

# Review: 'Therese Raquin' has area premiere by Chicago Opera Theater

[John von Rhein](#)

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Edward Parks as Laurent and Mary Ann Stewart as Therese Raquin in Chicago Opera Theater's production of Tobias Picker's "Therese Raquin" at Harris Theater for Music and Dance. (Handout / Courtesy Chicago Opera Theater)

French novelist Emile Zola's naturalistic masterpiece of 1867,

"Therese Raquin," teems with so many of the juicy elements on which opera feeds – try adulterous passion, murder, guilt and suicide, for starters – that you have to wonder why the book (and Zola's subsequent adaptation of the novel as a stage play) had to wait more than 130 years to be retooled for the lyric stage.

American composer Tobias Picker and his librettist, Gene Scheer, distilled the classic tragedy of Therese, a lonely young French woman who embarks on an extramarital affair that leads to murder, down to one of the more viable American operas of the last 15 years.

The local premiere of "Therese Raquin" by Chicago Opera Theater, which opened in a gripping new staging Friday night at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, affirmed the faith of COT general director Andreas Mitisek in the musical and dramatic worth of Picker's 2001 opera, which is being given here in a coproduction with his second company, Long Beach Opera.

That the Chicago premiere exactly coincides with the first full area staging of Jake Heggie's "Dead Man Walking," by Northwestern University Opera Theater (which opened the same night at Evanston's Cahn Auditorium and also plays through next Saturday) makes this a banner week for admirers of contemporary American opera, since the genre hasn't exactly been thick on the ground in these parts

recently.

An accomplished theater composer with five operas to his credit (including his first big success, "Emmeline," and "An American Tragedy," commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera), Picker deploys in "Therese Raquin" astringent tonal harmony and a through-composed structure laced with declamatory vocal writing, bustling counterpoint, nervous rhythms and dissonances that pile up more aggressively as the dramatic tension mounts.

Director Ken Cazan, working within a minimalist set design by Alan E. Muraoka and stark lighting by David Jacques, at times reinterprets the stage directions but returns to the Zola original at the end, when Therese – wracked with guilt and anxiety following the murder of her husband Camille that she engineered with her lover, the lusty painter Laurent – takes poison rather than stabbing herself, as indicated in the libretto. Cazan's staging works hand in hand with the music to ratchet up dramatic tension up through the devastating conclusion.

Picker's score chugs along with skilled if somewhat faceless efficiency until Act 2 when the declamatory vocal lines get spikier, the orchestra becomes more agitated and the score's colors darken. Therese finally gets her first memorable arioso of the opera, occurring just before her suicide, as she and Laurent contemplate the wages of sin

and the ruins of their relationship, following their drowning of her husband in the Seine.

The opera's choicest set piece is a haunting solo, "Betrayed by those we loved," which the bloody ghost of Camille keens into the ear of his mother, Mme. Raquin, who is rendered mute and paralyzed by a stroke once she realizes how her son died. The vocal writing, highly reminiscent of Benjamin Britten, sits beautifully on the smooth, high tenor of Matthew Di Battista, who plays the scene's "Walking Dead," Grand Guignol melodrama to the creepy hilt.

Another thing that really nails this show is the chemistry of Mary Ann Stewart and Edward Parks as the tormented Therese and her hunky, amoral lover and co-conspirator, Laurent. The vocal compass sometimes dips too low for her vibrant soprano and some of the high climaxes tax the voice unpleasantly, but she's as feral and watchable a stage-animal as Parks, whose firm, robust baritone makes him a singer COT would do well to reengage.

Company stalwart Suzan Hanson makes Mme. Raquin, the opera's moral center, a mesmerizing presence even when the character is mute and immobile and can only stare accusingly into the faces of her son's killers. Providing the necessary comic relief in supporting roles are tenor John Matthew Myers as Grivet, soprano Ani Maldjian as Suzanne and bass Zeffin Quinn Hollis as Olivier.

Picker's music, with its shifting meters and stabbing rhythms, is not at all easy to bring off well, but Mitisek draws a suitably biting, urgent performance from his 18-member orchestra, playing the composer's own, effective chamber-orchestra reduction.

*Chicago Opera Theater's production of "Therese Raquin" plays through Feb. 28 at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.; \$35-\$125; 312-704-8414, [chicagooperatheater.org](http://chicagooperatheater.org).*

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John von Rhein retired as classical music critic of The Chicago Tribune in 2018. Beginning in 1977, Von Rhein covered classical music and opera. Before joining The Tribune, he reviewed classical music and dance for the Akron Beacon Journal. His hobby is collecting classical music on recordings.

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