

In Dallas, "Therese" _ and hope

When Tobias Picker's *Therese Raquin* was premiered by the Dallas Opera, it passed the most important test from a purely musical standpoint. Picker's opera created a sound world that could be mistaken for no other.

Picker is among the most accomplished American opera composers of his generation (He was born in New York City in 1954). His first opera, *Emmeline*, adapted from the Judith Rossner novel, was a hit at Santa Fe Opera in 1996 and then at New York City Opera and in a broadcast performance on PBS. He has a commission from the Metropolitan Opera to turn Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* into music.

It was a coup for Dallas to produce Picker's latest work, and he stretched the audience with complex dissonances amid the high-flying arias and ensembles.

Dramatically, though, *Therese Raquin* had something of an identity crisis because its characters had scant resemblance to those in its source material, the 19th century novel by Emile Zola that launched naturalism in French literature. Zola's Parisian potboiler _ about an adulterous affair that leads to murder and suicide _ is unremittingly dark, and

Picker and his librettist, Gene Scheer, seemed to be trying to lighten it up, with less than satisfying results. Nor did the orchestra writing provide much contrast, with an insistent, restless pulse that became repetitious.

So it was not surprising earlier this month, at the third of four performances in Dallas, to hear only polite applause as the curtain came down on Therese Raquin. Sophisticated new music takes a while to find its voice, and it will be interesting to follow Picker's opera as it receives subsequent productions, and probably revisions, in Montreal (where it will be sung in French) and San Diego.

But for Dallas Opera supporters, the tepid reception was almost beside the point, because the most important development was happening offstage. Plans are under way to build a new venue for opera to replace the 3,400-seat Music Hall at Fair Park, where the company has performed since Maria Callas gave an inaugural concert in 1957.

Picker's music sounded fine from a close-in seat, but woe be to a listener in the upper reaches of the cavernous, acoustically challenged space. For set designers, the wide but shallow stage has always been a problem.

Nearly overshadowing Therese Raquin, the big opera news in Dallas this month was the naming of British architect Norman Foster to design an opera house in the city. Foster is

known for his striking restoration of the Reichstag in Berlin.

You say there's a financial crisis in the arts, one that has grown severe in the recession that became official after Sept. 11? It apparently has not dawned in Dallas.

The new opera house is part of the proposed Dallas Center for the Performing Arts, budgeted at \$250-million. Already, close to \$100-million has been pledged by private sources for construction, and the fundraising campaign hasn't even officially begun. The city is poised to do its part with a municipal bond issue for the center.

With the opening of the world-class Meyerson Symphony Center in 1989, Dallas had its ears opened. Concertgoers realized what they had been missing in performances by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, which used to play at the Music Hall. Now it's the turn of the opera company — led by a pair of Englishmen in general director Anthony Whitworth-Jones and music director Graeme Jenkins, who was in the pit for Therese Raquin — to get a suitable new home.

There is something about Zola's book that is irresistible to adapters. Even Zola turned it into a play that is, in some ways, more effective than his claustrophobic novel. The story is very similar to that of James M. Cain's hard-boiled classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, which itself was made into an opera by composer Stephen Paulus and

librettist Colin Graham.

This year alone, along with Picker's opera, there was a Broadway musical made from the story. Called *Thou Shalt Not* and transplanted to New Orleans, it sported a score by Harry Connick Jr. and direction by Susan Stroman, but it flopped and will close Jan. 6. There is also a movie in the works, with Kate Winslet producing and playing Therese.

The most over-the-top treatment was *The Artificial Jungle* by Charles Ludlam, founder of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. His satire has the Therese character and her lover kill the husband by feeding him to a tank of piranhas.

A touch of that kind of outrageousness might have helped the Picker-Scheer version, which came across as too calculated for its own good. It seemed to put a premium on the opera's ability to be produced, with a cast of only seven singers and no chorus. The libretto by Scheer, whom Picker met through director Francesca Zambello, was notably compact, with two acts and a running time of just over two hours.

Perhaps in an effort not to alienate the audience, Therese Raquin suffered from trying to be too nice, which led to some egregious mischaracterizations. Most prominently wrong was the doomed husband, Camille, sung by tenor Gordon Gietz. His Camille seemed like quite a decent sort, in

stark contrast to the pathetic, sickly murder victim of the novel.

Therese, as sung by mezzo-soprano Sara Fulgoni, was more like a kittenish schoolgirl than a passionate, manipulative schemer capable of such dastardly deeds. Fulgoni handled the high, dramatic part well, but her character was problematical.

With Therese unpersuasive, Richard Bernstein, the bass-baritone playing her lover and co-conspirator, the failed painter Laurent, lacked someone with whom to set off sparks. For the most part, an erotic charge was missing from the opera's central relationship. When it was there, Bernstein's Laurent had arresting music, such as a languid aria in which he reminisced about a woman who posed for him by the Seine.

In a Tampa Bay note, the cast included Gabor Andrasy, a bass who lives in Holiday. Known for Wagnerian and other heavyweight roles, Andrasy had fun as Olivier Michaud, a friend of the Raquin family, giving a richly comic performance.

Zambello's staging had one terrific coup de theatre, the scene in which Camille is pitched from a rowboat (elevated high over the stage) to drown in the Seine.

Picker appeared to anticipate his opera being compared unfavorably to the novel in an interview with the online magazine www.usoperaweb.com.

". . . The characters in my opera are not the same characters that are in the book," he said. "They are my take on those characters; I'm using them to express myself. I'm not Emile Zola's scribe, his translator or his spokesperson, and I didn't see myself as making his book into an opera. I am making his story into an opera."

Fair enough, but the characters make dramatic sense in Zola's book; they don't entirely in Picker's opera.