

TV REVIEW : 'Emmeline' Reexamines the Oedipus Drama

By MARK SWED April 2, 1997 12 AM PT

"Emmeline," the new opera by Tobias Picker that will be telecast on KCET-TV tonight, doesn't scream incest, but it does raise its voice with the dramatic revelation--this is opera after all. Still, that revelation comes only at the end, and it is so thoroughly set up that viewers know this is not hysterical daytime television; that it has nothing to do with the self-indulgence of Kathryn Harrison's best-selling memoir, "The Kiss," and none of the flavor of Hollywood exploiting a hot taboo.

Instead, "Emmeline" is an accessible, well-made, intelligently produced and excellently performed opera with the high dramatic intent of examining the Oedipus drama from the point of view of Jocasta, Oedipus' mother-wife. Its specific story is adapted by poet J.D. McClatchy from Judith Rossner's 1980 novel, which was based on historical incident--a woman in 19th century Maine unknowingly marrying her son.

As a 13-year-old, Emmeline is sent to work in the cotton mills, where she is seduced. When it is discovered that she is pregnant, she's forced to return home where her baby is given up for adoption and Emmeline gives up her life to serve her parents. Twenty years later, a young stranger comes to town. Instant attraction, slightly scandalous marriage with the younger man and then--bombshell. Son (and husband) flees, and Emmeline, abused at every point in her life, becomes an object of ostracism.

Yet as trendy as it is to focus on incest and victimization these days, "Emmeline" is essentially old-fashioned verismo American opera. We've been there--in drab, gray, early America--time and again in opera, whether in Carlisle Floyd's "Susannah," Jack Beeson's "Lizzie Borden," Douglas Moore's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" or countless lesser-known works,

especially from the '50s.

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And Picker, who is best known for his symphonic music and whose first opera is "Emmeline," follows the familiar policy of writing an opera in graciously lyrical heightened speech, with a surprisingly unassuming role for the orchestra. Actually, given Picker's talent for instrumental writing, the pit may be more important than it sounds on the advance low-fi review tape, which puts the voices so far forward that it could be just another television show.

In fact, that's just what it might be, were it not for the terrific performance "Emmeline" was given by Santa Fe Opera, which commissioned it and premiered it last summer. Soprano Patricia Racette offers a stunning account of Emmeline as vulnerable child and wounded adult whose only joy in life--her marriage--proves her worst curse. And there is also one outstanding supporting role after another. Particularly striking is Curt Peterson as Matthew Gurney, her cocky husband-son and a singer to watch for.

So magnetic is the theatrical chemistry between Racette and Peterson that one actually regrets the opera's too-good manners, especially since opera has never been an interesting medium for behaving one's self. Its very nature allows for extremes of expression inappropriate anywhere else.

But for opera as naturalistic theater, "Emmeline" is a success (enough so that New York City Opera will mount this production next season), and it is only helped by Francesca Zambello's production, which keeps the focus clearly and carefully on the characters, and George Manahan's conducting, which is a very model of clarity.

* "Great Performances' " broadcast of "Emmeline" airs tonight at 9 on Channel 28.