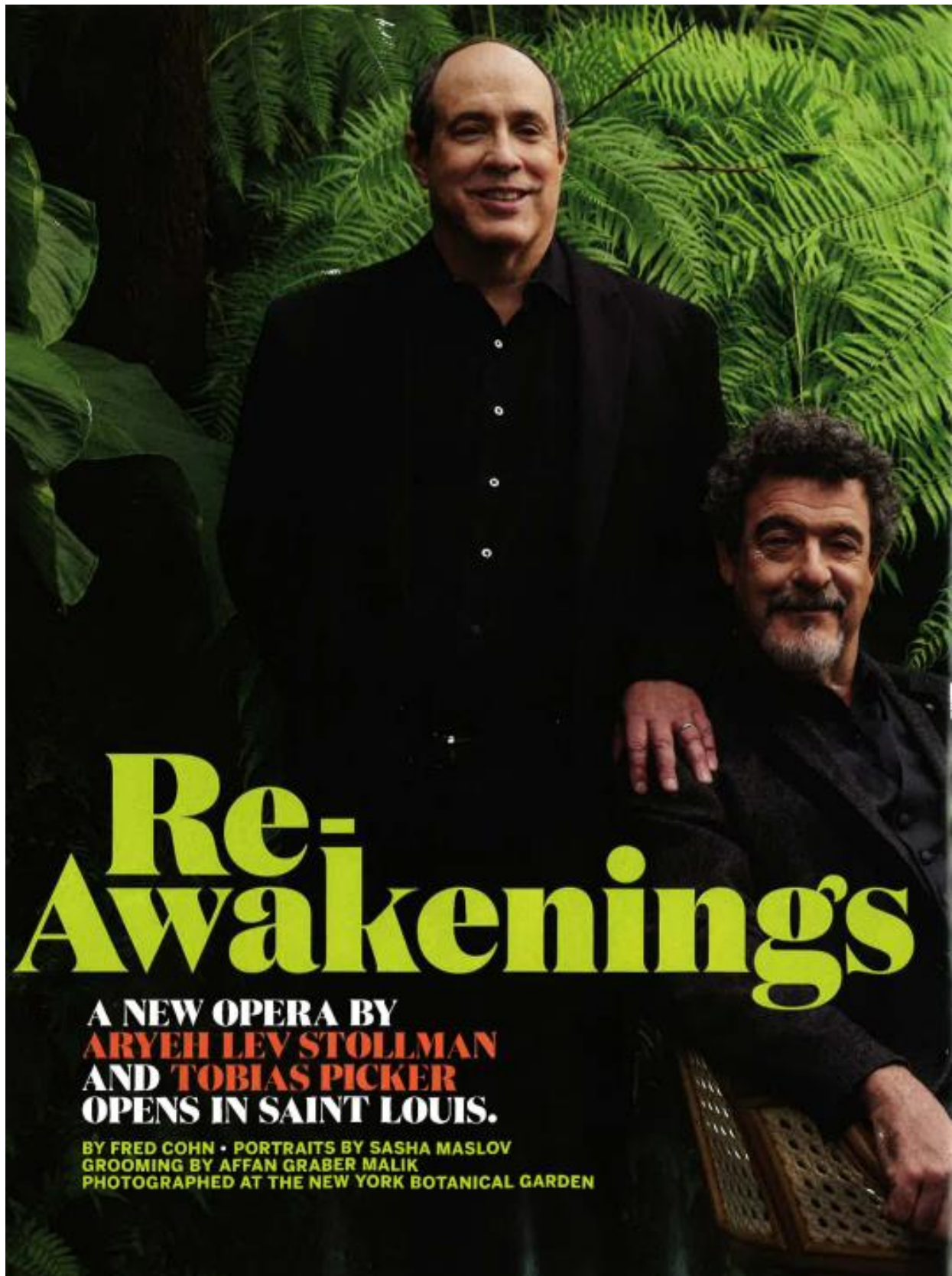
I am no longer the man I was,  
but I have not truly awakened yet.  
This time is not the time for me.  
Perhaps one day when I’ve lived long enough,  
love will happen.  
Not with medicine but with such a simple kiss.

**Link:** <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/25/arts/music/awakenings-opera-oliver-sacks.html>



# OPERA NEWS

June 2022



## Re- Awakenings

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

BY FRED COHN • PORTRAITS BY SASHA MASLOV  
GROOMING BY AFFAN GRABER MALIK  
PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN



# T

**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, OTSI'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. 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 *Musophilia: 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 *Enimeline*, 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 iatrogenica* 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.” ■



**ON LOCATION**  
**NEW YORK  
BOTANICAL  
GARDEN**

*On June 3, NYBG opens its major, 2022 institution-wide exhibition, **Around the Table: Stories of the Foods We Love** explores the diversity and beauty of plants grown for cuisine around the world through displays of living edible plants, art and science installations, and wellness and culinary-themed programming.*

*On view through Sept. 11, 2022; 2900 Southern Blvd., Bronx, NY. [nybg.org](http://nybg.org)*

**WORLD NEWS** Talking Movies

Home Episodes Clips Tom Brook

**Awakenings opera opens three decades after Hollywood movie**

A medical experiment conducted on patients afflicted by a pandemic from a different era by the celebrated British neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks has inspired a major new opera having its world premiere in America last weekend. In the experiment Dr. Sacks brought patients in a New York hospital back to consciousness after they'd been left virtually comatose for four decades by the so-called sleeping-sickness pandemic of the 1920s. Sacks' work was the subject of an acclaimed Hollywood movie *Awakenings* – but now as Tom Brook reports it's a full opera.

08 June 2022  
3 minutes

This clip is from   
**Talking Movies**

### Awakenings opera opens three decades after Hollywood movie

A medical experiment conducted on patients afflicted by a pandemic from a different era by the celebrated British neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks has inspired a major new opera having its world premiere in America last weekend. In the experiment Dr. Sacks brought patients in a New York hospital back to consciousness after they'd been left virtually comatose for four decades by the so-called sleeping-sickness pandemic of the 1920s. Sacks' work was the subject of an acclaimed Hollywood movie *Awakenings* – but now as Tom Brook reports it's a full opera.

**Release date:** 08 June 2022

**Duration:** 3 minutes

**Link:** <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0ccs1k4>

# BBC RADIO

June 3, 2022

Awakenings Featured On BBC World News: Talking Movies With Tom Brook



Awakenings  
BBC

Link: <https://tobiaspikker.com/news>





## 'Awakenings' opera shows Oliver Sacks as he was — a gay man

[Jeremy D. Goodwin](#) of St. Louis Public Radio reports.  
*This segment aired on June 22, 2022*

The 1990 film of Oliver Sacks' "Awakenings" portrayed Sacks as a heterosexual man with a female love interest. That's because he didn't come out until years later. Now, an [opera based on the book](#) pictures Sacks, accurately, as a gay man for the first time.

Link: <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/06/22/awakenings-opera-oliver-sacks>

## **OTSL world premiere recalls 'sleeping sickness' that attacked brains a century ago**

By Daniel Durchholz | Special to the Post-Dispatch  
June 8, 2022



**A** hundred years ago, the world was struck by a widespread infectious disease, inexplicable in its origin and often deadly in its outcome. Sound familiar?

No, it wasn't the same one that is stubbornly circulating among the population today, but rather encephalitis lethargica, also known as "sleeping sickness" or "sleepy sickness." It killed half a million people and affected the lives of many more.

As Mark Twain is credited with saying, "History may not repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Encephalitis lethargica attacked the brains of its victims, leaving them speechless and motionless; conscious but not fully awake.

In the late 1960s, neurologist Oliver Sacks treated a number of the disease's victims at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx, using L-DOPA, a drug that had (then) recently been developed for the treatment of Parkinson's disease.

Sacks recounted some of his patients' case histories in his 1973 nonfiction bestseller "Awakenings," which was adapted into the 1990 Oscar-nominated film starring Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro.

Beginning June 5, the story will be told — or rather sung — in another artistic medium as Opera Theatre of St. Louis presents the world premiere of "Awakenings" by composer Tobias Picker and librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman.



From left: Jarrett Porter, Jared Esguerra, David Pittsinger, Manfred Anaya, Mishael Eusebio and Rachel Blaustein in the Opera Theatre of St. Louis production of "Awakenings"

Photo by Eric Woolsey

The book's subject matter and its author are quite familiar to Picker and Stollman. Picker adapted the book into a ballet for England's Rambert Dance Company, which premiered it in 2010. Stollman, meanwhile, is a neuroradiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York as well as a novelist ("The Far Euphrates," "The Illuminated Soul").

Sacks, who died in 2015, was a personal friend of Picker and Stollman, who have been a couple since 1980 and were married — by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, no less — in 2016, and Sacks had once done a workup on Picker, who has Tourette syndrome and sought the doctor's advice. Sacks wrote about Picker's disorder and how it relates to his musical acuity in his 2007 book "Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain."

"I admired his writing very much and what he was accomplishing for humanity," Picker says via Zoom from his home in upstate New York. "So I wanted to do something with his work. We talked about which of his books would be the most effective as an opera. He felt 'Awakenings' would be the most operatic, and I agreed."

Picker's relationship with Opera Theatre of St. Louis dates to 2015, when the company mounted a production of his debut opera, "Emmeline." But even before that, James Robinson — OTSL's artistic director since 2008 — had directed the world premiere of Picker's "Dolores Claiborne" for the San Francisco Opera in 2013.

"I didn't think anyone in the opera world wanted ('Awakenings') until Jim came along," Picker adds. "He said, 'If you have the rights to that, we'd be very interested.' He immediately saw the potential for the story as a work for the lyric stage."

Paring Sacks' book, which describes the case histories of 20 patients, into a manageable form was no small feat for Stollman, a first-time librettist.

“(In the book) the patients are each in their own silos, so to speak,” he says. “They don’t really interact with each other. The idea was to find the most compelling characters and develop them. Our job was to make a story — relationships between the patients.”

Stollman chose three of them — Leonard, who, when “awakened,” was an intellectual of sorts; Rose, who was active and accomplished before getting sick; and Miriam, who is something of a composite of some of the other patients.

And Sacks, too, is a character, of course. “He’s the center; he’s the glue,” Stollman says. “But they all have their own presence.”

Stollman describes the arc of the story as having three phases: “Awakenings,” when the patients wake up and experience life as they had not for decades; “Tribulations,” when they experience side effects of the medication; and “Accommodation,” when they have to stop taking it and slip back into their comalike state.

Sacks, too, experiences an awakening of his own in the opera. Sacks was gay but closeted for most of his life. He only came out a few months before his death, with the publication of his 2015 memoir, “On the Move: A Life.”

“I knew him privately and personally, so I knew that he was in the closet,” Picker says. “It was something we talked about, but it wasn’t publicly known. It wasn’t official until he made it official. It’s such an important part of his life and who he was as a human being — as a man.” He and Stollman knew they had to include it.

Much like the characters are locked into their semiconscious selves, Sacks was “locked in himself in a psychological, spiritual way,” he adds. “And he released himself from that.” Being a couple and working together as composer and librettist, Picker says, was “a great experience.”

Being a couple and working together as composer and librettist, Picker says, was “a great experience.”

Picker, who has worked with three librettists on his five operas, completely changed his routine while working with Stollman.

His usual method would be to have a finished libretto and compose to that. For “Awakenings,” Picker says, “I started composing the opera after the first scene was written. He would be writing a scene, and then I would compose for that scene that he had just written. Then he would come and hear it, and we’d talk about revisions.

“It was a joy to make this opera together. There were no battles. If we disagreed about something, we found a way to figure out what to do about it.”

The process had to be accelerated a bit anyway, Picker says, because Robinson originally wanted the piece for OTSL’s 2020 season, which was then canceled due to COVID.

Unintended though it may be, the current pandemic possibly adds another layer of meaning onto the opera.

“It was a coincidence whose repercussions remain to be seen,” Picker says. “How will people react to it? Will they associate it in their minds and their hearts with the pandemic that we’re still living through? Or will they see it as something separate?”



Keith Klein (left) and Jarrett Porter in the Opera Theatre of St. Louis production of "Awakenings"

Photo by Eric Woolsey

The finished opera was delivered to OTSL before the pandemic, and nothing has been done to revise it to comment on COVID.

“They’re different pandemics, different trajectories,” Stollman says.

Sacks did not live to see the opera, but Picker can imagine his friend’s reaction to it.

“I think he would have loved it,” he says. “He was a very shy man, so he would have been a little embarrassed by the attention and being made into an operatic hero. He would have also loved it because he loved being acknowledged because he was human like the rest of us.”

For Picker himself, he says, “it as if he’s come back to life, but only in a new dimension.”

Link: [https://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/arts-and-theatre/otsl-world-premiere-recalls-sleeping-sickness-that-attacked-brains-a-century-ago/article\\_9b5e43c5-28c9-5d24-abfb-b60425c24d8a.html](https://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/arts-and-theatre/otsl-world-premiere-recalls-sleeping-sickness-that-attacked-brains-a-century-ago/article_9b5e43c5-28c9-5d24-abfb-b60425c24d8a.html)



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

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

Published June 2, 2022 at 5:03 AM CDT

▶ LISTEN • 4:50



Brian Munoz / St. Louis Public Radio

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.

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."



Brian Muroz / 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."

## **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.

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.



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.



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

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.

*Follow Jeremy on Twitter: [@jeremydgoodwin](#)*

**Link:** <https://news.stpublicradio.org/arts/2022-06-02/an-awakenings-opera-that-shows-oliver-sacks-as-his-friends-knew-him-a-gay-man>

# REVIEWS

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## ‘Awakenings’, ‘Harvey Milk’ and ‘Carmen’ Review: Two Poignant Premieres and an Old Favorite

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis’s spring season includes Tobias Picker’s new opera about neurologist Oliver Sacks’s patients suffering from sleeping sickness.



Katharine Goeldner, Andres Acosta, Marc Molomot and Jarrett Porter (foreground) in Tobias Picker's 'Awakenings'  
PHOTO: ERIC WOOLSEY

By Heidi Waleson  
June 27, 2022  
*Webster Groves, MO*

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis returned to full programming this spring for the first time since the outbreak of Covid-19 with a pair of new works originally intended for its seasons in 2020 and 2021, which were, respectively, cancelled and abridged. Tobias Picker’s “**Awakenings**” is a sensitive adaptation of the eminent neurologist Oliver Sacks’s 1973 book about a group of institutionalized patients who, stricken during the 1920s with *encephalitis lethargica* (sleeping sickness), had been locked into mostly speechless, motionless lives for decades. In 1969, using L-dopa, then newly shown to be effective in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease, Sacks “awakened” these patients, who had Parkinsonian symptoms, to near-normal

functioning. Sadly, the drug's effects were transitory and fraught with side effects, and the patients returned to their earlier states.

Sacks's is a collection of detailed case studies; Aryeh Lev Stollman's poetic libretto follows the basic narrative arc of the well-known 1990 film adaptation, framing it with a choral prologue and epilogue recounting the "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale and zeroing in on three patients. Mr. Picker's elegiac, autumnal score, with its eloquent writing for solo string players, treads delicately in these stories of unrealized possibility: Rose (Susanna Phillips), once an aviator with a fiancé; Miriam (Adrienne Danrich), whose infant daughter was taken from her; and Leonard (Marc Molomot), whose awakening is fraught with intense sexual feelings for the nurse, Mr. Rodriguez (Andres Acosta), and apocalyptic hallucinations. Leonard's devoted mother, Iris (Katharine Goeldner), prefers him in his gentle, unawakened state; her line, "Maybe best to let him be" captures the ambiguity of this medical experiment and its outcome.

Dramatic tableaux worked well: In an early scene in the institution's dayroom, the joy of the newly revived patients is expressed in lilting waltz time; in act 2, as the patients and staff celebrate the miracle cure with a party, a sudden switch into jagged, uptempo dance music triggers Rose's relapse into Parkinsonian symptoms, signaling the ultimate failure of the drug. At times, the libretto becomes too poetic and takes the score with it: A quintet scene in the New York Botanical Garden about the discovery of love sags. The addition of an awakening theme for Sacks (Jarrett Porter), who did not publicly acknowledge his homosexuality until shortly before he died in 2015, felt grafted on, in part because Sacks's musical personality was muted. His love for his patients comes through, but their stories and struggles are more immediate.

Standout singers included Ms. Phillips, whose generous soprano and vivid acting captured Rose's understanding of her state—a woman in her 60s who still feels that she is 21 years old. Mr. Acosta brought a bright tenor to Mr. Rodriguez, the apex of a triangle of unrequited love—Leonard's for him and his for Sacks. Mr. Molomot's high, jagged tenor gave Leonard's transformation believable dramatic instability. Roberto Kalb's conducting deftly balanced the transparent orchestration. Allen Moyer's simple set—some moveable glass panels and misty projections—established locations, mostly in the hospital; James Schuette's costumes evoked the period. James Robinson's astute direction incorporated telling details—Leonard, newly awakened, ecstatically smokes a cigarette; Miriam, her L-dopa losing potency, has arm tremors—and Christopher Akerlind's lighting took the story into brightness and then back into shadows.

\*\*\*

Link to story [here](#).

**In St. Louis: *Awakenings* Touches the Soul**

By Susan Elliott, Musical America  
June 16, 2022



Before *Awakenings* was a new opera by Tobias Picker, premiering at Opera Theater of St. Louis last week, it was a ballet, with a score also by Picker (completely different from the opera), as well as a 1990 film starring Robert DeNiro, and the basis of a 1982 play by Harold Pinter, *A Kind of Alaska*. Each owes its origins to British neurologist and prolific author Oliver Sacks's non-fiction book of the same name (1973), a series of case studies about his experience with patients at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx suffering from the aftermath of sleeping sickness (*encephalitis lethargica*), a pandemic that

lasted from 1916-1927. Many of its victims died, others lapsed into a bizarre syndrome that left them frozen for decades—often mid-transition from one movement to the next—like statues.

Dr. Sacks's work with them, administering the drug often used for Parkinson's disease called L-dopa, forms the basis for the new opera, whose librettist happens to be a neuroradiologist himself—Aryeh Lev Stollman—as well as Picker's partner of 42 years. Thus a chorus of words that hardly trip off the tongue but are fact-checked by the librettist himself: "Apomorphine! Amphetamines! Antimuscarinics! Trihexyphenidyl! That's a mouthful!" It sure is.

**Timely as ever**

Originally scheduled to premiere at OTSL in the 2020 season, *Awakenings* is all the more relevant for the two-year pandemic-induced delay, although its creators say it has not been altered in any way since to reflect current events. Whether relevant to the tragedies of today or those of the last century, it is a story of the human condition, of re-awakenings and the consequences of them, of life's mixed blessings, and, mostly, of love.

While Sacks's book is a series of case studies describing the effects of L-dopa on 20 patients, Stollman has condensed them to a central three: Miriam H. (mezzo soprano Adrienne Danrich), Rose (soprano Susanna Phillips), and Leonard Lev (tenor Marc Molomot). Each reacts to the drug in their own way, and we come to know and care deeply about them, not only as individuals on a journey from numb to alive to numb again, but as individuals in relationship to each other—something a series of case studies could not accomplish—and with their caretakers.

Those include members of the hospital staff (which, with other patients, form the core of the chorus), overseen by medical director Dr. Podsnap (bass-baritone David Pittsinger), who doubts Sacks's experiment and damns it when it fails; neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks (baritone Jarrett Porter); and a nurse called Mr. Rodrigez (tenor Andres Acosta).



*Leonard Lev (Marc Molomot) sulks in his room, as Dr. Sacks (Jarrett Porter) looks on with concern*

The vocal lines are not hard on the ear and tend to be more linear--read tonal--in sunnier or more wistful moments. Unlike some new operas, Picker treats the orchestra--OTSL uses the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO) for its performances--as support to and follower of the vocal line and its motifs, rather than the other way around. At the June 9 performance, conductor Roberto Kalb balanced his forces extremely well, though there were occasions when the chorus's sound and ensemble were scraggly. Moments of the score that linger in the memory include the duet between Rose and Miriam as their symptoms begin to return ("Let us be, we are happy now"), mournfully supported in the lower strings (SLSO's principal cello was a particular standout). Bases are called upon to anchor the frequent, suspenseful, driving ostinatos. Orchestral motifs often echo vocal ones, and their recurrence, though subtle, form a tightly woven musical narrative.

Oliver Sacks was a gay man but did not come out until well after the book was published. Picker and Stollman have incorporated his preferences (the three men were close friends) to create a love triangle in the opera, among Mr. Rodriguez, Leonard, and Sacks, who only acknowledges his sexuality—and reluctantly at that—at the end of the opera when approached by Rodriguez. Meanwhile Rodriguez is the object of Leonard's infatuation, and the two sing of their respective love objects in a duet ("The Flower of Love"), set on either side of a glass partition—one of the many, on wheels, that are cleverly moved about to form the opera's different spaces, from patient common area to private room. Reflecting a hospital's sterile image, the stage is otherwise uncluttered and cleanly lit (set design Allen Moyer, lighting by Christopher Akerlind). The only exception is the botanical garden, where the three patients wander amid Greg Emetaz's vivid video projections, experiencing their first "awakenings" to life's beauty after decades of being locked in silence.

Especially considering the physical demands of the patients--from frozen in place for minutes at a time to fits of screaming hysteria--his was a strong and committed cast. Susanna Phillips was a natural as the idealistic, love-lost dreamer Rose, her voice sweet-toned yet varied and expressive. Danrich inhabited Miriam as her down-to-earth polar opposite, such that their concern for each other as the brevity of the cure became clear was all the more touching. Molomot came to the role of Leonard on apparently very short notice and did a hero's job of making him a sad, wholly believable boy in a man's clothing.

Onstage almost throughout, Porter sang the even-tempered Sacks with requisite persuasiveness and Andres Acosta was a short, studly Rodriguez with an ardent tenor. Pittsinger was a natural as Podsnap, resistant to the upside of the revelations around him as if waiting for his "told-you-so" moment. A quick shout-out to OTSL young artist Keith Klein, who's sturdy, true bass as Samuel Sacks, Oliver's father, stood out, even in its very brief moment in the sun.

OTSL Artistic Director James Robinson, the go-to commissioner and director of new operas that challenge the prejudices and status quo of any era (*Champion*, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* to name two), has made a compelling case for the opera, as well-crafted musically as it is compassionate.

## *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

© Eric Woolsey 2022

**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' tics, 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.

...

Link [here](#).

# Opera Today

OPERA NEWS, COMMENTARY, AND REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

## OTSL: *Awakenings* Rouses Empathy

By [James Sohre](#) on [June 26, 2022](#)



Composer Tobias Picker and librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman have created an emotional rollercoaster of an operatic experience with *Awakenings*, yet another world premiere by the enterprising Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

Based on the compelling true story, in a Bronx hospital, patients with a decades-long sleeping sickness, Encephalitis Lethargica, exist on the fringe of consciousness. Dr. Oliver Sacks proposes treating them with the new drug, L-DOPA. Over the initial objections of his superior, Dr. Podsnap, Sacks experiences success at “awaking” first one, then several patients to “normal” behavior and awareness.

The dynamic of “awakening” also applies to Sacks himself, as his publicly heralded momentary breakthrough reverses course, and the patients revert to their pitiable prior conditions. The doctor must reckon with not only his own limitations, and his vanity in having been enamored with his own publicity; but also must confront his closeted homosexuality. An attractive young nurse, Mr. Rodriguez, is drawn to the doctor, and although it is mutual, Sacks cannot yet “wake up” to such a relationship. This is a second opera informed by gay identity that OTSL had on offer during Pride Month, the other being Wallace and Korie’s *Harvey Milk*.

Mr. Stollman’s taut libretto is quite a vibrant and informative construction, marked by incisive character development and well-defined relationships. Based on the book by Oliver Sacks, M.D., Picker actually met with Sacks, first because he is afflicted with Tourette syndrome, and he sought out the doctor’s insights. They were then joined in conversation by Picker’s neuroradiologist husband (and librettist) and discerned many unique insights to the doctor’s life views that helped inform their writing. The character delineation was also furthered by musical ‘identities’ that are marked by empathy and specificity.



Rose (Susanna Phillips) and Dr. Oliver Sacks (Jarrett Porter) in Tobias Picker's *Awakenings*. Photo © Eric Woolsey 2022

A choral piece frames the opera with a telling of, and commentary on, *The Sleeping Beauty*. The analogy of a princess being trapped in a castle frozen in time resonates poetically with the plight of human beings being trapped in their barely conscious bodies. When the commentary returns at opera's end, the metaphor is unutterably poignant.

Mr. Picker utilizes any number of recurring motifs that are catchy *Ohrworms*, snippets that linger in your ear only to make a welcome return. The musical writing has an underlying supernatural effect, as banks of layered instruments trade statements, and players break free in solos to comment on a character's mental state. The overall arc surges from the initial depths to joyous heights with increasingly animated phrases. It was notable how effectively Picker often utilized a droning ostinato to create multiple fine dramatic effects, just as it was striking how much of the writing was noticeably in triple time.

Indeed, it is at a celebratory party, when the waltz music that was being danced to was abruptly swapped out for something disjointed, that the tragic relapse was triggered. Unable to continue smoothly gliding together in a waltz, characters severally and together broke down into tics, neuroses, twitches, and renewed immobility.

It is after the transitory jubilation in the opera's middle that the composer finds his most profound voice, creating a soundscape of helplessness and stern, even cruel introspection for the "well" characters, and most especially for the deflated Sacks. The writing here just aches, pulsing with pathos.



Iris Lev (Katharine Goeldner), Dr. Rodriguez (Andres Acosta), Leonard Lev (Marc Molomot), and Dr. Oliver Sacks (Jarrett Porter) in Tobias Picker's *Awakenings*. Photo © Eric Woolsey 2022

Roberto Kalb exerted complete mastery in his clear and concise conducting, which inspired superior music-making from his cast and orchestra. This is a very demanding score, and Maestro Kalb managed to withdraw the highest level of accomplishment from the members of Saint Louis Symphony in the pit. He was also a sensitive and conscientious partner to the singers on stage, cuing them tirelessly through the knottier passages, and evoking meaningful musico-dramatic commentary with a skillful baton technique. Kevin J. Miller's chorus of Gerdine Young Artists covered themselves in glory, not only for singing with accuracy, heartfelt emotion, and excellent diction, but also for executing the many complicated set changes without a hitch.

Set almost entirely inside Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx in the middle of the past century, Allen Moyer's main set is a handsome tiled institutional back wall in front of which a series of rolling acrylic room dividers, disparate furniture, wheelchairs, and medical paraphernalia are often in motion with choreographic precision. Although the muted hospital look was required to establish the correct atmosphere, Mr. Moyers, lighting designer Christopher Akerlind, and video designer Greg Emetaz found myriad ways to engage our eyes with subtle inventive effects.

While Mr. Akerlind's lighting struck a moody tone at the start, as the news got better and better, he winningly injected incremental brightness and color to the story. Mr. Emetaz has devised some diverse and eye-catching projections, capitalizing again and again on scrolling (or still) projections of medical texts, frequently looming over the entire process, a very effective dramatic addition. As the story crescendoed to the good news of "the cure," a visit outside the walls into a spacious garden was treated to stage-filling projections of an overpowering riot of colorful flowers.



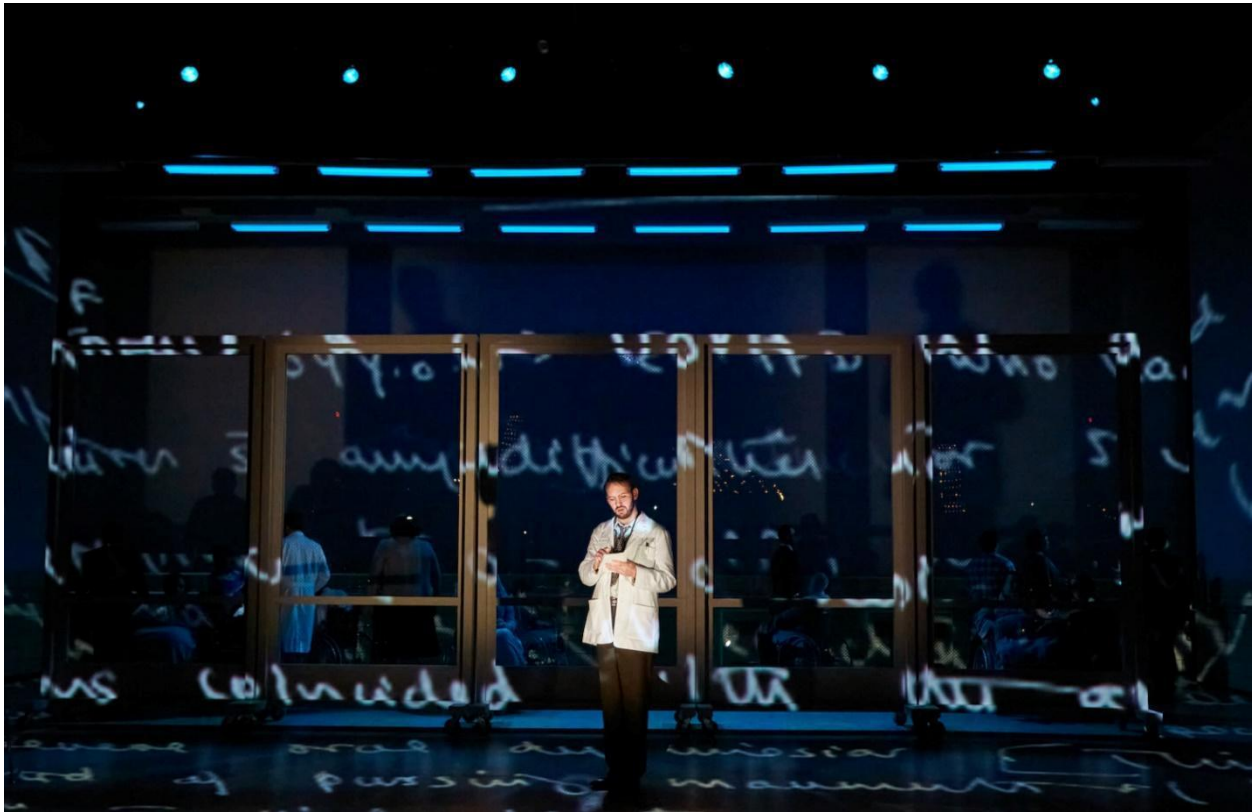
Rose (Susanna Phillips) and Miriam H. (Adrienne Danrich) in Tobias Picker's *Awakenings*. Photo © Eric Woolsey 2022

Director James Robinson thrives on the process of making new operas “sing,” and *Awakenings* benefited from his expertise in the flowing style with which he infused the staging. He has managed to convey the comings and goings of a working medical establishment, with subtle crosses, unobtrusive entrances and exits, and well-calculated regroupings. He also knows how to point up solo moments of focused stillness.

Mr. Robinson's greatest success with this piece is arguably the nonpareil character development, and the physical manifestation of each patient that is on display. There was a discernible journey that was manifest in each character which was very affecting. James Schuette's spot-on costume design and Tom Watson's equally effective wig and makeup were also of the usual high standard that always marks their work at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and elsewhere. With all this excellence from the writing and creative side, it is a pleasure to report that the singing could hardly have been bettered.

First among equals are the three principle institutionalized characters. As Rose, soprano Susanna Phillips does not so much sing her music as embody it. There is not a moment that is not laser-focused on showing us this is a person who, once released from her affliction, is aching for her long-gone love to return, when they will gaily waltz. Oh, how she loves to dance, and once she is able, Ms. Phillips floats and spins in an infectious joyous abandon.

And she sings, too! She is possessed of a ravishing instrument that is meticulously controlled in all registers. Whether riding the orchestra in dramatic outbursts or caressing a loving phrase with the apparition of her lover (nicely sung by Manfred Anaya), she is in complete command of her resources, and our hearts. The composer has given Rose some important duet moments with Miriam, the latter taken in a powerful role assumption by soprano Adrienne Danrich.



Jarrett Porter as Dr. Oliver Sacks in Tobias Picker's *Awakenings*. Photo © Eric Woolsey 2022

It is revealed that Miriam has not only a daughter, but granddaughter, who were told she was dead to spare them the need to know their mother was not lucid. As Miriam recovers, the family is reunited, and Ms. Danrich, who starts out muttering in lower registers, inexorably raises her searing soprano, first in joy, later in outraged self-pity that she has been robbed of time with her kin. Hers is a potent, full-throated vocal production, and when she rides the orchestra at some tumultuous climaxes, it is an exhilarating, pin-your-ears-back effect. As Miriam's daughter Lily, Melissa Joseph's soprano fairly glows with a radiant tone married to commendable musicianship.

You would never know that tenor Marc Molomot came late to the production process to portray the (at first) sympathetic; then later, bitter incarnation of Leonard Lev. As he "awakens," Mr. Molomot is a combination of lovable nebbish and pitiable gay man. His tenor deftly meets the initial lyrical demands of the role, but it is when he gets riled to defiance and short-lived self-assurance that he unleashes a potent, *Mime*-like, laser-focused projection that is rock solid in its delivery.

As his long-suffering, devoted mother, Katherine Goeldner was luxury casting in this featured role. While wishing this fine artist had a bit more to sing, she lavished her material with sincerity, and a plush, experienced mezzo. That fine seasoned pro, David Pittsinger was another unexpected treat, and he used his meaty, poised bass-baritone to excellent effect in bringing the contrarian Dr. Podsnap to the stage. Andres Acosta is perfect casting as Mr. Rodriguez, the nurse who rebuffs Lev, and is rebuffed by Sacks. He looks good, and his fresh, shining tenor conveys coltish charisma.

In smaller parts, Rachel Blaustein's crystalline soprano provided much pleasure as the social worker Ruth. Daniela Magura may have been physically tied to her walker as the patient Lucy, but her enchanting soprano was far from earth bound, it soared. Angel Azzara and Jared Esguerra shone in their exchanges as a speech therapist and her charge. Once they have proceeded to the "cured" segment of the story, Ms. Azzara's confident soprano, and Mr. Esguerra's substantial tenor were unleashed to fine impression.

In a pivotal flashback scene, student Sacks is celebrating his admission to Oxford with his parents, well taken by Keith Klein and Elissa Pfaender. Mr. Klein's pleasing bass-baritone, and Ms. Pfaender's mellifluous mezzo begin the *scena* in rolling conversational tones, but once mother prods Sacks to admit he is homosexual, she hurls an invective at him with chest tones of chilling power, and father spews out a potent and rangy denunciation that shows a voice of considerable size.

Last, but not least, the central figure of Dr. Oliver Sacks was well-served by baritone Jarrett Porter. His suave, attractive vocal production is put in complete service to accomplishing this very Big Sing. Mr. Porter is lanky and appealing, and his truthfulness, thorough preparation and suitability for the assignment are always apparent. While his voice blooms in mid- and upper-range, it has to be said that he husbands it sensibly in lower passages, where it is more soft-grained. In the few instances the orchestration got dense during his lower pitched singing, I found myself searching out the words from the projected text.

In Porter's big last extended scene, in which Sacks soberly assesses his life's work, he clearly commanded every nook and cranny of the moment. But while Jarrett's voice communicated well in the house, I felt his acting sometimes stopped at the footlights. He already has the voice, the technique, the looks, and the intellect, which he generously shared with us. Now I would urge him to surrender to the idea of more demonstratively sharing his soul.

*Awakenings* is a touching, resonant, important new piece of lyric theatre. May it have many more productions.

---

## ***Awakenings***

Music by Tobias Picker

Libretto by Aryeh Lev Stollman

### **Cast and production personnel:**

Rose: Susanna Phillips; Miriam: Adrienne Danrich; Dr. Oliver Sacks: Jarrett Porter; Leonard Lev: Marc Molomot; Iris: Katherine Goeldner; Mr. Rodriguez: Andres Acosta; Dr. Podsnap: David Pittsinger; Ruth: Rachel Blaustein; Ms. Kohl: Angel Azzarra; Frank: Jared Esguerra; Lucy: Daniela Magura; Rose's Fiance: Manfred Anaya; Lily: Melissa Joseph; Dr. Samuel Sacks: Keith Klein; Dr. Muriel Else Landau: Elissa Pfaender; Conductor: Roberto Kalb; Director: James Robinson; Set Designer: Allen Moyer; Costume Designer: James Schuette; Video Designer: Greg Emetaz; Lighting Designer: Christopher Akerlind; Wig and Makeup Designer: Tom Watson; Kevin J. Miller, Chorus Master; Choreographer: Seán Curran

**Top photo: Dr. Oliver Sacks (Jarrett Porter), Frank (Jared Esguerra), Dr. Podsnap (David Pittsinger), Beth Abraham physician 1 (Manfred Anaya), Beth Abraham physician 2 (Mishael Eusebio), Beth Abraham physician 3 (Rachel Blaustein) in Tobias Picker's Awakenings. Photo © Eric Woolsey 2022**

**Link:** <https://operatoday.com/2022/06/otsl-awakenings-rouses-empathy/>



## Perchance to dream: Opera Theatre's 'Awakenings' puts a human face on a mysterious pandemic

Written by Chuck Lavazzi, Jun 10, 2022



Through June 24th, [Opera Theatre of St. Louis](#) presents the world premiere of “Awakenings,” based on the book of the same name by [Oliver Sacks](#). With music by [Tobias Picker](#) and a libretto by Picker’s husband, neuroradiologist [Dr. Aryeh Lev Stollman](#), “Awakenings” takes on the difficult task of turning a plot-free nonfiction work into a dramatically coherent piece of musical theatre—and a few missteps aside, it succeeds splendidly.

Sacks’s book is the story of the famed neurologist’s heroic but ultimately unsuccessful attempts in the late 1960s to treat patients at New York’s Beth Abraham Hospital who were suffering from [encephalitis lethargica](#). A mysterious disease that infected at least a million people (and killed at least half of them) during a worldwide pandemic between 1915 and 1926, encephalitis lethargica left many of its survivors in a kind of netherworld—awake and apparently aware, but largely nonresponsive to everything and everyone. “They neither conveyed nor felt the feeling of life,” wrote Sacks; “they were as insubstantial as ghosts, and as passive as zombies.”



Sacks tried to treat them with L-DOPA—a drug used primarily to reduce the symptoms of Parkinson’s Disease, many of which are shared with encephalitis lethargica. At first it appeared to be a miracle cure and was described that way in the press. Unfortunately, the reprieve didn’t last, and the patients eventually slipped back into their former half-lives after experiencing a painfully brief return to full ones. The pandemic stopped as mysteriously as it started, and to this day there is no real cure.



L-R: Katherine Goeldner, Andres Acosta, Marc Molomot, Jarrett Porter  
Photo: Eric Woolsey

The opera tells this complex story by focusing primarily on three patients: Miriam H., Rose, and Leonard Lev. Miriam and Rose are composites of real people from the book, as are most of the other characters, but Lev is, as Joshua Barone writes in *The New York Times*, “largely intact and is even intensified.” Sacks himself is also present, both as narrator and as a character struggling with his own awakening to his identity as a gay man—something disclosed publicly only a few months before his death in 2015.

That multi-layered approach has both its strengths and weaknesses. Leonard, Rose, and Miriam are all fully realized and immensely sympathetic characters whose stories are both beautiful and heartbreaking. Their scenes are, far and away, the most compelling aspects of the opera. So much so that Sacks’s own story, while tragic in its own way, feels almost trivial by comparison.

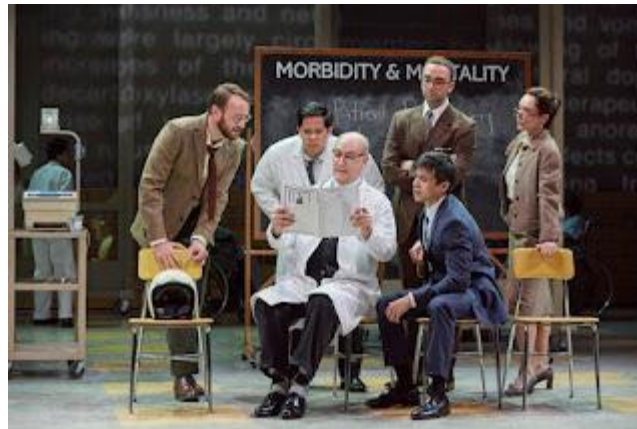


L-R: Adrienne Danrich, Susanna Phillips; Photo: Eric Woolsey

A subplot involving the unrequited love of the nurse Mr. Rodriguez for Sacks and Leonard’s equally futile love for Rodriguez feels imposed and unnecessary. And a flashback in which the young Sacks is suddenly and harshly rejected by his mother because of his sexual orientation comes across as implausible and clumsy. It does, however, set up one of the stronger moments in the opera, a long monologue in which Sacks realizes there are some things that “can’t be changed by me. Not with medicine or love.” He laments that “there is a border I can never cross”—echoing the same words sung by Rose as she describes the experience of falling ill decades before.

So, yes, “Awakenings” is a mixed bag, dramatically speaking. But the mix is heavily positive. And, given that this is a world premiere by a librettist who has never attempted an opera before, it’s really quite admirable. Better yet, Picker’s music has a strong emotional connection with Stollman’s words—something I have not always heard in some other contemporary operas. Surprisingly for someone who studied with composers like Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt (who treated music more as a mathematical exercise than a form of communication), Picker has written a score that often embraces melody and is perfectly matched to the natural flow of the text.

Part of this is likely due to the fact that Picker and Stollman worked as a team in creating “Awakenings,” writing music and lyrics together. In that sense, the work harkens back to the musical theatre pieces of legendary teams like Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, or Flaherty and Ahrens. I often come away from newer operas with the feeling that the composer and librettist inhabited different worlds. Not so with “Awakenings,” which feels like the true partnership that it is.



David Pittsinger and the cast; Photo: Eric Woolsey

Every member of this large cast (15 named roles) does a splendid job, making even the smallest character well-rounded and credible. Tenor Marc Molomot’s deeply troubled Leonard is a beautiful piece of work, and the character’s tragic fall into madness is deeply moving. Mezzo Katharine Goeldner offers sympathetic counterpoint as his long-suffering mother Iris.

Sopranos Adrienne Danrich and Susanna Phillips are (to quote Mr. Sondheim) a “practically perfect pair” as Miriam and Rose. The fast friendship that develops between the two is both heartwarming and, ultimately, heartbreaking as their illness snatches them back into the Twilight Zone. Two other patients, Frank and Lucy, are brought to vivid life by tenor Jared V. Esguerra and mezzo Daniela Magura. Tenor Andres Acosta powerfully communicates Mr. Rodriguez’s frustrated yearning.

Bass-baritone David Pittsinger, whose stentorian tones have graced both operatic and musical theatre stages, is Dr. Podsnap, the hospital’s Medical Director. The character’s Dickensian name is a good match for his snobbishness and refusal to even consider the research behind Sacks’s proposal. “Who does this Englishman think he is,” he snarls. “Another fancy paper / It will be disproven before you know it.” It’s not until the final scene that we get to see the emotional conflict that lurks behind that arrogant front. “Have I broken my oath,” he muses. “Can it be wrong to have tried? I don’t know. Though in the end I did not protect them.” Pittsinger’s multi-leveled performance captures both sides of Podsnap’s persona.

Much of the opera, of course, rests on the highly capable shoulders of baritone Jarrett Porter as Sacks. Picker and Sacks were close friends, and the fictionalized version of him in the opera has the ring of truth and compassion. A complex mix of crusader, healer, and a conflicted man who (in the composer’s words), “finds himself locked in by outside social and familial forces,” the character of Sacks requires not just a compelling singer but also an actor capable of showing us his many facets. Porter is just the man for the job. It’s a bravura performance.

The OTSL chorus has all of its usual power, although Picker’s thick choral lines are difficult to hear, requiring frequent glances at the English supertitles. Even so, I was especially impressed by the clarity with which the singers handled the short, sharp phrases lobbed back and forth in the contentious clinic scenes. Lines like “Hyoscamine! Stinking nightshade! Anticholinergics! Belladonna!” are not often heard on the opera stage and don’t fly trippingly off the tongue.

Under Roberto Kalb's direction, the orchestra gives what certainly sounds like an authoritative reading of the score. Judging by the hugs and smiles when both Picker and Stollman came on stage afterwards, the creators of "Awakenings" would appear to agree.

OTSL Artistic Director James Robinson, who directed Picker's "Emmeline" in 2015, repeats that role here, imparting a sense of momentum and even urgency to a work that could, in lesser hands, become static. Robinson has brought most of his production team from "Emmeline" along as well, with satisfying results.

Allen Moyer's set is simple and flexible, consisting of a series of transparent panels that are easily rolled around the hospital ward set to create different playing areas. Christopher Akerlind's lights and Greg Emetaz's video projections allow the scene to shift easily from the hospital interior to the botanical garden outside, where the recovering patients, in a touching scene, make their first contact in decades with the natural world. James Schuette's costumes subtly reflect the personality of each character. The brown British tweeds Sacks wears in his first appearance, for example, clearly mark him as an outlier among the American hospital staff.



Jarrett Porter in the final scene; Photo: Eric Woolsey

Opera Theatre's "Awakenings" is not, of course, the first attempt to dramatize the Sacks book. The 1990 film version is perhaps the best known of those attempts, but in 1980 Harold Pinter made it into a one-act play titled "A Kind of Alaska" and Picker himself composed a ballet version in 2010. There was even a 1974 documentary for British television. But this world premiere is the first try at a full-length work for the stage, and despite its flaws it's well worth your time.

"Who knows if the world out there will ever truly know us," wonders Miriam in the final scene. "Who in the world could ever truly know us?" "Awakenings" is another step towards that level of understanding.

"Awakenings" continues through June 24th at the Loretto Hilton Center on the Webster University campus in rotating repertory with the rest of the Opera Theatre season. To get the full festival experience, come early and have a picnic supper on the lawn or under the refreshment tent. You can bring your own food or purchase a gourmet supper in advance from the OTSL web site. Drinks are available on site as well, or you can bring your own. For more information, visit [the web site](#).

Link [here](#).

## A home-grown awakening

STL's Adrienne Danrich delivers in OSTL debut, acclaimed opera closes Friday

By Kenya Vaughn | The St. Louis American Jun 25, 2022



Adrienne Danrich's character Miriam H. shares a laugh with Rose, portrayed by Susanna Phillips in the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis world-premiere of 'Awakenings,' which play the Loretto-Hilton on Friday, June 24th as part of the culminating performances of the 2022 season.

Photo by Eric Woolsey

The most celebrated operas tend to have their greatness attributed to a particular identifying distinction. There is the vivid storytelling of Puccini's *La Bohème* and the musical and emotional rollercoaster of his *Tosca*. There is the scope of music and themes within Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, (which is among the lineup of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis 2022 festival season) and the character richness of his *Marriage of Figaro*.

But there is also a category of operas made spectacular by the sum of their parts. These works display a cohesiveness – and create a perfectly aligned, well-rounded musical and theatrical experience. Such can be said about the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis world-premiere of *Awakenings*. Composed by Tobias Picker with a libretto by Aryeh Lev Stollman, the opera is based on the book of the same name by Dr. Oliver Sacks – which was also the inspiration behind the 1990 Oscar nominated film. *Awakenings* will play at OTSL on Friday, June 24 as their 2022 festival season winds down this weekend.

As with the book and the film, *Awakenings* is based on the research and treatment for Encephalitis Lethargica – or the sleeping sickness – at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx in the late 1960s. The patients he eventually treats are among the survivors of the sleep sickness global pandemic that took place from 1916-1927.

By the time Sacks publishes his landmark paper and begins administering the detailed treatment, his patients had been in a state of slumber for decades. The story of his work, his

patients and Sacks' own life provide ideal conditions for a haunting tragic opera that lingers with the audience well after the curtain closes. The stunning production elements and stellar performances give visual and musical stimulation. Meanwhile, director James Robinson gives the story such depth and emotional connection that viewers will be grateful for the problems and life circumstances they hoped to temporarily escape from as they took their seats in the Loretto-Hilton.

Allen Moyer's strikingly accurate set design is the perfect first impression – and heightens anticipation of what to expect from the opera. The linoleum floors, the muted, natural tones of the tiles and the portable picture windows that are shifted from scene to scene with choreographed precision. The textile combinations provide such authenticity that one can almost smell the aroma of Lysol and hospital grade disinfectants characteristic of medical facilities. With his design for *Awakenings*, Moyer demonstrates that the best set designers are equal parts architect, engineer, and artist.

And the performances do not forsake the production value, including St. Louis' own Adrienne Danrich. The Central Visual and Performing Arts High School alum makes her OTSL debut in the production as Miriam H. – a patient who must come to terms with a cruel hand to her by the fate of being afflicted with the sleeping sickness for more than 30 years. And the renowned soprano makes her city incredibly proud with her embodiment of the character. The role is both physically and emotionally demanding – and Danrich rises to the challenges of her character without compromising her impressive tone and vocal range. There is a heart-wrenching scene between the beautifully merged voices of Danrich and Melissa Joseph – who portrays Miriam's daughter Lily – that displays the power and strength of a Black mother's love. It is undiminished, even after three decades of slumber. The exchange is one of many emotional peaks over the course of the production as each patient comes to terms with their respective fates and the impact of their affliction shaped their lives.

The principal cast of *Awakenings* also includes Jarrett Porter as Dr. Oliver Sacks, Susana Phillips as Rose, Marc Molomot as Leonard Lev, Andres Acosta as Mr. Rodriguez, David Pittsinger as Dr. Podsnap and Katharine Goeldner as Iris Lev. Chorus Master Kevin J. Miller should be commended for the precise harmonies shared with the leads and supporting players from such a diverse group of voices. The pristineness of Phillips' voice – particularly in her higher register is also noteworthy.

There are moments where the opera drags almost to a halt. The opening scenes are especially slow. Perhaps this is intentional to give the audience an opportunity to truly empathize with the afflictions of the patients Dr. Sacks is so desperate to cure. Either way, the lulls are sizably labored. However, the cumulative payoff of the production makes the lags worth the time spent.

Dr. Sacks personal woes and internal struggles are worked into *Awakenings* in a manner that at first doesn't seem to fit with the story that is unfolding. Finding out that they were a part of his real-life experiences and framed his professional devotion, promote them from an unessential sidebar to a critical necessity within the opera.

*Opera Theatre of Saint Louis world premiere of Awakenings will take place at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, June 24 at the Loretto-Hilton on the campus of Webster University. Their season concludes on Sunday, June 26th with a final production of The Magic Flute. For additional information or to purchase tickets, visit [www.opera-stl.org](http://www.opera-stl.org).*

Link: [https://www.stlamerican.com/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/living\\_it/a-home-grown-awakening/article\\_75cf8a9e-f47c-11ec-8191-cbc910486cec.html](https://www.stlamerican.com/arts_and_entertainment/living_it/a-home-grown-awakening/article_75cf8a9e-f47c-11ec-8191-cbc910486cec.html)

## Theatre Review: AWAKENINGS Is the Sleeper Hit of the Season



POSTED: JUNE 13, 2022 AT 9:53 AM / BY [ROB LEVY](#) / [COMMENTS \(0\)](#)

For Opera Theatre St. Louis, the season doesn't get much better than having two world premiere operas in the same season. The first, an adaptation of Dr. Oliver Sacks' book *Awakenings*, was originally planned as the opener for the 2020 season.

Despite being stalled, this highly emotional opera has finally arrived. Relentless in its intensity and melancholy, *Awakenings* locks into the audience's subconscious, carefully pushing overwhelming feelings of frustration and sadness to the surface.

During the 1920s, the mysterious encephalitis lethargica, also known as sleep sickness, claimed nearly half a million victims. Those who did not die from the malady were left in a comatose state where they could not move, speak or function normally. For subsequent decades, the afflicted remained suspended, trapped between the waking world and a slumbering one. The aftermath of this epidemic serves as the backdrop for Opera Theatre of St. Louis' excellent world premiere of *Awakenings*.

After decades with no progress, resuscitation, or known treatment, hope arrives when neurologist Oliver Sacks takes a chance and gives the Parkinson's drug L-Dopa (a precursor to dopamine) to a patient named Leonard Lev.

After receiving treatment Lev miraculously wakes from his stupor. Surprised to be asleep for so many decades, Leonard is forced to address the challenges of his revival. As other patients began to awaken, they too are faced with living in a world different than the one they remembered.

These core ideas; being lost in society, facing self-identity, and finding connections in new environments are at the heart of OTSL's production. Directed by James Robinson with a libretto by Aryeh Lev Stollman, this emotionally charged opera never allows the audience to feel at ease.

Stollman's libretto focuses on Sachs' acceptance of his true self, multiple confrontations with his superiors, and the discovery of a new way of life by the victims. Despite his medical brilliance, he is never on solid footing emotionally. The libretto also delves into the lives of his patients, each of whom grapples with tragic feelings of loss and missed opportunities.

For Sachs patients, waking up is hard to do. One of them, Rose sees her husband again, while another, named Miriam, is reunited with her daughter. As *Awakenings* unfolds each patient faces hurdles, setbacks, and hardship as they grapple with waking up. Especially Leonard, whose years of sleep have been squandered, costing him an opportunity to discover his true self and live a full life.

Previously adapted as a ballet by composer Tobias Picker, who has joined his partner Stollman to bring the opera to life, *Awakenings'* powerful score marks the time as it frames the esoteric sterility of Beth Abraham Hospital with an atmospheric tone that touches on the themes of reflection, hope, jubilation, and melancholy.

This fresh presentation of *Awakenings* utilizes Allen Moyer's harsh, Brutalist lighting and minimalist sets to emphasize the hollow bleakness of those who have been reawakened. His sets, along with Christopher Akerlind's lighting, punctuates the guarded optimism and joy of act one while foreshadowing shadows a crushing second act.

Onstage the ensemble is captivating. Led by baritone Jarret Porter's gripping portrayal of the conflicted Oliver Sacks and debuting tenor Marc Molomat's strikingly tragic performance as Leonard.

The tension between Porter and David Pittsinger's Dr. Podsnap is palpable. Charged with being the opera's 'bad guy' Pittsinger's petty, jealous, and callous Doctor serves as the perfect foil for Porter's determined Sachs.

Also shining in this robust world premiere is Susana Phillips as Rose and Adrienne Danrich as Miriam. Both artists deliver poignant portrayals of women whose time 'asleep' has cost them dearly. *Awakenings* also features two young artists to watch, Daniela Magura and Jared Esguerra. Playing Lucy and Frank respectively, their performances encapsulate the frustration of watching each progress and regress as the production unfurls.

Set from 1966 to the end of 1969, OTSL's production of *Awakenings* emphasizes how the decades lost affect those who cruelly succumbed to the sleeping sickness. Drenched in emotional and physical paralysis, and mental anguish, this weighty opera pulls on heartstrings as it illustrates Sachs' determination to help his patients recover, despite a system of bureaucracy that hinders his every move.

***Awakenings runs through June 24<sup>th</sup> at the Loretto-Hilton Center on the campus of Webster University. Productions at Opera Theatre St. Louis are in English with musical accompaniment from The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. For more information on programming or the 2020 season, visit [opera-stl.org](https://www.opera-stl.org).***

**Link:** <https://www.reviewstl.com/theatre-review-awakenings-opera-theatre-stlouis-0613/>



## OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS PREMIERE OF AWAKENINGS: TRAGEDY, OR WAS IT?

June 12, 2022

Regardless of the answer to the question posed in my title, *Awakenings* is extremely well done! Kudos to Opera Theatre of Saint Louis for as professional a production of an opera as I have seen. *Awakenings* is a new opera composed by Tobias Picker with a libretto by Aryeh Lev Stollman, commissioned by OTSL and Tulsa Opera. The opera is based upon the 1973 nonfiction book “Awakenings” by neurologist Oliver Sacks, who had a gift for discovering meaning in rare, unusual neurological conditions and writing about them with understanding and sympathy. In the opera, Mr. Sacks becomes part of the story. One never knows how new operas will fare in the long run, but I believe *Awakenings* will stand the test of time.



*l to r*: Dr. Oliver Sacks (Jarrett Porter), Frank (Jared Esguerra), Dr. Podsnap (David Pittsinger), Physician 1 (Manfred Anaya), Physician 2 (Mishael Eusebio), Physician 3 (Rachel Blaustein) consider Dr. Sacks’ request to treat patients with L-DOPA. Photo by Eric Woolsey; courtesy of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.



At first the plot seems to be a medical report of case studies of patients suffering from encephalitis lethargica, a pandemic that once afflicted millions in the 1920s. In some survivors, the disease caused a state where victims were conscious and lived for decades but were speechless and motionless, causing the disease to be referred to as the sleeping sickness (not the same as the fly-caused disease). The disease remains a mystery and is rarely seen today. Dr. Sacks read a journal article where L-DOPA was used as a treatment for parkinsonism, a disease with some medical characteristics similar to sleeping sickness. Dr. Sacks' treatment of his patients with the drug worked, and he became famous for it. However, the plot thickened. Unfortunately, the drug's effects wore off, and it caused complications of its own. Dr. Sacks who led this effort, despite the skepticism of the hospital administration, enjoyed the ride up and suffered the ride down as did his patients. While much was learned of medical value from the Sacks' experiment, the opera is about the psychological and emotional parameters of human life. The opera draws a parallel between the Sleeping Beauty fairytale and L-DOPA's awakening of the patients with Dr. Sacks being the Prince. *Awakenings* is deeply affecting; I found myself growing to care about each of the characters.



As his mother (Katherine Goeldner) looks on, patient Leonard (Marc Molomot) is helped by a nurse (Andres Acosta) and Dr. Sacks (Jarrett Porter). Photo by Eric Woolsey; courtesy of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

As the medication effects start to wear off, one of the characters, Leonard, begins repeating this refrain: "The world is filled with devils. A world polluted. But I am still rising from the Ashes of Defeat/To the Glory of Greatness." Tragedy is in the wings, Greek-styled; Fate asserts itself as the drug's benefits diminish. Not having read the Sacks' book, nor having seen the academy award nominated film by the same title, nor the play, nor the ballet, I found the opera rich in new meaning, posing questions. Should the research have been done? Was the return to normalcy for

just a limited time followed by relapse a good thing for the patients? And we the audience don't get off even that lightly: do we all keep parts of ourselves in a sleeping state throughout our normal lives as did the real Dr. Sacks regarding his homosexuality? Dr. Sacks was told by his mother when she discovered his homosexuality that she wished he had never been born; he hid this part of himself from the public for most of his life, never letting this important aspect of his personality blossom...to his dismay; this was not alluded to in the book or the film version. Do we all have our own personal tragedies, repressing aspects of ourselves? Are they made for us by ourselves or by Fate? Have we witnessed a tragedy, or not?



Rose (Susanna Phillips) has awakened and dances. Photo by Eric Woolsey; courtesy of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

Composer Picker was a close friend of Dr. Sacks, whom he credits with helping him deal with the shame he felt about his Tourette's Syndrome, which includes tics similar to those of patients in *Awakenings*. When Mr. Picker expressed interest to him in making an opera based on one of his books, Dr. Sacks recommended *Awakenings*. Mr. Picker and Mr. Stollman are spouses, and the opera's words and drama are as wedded as the opera's composer is to its librettist. They worked together as well as lived together throughout its creation, scene by scene. The music was beautifully played by Conductor Roberto Kalb and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. The varied score painted the tense scenes with dissonance and its tender moments with lovely melody, always steady in enhancing the emotions on stage. While the music never competed with the drama for attention, the music did grow lush and especially beautiful in the scene where Dr. Sacks took his patients into the botanical garden, perhaps my favorite scene in the opera.



Miriam (Adrienne Danrich) and Rose (Susanna Phillips) bond during their awake period. Photo by Eric Woolsey; courtesy of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

OSTL assembled a fine cast for this production, with 15 named players, with many being soloists; all the performers added to the impact of the opera. Part of my initial attraction to this production was the inclusion of soprano Susanna Phillips, my all-time favorite Musetta; although I have seen her in several Met Opera videos, this was my first time in person. It had been a while since I had seen her work, and she was splendid as Rose, a patient much later in life who had been afflicted in her twenties, causing the loss of a suitor who seemed still there to her for over twenty years. It was marvelous to become reacquainted with the beautiful timbre of Ms. Phillips' voice. She was matched with a powerful performance by soprano Adrienne Danrich. She played Miriam who bonded with Rose when revived by the drug. Her aria sung as she recognized the changes in Rose was quite touching. During her awakening, Miriam was reunited with a daughter taken from her, causing her great pain that endured during her long illness. Tenor Marc Molomot's charismatic portrayal of Leonard, an immobile patient who could read was exceptional, and beautifully coupled with Katherine Goeldner's excellent soprano vocals as his doting mother who turned the pages for him. Tenor Andres Acosta, who played Nurse, sang beautifully and made a believable love interest for Dr. Sacks, a love interest he clearly wanted but could not accept or return, not at that point. Another stand out for me was bass-baritone David Pittsinger as Dr. Podsnap, leader of the hospital who struggled with his conscience over conducting the experiment. The focal point of the opera was Dr. Sacks, played to perfection by baritone Jarrett Porter. His excellent singing was perhaps even overshadowed by impressive acting. The thoughtfulness and deep humanity of Dr. Sacks, flaws and all, came across forcefully.



Dr. Sacks (Jarrett Porter) briefly touches the hand of Nurse (Andres Acosta). Photo by Eric Woolsey; courtesy of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

The staging of this opera was a strong point of the production. Remarkable in the staging were scenes with multiple foci, with singing and action around different patients taking place concurrently. Kudos to stage director James Robinson. Allen Moyer's set using six large window frames to form walls and separations were effective both physically and symbolically as the patients opened and then closed again. The movement of so many players around a small stage, including limited dancing, requires a deft touch; choreographer Seán Curran had the touch. The singers and supernumeraries moved props around unobtrusively during scene changes; the forward motion never faltered. The lighting and projections, adding background and context to the scenes, especially in the garden scene, were excellent; kudos to Greg Emetaz for video projections and Christopher Akerlind for lighting. The costumes were sufficiently effective at setting the time and place of the story that I took them for granted; kudos to costume designer James Schuette.



Dr. Sacks (Jarrett Porter) is left to ponder and question what happened to his patients and himself, as the patients are again silent behind windows. Photo by Eric Woolsey; courtesy of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

I have sometimes wished I could see myself as a movie character, gaining the perspective of how others see me. What if I could have viewed each day's taping from the viewpoints of my friends and fellow workers? Would my choices have changed? Good operas do that in measure, adding emphasis with music. Sometimes operas addressing important contemporary social issues, that need to be addressed, can come off as a bit preachy. However, the best operas make it personal by giving us glimpses of ourselves in others. I think *Awakenings* is among the best.

**The Fan Experience:** Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' 2022 Spring Festival runs May 21-June 26. Performances of *Awakenings* were scheduled for June 5, 9, 11, 18, and 24. The opera runs for two and one-half hours. The opera is sung in English with English supertitles projected.

The moderate size venue for the opera is the Loretto-Hilton Center for the Performing Arts on the Webster University campus. This is a modern facility with excellent acoustics; 763 seats are placed in a semicircle of seats around the stage. A special appeal of the venue are the beautiful picnic grounds adjacent to the theater, where you may pre-order boxed meals if ordered 24 hours in advance. You can also choose to provide your own food and beverages to enjoy on the grass or using the tables and chairs provided, some under cover. Free parking is available.

**Link:** <http://operagene.com/new-blog/2022/6/12/opera-theater-of-st-louis-premiere-of-awakenings-tragedy-or-was-it>

# LADUE NEWS

## Haunting Music, Touching Story Propel Opera Theatre's World Premiere of 'Awakenings'

Mark Bretz Jun 14, 2022 Updated Jun 15, 2022



Photo courtesy of Eric Woolsey

**Opera:** "Awakenings"

**Company:** Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

**Venue:** Loretto-Hilton Center for the Performing Arts, Webster University, 130 Edgar Road, Webster Groves

**Dates:** June 18 and 24

**Tickets:** \$25 to \$135; contact [experienceopera.org](http://experienceopera.org) or 314-961-0644

**Highlights:** Composer Tobias Picker and librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman's adaptation of Dr. Oliver Sacks' book, "Awakenings," uses the power of music and words to tell Sacks' remarkable story in this two-act opera being given its affecting world premiere by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

**Story:** In the late 1960s, Dr. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist, is frustrated by the condition of several patients at Beth Abraham Hospital in the New York City borough of the Bronx. They suffer from encephalitis lethargica, commonly known as "sleepy sickness," living on the edge of consciousness. They are vestiges of an epidemic of the condition which affected thousands of people worldwide between 1916 and 1927.

When Sacks reads about the benefits of a drug called L-DOPA in treating patients with Parkinson's disease, he convinces Dr. Podsnap, the hospital's administrator, to let Sacks try the drug on the "dormant" patients at Beth Abraham. Almost immediately, several of those patients show remarkable recovery, returning from their imprisoning, decades-long slumber to revitalization.



Photo courtesy of Eric Woolsey

A trip to the New York Botanical Garden further enlivens the patients, including Leonard, Rose and Miriam. Leonard is smitten with his nurse, Mr. Rodriguez, who in turn is attracted to Sacks. Rose speaks of her long-lost lover, whom she says will soon be returning to

her, while Miriam is visited by her daughter and granddaughter, recognizing the latter for the first time.

While euphoric about their return to a more normal life, the patients also are bewildered by their environment and the many changes in society during the decades during which they've been virtually comatose. Sacks takes copious notes, studying the psychological as well as physical effects of "sleepy sickness" on its victims.

Not long after Sacks' work begins being recognized in newspaper articles, the patients take a devastating downturn, regressing to their previous condition. Sacks continues to work with them and treat them with various doses of L-DOPA, but this modern-day "prince" can no longer rescue the "sleeping beauties."

**Other Info:** Stollman's libretto makes subtle references to Sacks' homosexuality, something the neurologist didn't make public until shortly before his death in 2015. It provides additional background information, although secondary to the case studies themselves.

"Awakenings" was previously made into a film directed by Penny Marshall, which starred Robin Williams as Sacks and Robert De Niro as one of the resurgent patients, and which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture in 1990. Stollman and Picker introduce their opera as a "Sleeping Beauty" scenario, with Sacks as the hopeful prince who can rescue these "sleepy sickness" victims with modern medicine.



Photo courtesy of Eric Woolsey

Picker's music is straightforward and highly accessible, as haunting and melancholy as the true story itself, less sonorous on the upbeat visit to the botanical garden. Stollman presents his libretto in snippets which move the scenario directly forward, from the bureaucratic villainy of Podsnap to the bewilderment of the

patients and their profound, simple appreciation for nature at the botanical garden.



It all plays out on an antiseptic set designed by Allen Moyer, with a series of large, clear windows before a bland, '60s-style, institutional wall, with patients in chairs spread about while tended to by various staffers. Christopher Akerlind's lighting is low-key, increasing illumination during the botanical garden visit, appropriately dreary at the hospital.

James Schuette's costumes reflect the era in the attire of visitors, which offsets the drab garb of the patients, and there's a brief, exceptional moment when Rose's would-be lover of a different era appears before her in his finest '20s regalia. Video projections by Greg Emetaz accentuate the botanical garden as well as the formulae floating in Sacks' mind, and Sean Curran's choreographer adds a lilting touch in a patient party scene.

Roberto Kalb elicits a touching performance by members of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, aided by chorus master Kevin J. Miller's supporting singers. James Robinson's direction is measured and affecting, following the story in carefully modulated fashion, coaxing fine performances from his cast.

The steady ensemble includes baritone Jarrett Porter as Sacks, and bass-baritone David Pittsinger as Podsnap, both in their Opera Theatre debuts. Soprano Adrienne Danrich as Miriam, tenor Marc Molomot as Leonard (both OTSL debuts) and soprano Susanna Phillips as Rose all are convincing as revived patients. Tenor Andres Acosta, another singer making his OTSL debut, is touchingly persuasive as Rodriguez.



Photo courtesy of Eric Woolsey

The supporting cast includes Katharine Goeldner as Leonard's mother, Melissa Joseph as Miriam's daughter, Angel Azzarra, Jared V. Esguerra, Daniela Magura, Manfred Anaya and Rachel Blaustein. In a flashback scene, Keith Klein and Elissa

Pfaender portray Sacks' educated but harsh and punitive parents. Stollman's depiction of Dr. Muriel Landau, Sacks' mother, is especially damning in her staunch rejection of her son's gay leanings.

Co-commissioned by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and Tulsa Opera in 2018, "Awakenings" was postponed until 2022 due to the coronaviral pandemic, a worldwide affliction eerily similar in ways to the encephalitis lethargica plague a century earlier.

That delay enabled Picker and Stollman to refine their treatment of Sacks' incredible story of a medical breakthrough, the heartbreaking reemergence of the "sleepy sickness" and an updated reference to Sacks' own gay persona, something not addressed in the 1990 film or in Sacks' original book.

"Awakenings" is an emotional story told through a clinical lens, one with hope, love and aspirations, but ultimately a tale that returns to its melancholy origination.



# Opera Theatre's 'Awakenings' Is A Dream

By Chas Adams, June 18, 2022



*I hold it true, whate'er befall;  
I feel it, when I sorrow most;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.*

– “In Memoriam:27”, Alfred Lord Tennyson

To key off Tennyson’s philosophical proposition, Opera Theatre of St. Louis’s “Awakenings,” at the Loretto-Hilton Center’s Virginia Jackson Browning Theatre through June 25, explores a similar notion. If you were a patient trapped for decades by encephalitis lethargica , spending your waking moments in constant stupor and inertia, would you agree to allow a doctor like the neurologist Oliver Sacks to experimentally administer a drug called levodopa, or L Dopa, that could alleviate the disease’s debilitating effects? And, would you consent if you knew the risks – that the effects might not last long and that you would still suffer, like a sort of Rip Van Winkle, from spending decades isolated from the world’s events and your own maturity and development?

Is it better, then, to have been awakened than not at all?

That’s a powerful philosophical question dreamed up in Sack’s book “Awakenings” that presented a series of fascinating case reports of patients trapped by encephalitis lethargica. It was also dreamed up into the eponymous Hollywood film (starring Robert DeNiro and Robin Williams), a documentary, a ballet

and a play by Harold Pinter. Sacks himself dreamed it could even be this opera, a pandemic delayed premiere by OTSL this season.



Andres Acosta and Jarrett Porter. Photo by Eric Woolsey.

This production draws the audience into the clinical but dreamlike world even before the score begins. The opening set evokes an impersonal, sterile hospital setting as nurses slowly wheel in slumped patients behind a series of moveable glass walls. Though not “pretty,” the harsh, set design by Allen Moyer is visually affecting and well-matched to the opera’s melancholic intensity (including a fantastic use of video projections by Greg Emetaz), especially as illuminated by Christopher Akerlind’s lighting designs.

The “Awakenings” score, performed by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Robert Kalb, is excellent if not exactly memorable. The music weaves around the characters and action without calling attention to itself.

Baritone Jarrett Porter sings Dr. Sacks, and his rich voice is well-matched to the demands of the role as a deeply empathetic caregiver. Porter’s voice is well-matched to the bass-baritone of David Pittsinger, who voices Sacks’s naysaying boss, Dr. Podsnap. Pittsinger’s presence and deep voice provide believable authority.

One of the key reasons “Awakenings” shines is the opera’s balancing of multiple “awakenings” by Sacks, who grapples with his sexuality in a subplot, as well as three patients that representing the 20 in real life. They provide more than yeoman’s work as they must sit in wheelchairs – all trembles and contortions – and then transform into walking/talking human beings then return to their un-awakened states.



Susannah Phillips and Jarrett Porter. Photo by Eric Woolsey.

Marc Molomot, tenor, plays a middle-aged Leonard, whose aging mother (sung beautifully and dutifully by Katherine Goeldner) has been reading to him every day since he succumbed to his condition. Molomot confidently provides a Leonard who hasn't emotionally matured since adolescence. He's a boy in a man's body, which makes life exciting, challenging and ultimately disturbing. Molomot plays Leonard with aplomb.

One of the highlights of "Awakenings" is Leonard's duet with Rodriguez, his male nurse, sung by the tenor Andres Acosta. Acosta proves there are no parts too small to stand out.

Another of the trio of patients is Rose, engagingly sung by Susannah Phillips. Rose is an optimistic yet dreamy character, still living in an interrupted past that includes a long-gone love. Phillips's performance and engaging voice make it easy to start identifying with her fairytale outlook and then mourn as she returns to her former state.

Completing the trio is Miriam H, sung by soprano Adrienne Danrich. Miriam's story is as unique and ultimately tragic as her cohorts. Like Rose, Miriam's story moves from silence to astonishment as she discovers that her family considered her dead and that she has a daughter and even granddaughter. Danrich's performance and beautiful voice elevate the tragedy of her return to silence.

As directed by James Robinson, "Awakenings" is a compelling experience – one that calls to mind Bob Dylan's *Series of Dreams*: "...Thinking of a series of dreams / Where the time and the tempo drag, / And there's no exit in any direction..."

Long after the performances fade, the philosophical and ethical questions posed by "Awakenings" linger. Would have the lives of Miriam, Rose and Leonard (and perhaps even Sacks himself) have been better if they hadn't been intervened by L Dopa? And who should be allowed to make that choice? One person's dream may be another's nightmare.

**Link:** <https://www.poplifestl.com/opera-theatres-awakenings-is-a-dream/>

## Awakenings by Tobias Picker

Opera Theatre of St. Louis Presents Premiere

By: Susan Hall - Jun 15, 2022



*Awakenings* is a new opera by the very American opera composer Tobias Picker. In the past, he has musicalized the stories of Judith Rossner, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen King. Now he takes on a story told by a good friend, Dr. Oliver Sacks.

The Opera Theatre of St. Louis takes advantage of a story's arc to make scenic points. Moving panes of glass form an entrance way to the world of the sleeping in a Bronx long-term facility.

When *encephalitis lethargica* hit the world it came in second place to the Spanish flu epidemic, which killed over fifty million people. To this day, the cause of what came to be known as 'sleeping sickness' is not known.

A young British doctor, Oliver Sacks (sung beautifully here by Jarret Porter), had emigrated to the United States. He took what at first appeared to be a thankless job in a long term care facility. Paralytically shy himself, Sacks was able to emerge from his own shell when he reached out to patients in his neurology clinical practice.

He was never a man to give up. Reading medical literature, he was startled to discover L-Dopa, a drug that was helping Parkinson's patients. Jerky gestures, often frozen into bizarre positions, characterized Parkinson's and also often cropped out in his 'sleeping' patients.

Sacks persuaded his supervisor, sung with great complexity and force by David Pittsinger, to allow him to use the drug on one patient. When it succeeded with Leonard L., other patients joined the experiment.

This is the *awakening*. Portraits drawn by Sacks in his own writing are now expanded into spoken music, arias and even duets.

Standing out in this touching group is Adrienne Danrich, who made her mark recently at Lincoln Center as Mrs. Dickson in the opera version of Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*. Here she is a grandmother, trapped in her body, who is released to embrace her now grown daughter and a new grandchild. Danrich, a writer and poet as well as a singer, is a St. Louis native. She is curating a song fest on June 21st.

She brings her sensitive soul to bear on her role as Miriam. The awkward shuffle of feet, the jerky hand motions and body shivers, are in retreat at the center of the opera, when it appears for a moment that the new drug is going to work.

This moment gives the audience a sense of what it is like to be born, to come into life. It is the opera's center. Composer Picker makes the most of the moment, supported by his husband, the librettist Aryeh Lev Stollman.

Singers Susanna Philips, Jared V. Esguerra, Daniela Magura and Marc Molomot each add to our understanding of these patients, their struggle, their triumphs, and their slip back into a statue state, locked back in themselves as best we know forever. Yet life is ever present on the stage.

Sacks was a botanist and wrote about flowering plants. His description of Charles Darwin, on hands and knees with his children in the backyard garden of his home, using their noses to transfer pollen from one flower to the next, just as a bee might, is for the ages.

One stunning scene in the opera has Sacks and a group of patients visit the New York Botanical Garden to relish the sights and smells of flowers. Again Picker captures botanical sounds in notes.

Neurologists like Sacks exempt nothing from the domain of science as they develop the physiology of the mind. Released from his 'shyness' as he practiced, Sacks could daily face the richness of human life and the world's complexity. Picker and Stollman capture a physician confronting the total being of his patients. Sacks knew that if he did not bring all his senses to bear on his 'treatment,' he would be unable to treat them.

The drug did not work. Sleeping sickness remains a mystery. Yet this opera celebrates life and discovery. Sacks' own homosexuality, a mystery to him for so long, also begins to be discovered in this telling of his story.

With James Robinson's subtle direction and under the baton of Roberto Kalb, *Awakenings* is a moving contribution to opera literature.

**Link:** [https://www.berkshirefinearts.com/06-15-2022\\_awakenings-by-tobias-picker.htm](https://www.berkshirefinearts.com/06-15-2022_awakenings-by-tobias-picker.htm)