

'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.

By Heidi Waleson June 27, 2022 5:54 pm ET



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

Photo: Eric Woolsey

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.



Melissa Joesph, Zaikuan Song, Raquel Gonzalez, Thomas Glass and Jesus Vicente Murillo in the new performing edition of Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's 'Harvey Milk'

Photo: Eric Woolsey

Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's **"Harvey Milk"** had its world premiere in 1995 at the Houston Grand Opera. The story of the first openly gay elected official in San Francisco, who was assassinated—along with Mayor George Moscone, by his fellow city supervisor Dan White—in 1978, the opera was a big, sprawling show, a three-act pageant of gay liberation. The new two-act version, commissioned by Opera Parallèle and OTSL, has radically trimmed the number of secondary characters, the size of the orchestra and some of the scenes, narrowing the focus to Milk and his mythic resonance. Just in case we don't get it, there's a white-clad Messenger aligning Milk with Moses, the prophet who does not get to enter the promised land.

It still doesn't quite work. Act 1 packs in a lot and feels long: Milk's closeted New York youth and its tropes—opera, clandestine trysts in Central Park, secret lovers, fear of police harassment—are juxtaposed with Kaddish-

chanting Holocaust refugees, reminding the Jewish Milk that silence equals death. After the Stonewall uprising, we get Milk, now out and prominent in San Francisco, entering politics, and we meet his antagonist, Dan White, ex-cop and fireman, clinging to the good old days. Act 2 has a tighter story arc, as Milk and White clash on the Board of Supervisors and White, frustrated and outmaneuvered, takes revenge.

The musical material is diffuse, with episodes seeming unrelated to each other, and the words take precedence. Some of the big chorus numbers, like Stonewall and the Milk Train campaign, have jaunty energy, and moments like when a trio warns Harvey to watch out for Dan White snap into focus. However, the arias meander, Harvey's love duets don't feel erotic, and the sound of the Kaddish doesn't read as Jewish, diluting that thematic reference.

Baritone Thomas Glass played Milk with an insouciant irreverence; tenor César Andrés Parreño, a company Young Artist who valiantly replaced a Covid-positive colleague for all but the first performance, brought a chilling edge to White. Bass-baritone Nathan Stark was so distinctive in three different roles—the leather-clad Horst in New York, the Teamster who joins Milk's San Francisco campaign and the back-slapping Moscone—that I didn't realize it was the same singer. Tenor Jonathan Johnson was sweet as Scott, Milk's lover; countertenor Kyle Sanchez Tingzon stood out as the Messenger (the voice type switch from the original baritone was a plus). Carolyn Kuan was the skilled conductor.

Mr. Moyer's design centered on a row of closets used for quick changes and in the end, symbolically empty; Mr. Akerlind's lighting, also symbolically tended towards purple. Seán Curran choreographed and co-directed with Mr. Robinson, bringing the group scenes to life, though Mr. Schuette's low-budget costumes meant there was not a single drag queen at Stonewall.

Bizet's "**Carmen**" is everywhere this summer; how to make it new? OTSL's production was performed in a clunky English translation by Amanda Holden. As directed by Rodula Gaitanou, it featured a Carmen (the forthright Sarah Mesko) demonstrating her free spirit by riding a motorcycle and wearing pants, and a pregnant Micaëla (Yunuet Laguna, prone to oversinging). Adam Smith, as Don José, also oversang, though his Act 4 sublimation of toxic masculinity into madness was arresting. Christian Pursell, a stalwart Escamillo, seemed the most at ease of the principals, and Rachael Nelson, a flamenco dancer, enlivened act 2. Cordelia Chisholm's basic set—a wooden wall and pole—and modern-day costumes testified to a limited budget. The show's best element was the lively orchestra, under the incisive leadership of Daniela Candillari.

—Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the *Journal* and is the author of "*Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America*" (*Metropolitan*).