

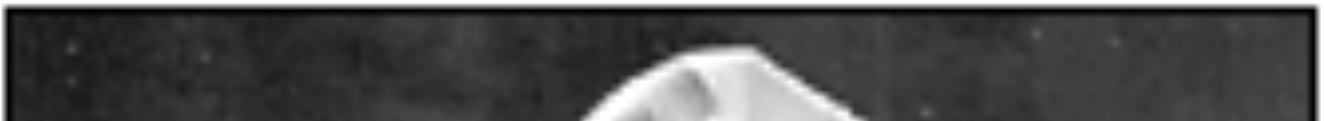
# A Soap Opera in Song

By Matthew Gurewitsch Oct. 25, 2001 12:01 am ET

For the brightest talents in American musical theater, commercial and nonprofit, Emile Zola is the flavor of the month. The director-choreographer Susan Stroman, whose name is bigger on the Rialto than those of her collaborators David Thompson (book) and even Harry Connick Jr. (songs), is first out of the box with "**Thou Shalt Not**," the new musical opening tonight on Broadway. Her source: Zola's "Thérèse Raquin" (1867), which has also attracted the notice of Tobias Picker, our finest composer for the lyric stage. Look for his adaptation, with Zola's title, late next month in Dallas.

An hallucinatory vivisection of adultery, murder and their aftermath, the original "Thérèse Raquin" derives from a real-life case Zola read about in the newspaper, and it was as a newspaper serial that it first scandalized France, when the author was just 27 years old.

The basics of the tale are simple. Thérèse, trapped in a travesty of a marriage with her anemic first-cousin Camille, awakens to sensuality in the arms of Camille's brutish friend Laurent. When circumstances interfere with the lovers' reckless adultery, they arrange a boating party à trois, from which Camille does not return. No one suspects murder. Instantly, the lovers' passion dies, yet in time, they marry, cheered on by a small circle of Dickensian family friends and even the distraught Mme. Raquin, Camille's doting mother. But Camille's ghost haunts the couple's bedroom like a dank cadaver. Eventually, Mme. Raquin learns the truth but is silenced by a stroke. Under her glaring eye, Thérèse and Laurent descend ever deeper into the hell of self-flagellation and mutual hatred. At the point of killing each other, they back off and share a flask of prussic acid.





Kate Levering portrays Thérèse in 'Thou Shalt Not,' an adaptation of Zola's novel 'Thérèse Raquin' opening tonight on Broadway.

The novel is an odd hybrid. Zola described it as "scientific," but something in its triangular plan gives it the diamond-hard inevitability of myth. Thérèse and Laurent inhabit the realm of archetype, as does the dead Camille, a presence more monstrous (and infinitely more persistent) than Banquo's ghost. In this respect, their tale is universal, and might be adapted to any place and time.

Against that, there is Zola's genius for the particular. In his prose, he captures the halo of a street lamp, the scent of wet grass, the flow of a river that can only be the Seine. The Parisian pastime of gawking in the morgue is as integral to the fabric of the novel as the clack of dominos at Mme. Raquin's every blessed Thursday night. In this respect, "Thérèse Raquin" requires precisely the grubby petty bourgeois setting Zola gave it, and is unthinkable in any other.

From the first, "Thérèse Raquin" has cried out for dramatization. Zola's own stage adaptation of 1873 is a crude, melodramatic affair, but there are others to choose from, including Neal Bell's recent version, spare and elegant. On film, too, "Thérèse Raquin" has had quite a run, from the silent era on. Simone Signoret has played the heroine, as has Kate Nelligan, with Kate Winslet soon to follow.

As for musical treatments, the American composer Kevin Oldham, scarcely into his 30s, was working on an opera of "Thérèse Raquin" when he died in 1993. Three promising excerpts may be heard on a CD of his piano and vocal music (on Albany Records). Set to the hypnotic rhythm of a bolero, the trio of the murder on the river, in particular, suggests that something durable was in the making.

Now that the novel is in the public domain, the scope for poetic license is unlimited. Certainly, the Broadway version is not meant for professors of French lit. Ms. Stroman, the project's prime mover, has retained Zola's character's names and key facts of the plot, but not much else. Unlike Zola's Mme. Raquin, who owns a failing little shop that stocks dressmakers'

notions, Ms. Stroman's runs a jazz boîte. Craig Bierko, Ms. Stroman's original lead in her revival of "The Music Man," plays Laurent as a G.I. home from overseas. And the Broadway Thérèse dances. "She has the soul of an artist," says Ms. Stroman, who has cast her accordingly: She is Kate Levering, lately the hard-tapping showstopper of "42nd Street" (and before that, the dreamy supporting ingénue of "The Music Man").

"The novel is about uncontrollable passion," Ms. Stroman explains.

"Everybody fantasizes about passion. We all want to experience it. I wanted to make it more accessible to American audiences, so I placed it in New Orleans in 1946. It was an exciting time for that city. The war was over. The Mardi Gras had been shut down for four years and was now returning. The town was filling with men again. Music was starting to pour out of every door. Placing it in the French Quarter retains the French feel of the novel. Harry Connick Jr. is the perfect choice for the composer-lyricist. He is from New Orleans, so he brings a firsthand knowledge to the lyrics and the tone. His words and music are poetic and very sensual, a must for this story of love."

Mr. Picker sticks closer to Zola but has made some departures, too. For instance? "I didn't want a rotting-corpse ghost," he says. "I wanted a dignified ghost, like the one in Ingmar Bergman's 'Fanny and Alexander.' And we changed the suicides a little bit. Thérèse falls on her dagger, into Laurent's arms. I wanted it to be more violent than drinking poison."

An awkward question. Does Mr. Picker actually like Thérèse? Does he expect audiences to?

"My Thérèse will touch people's hearts, I think," the composer answers. His first heroine, the British mezzo-soprano Sara Fulgoni, certainly should. (She has triumphed as Carmen.) "I certainly want Thérèse to touch people. I feel very bad for her. I wanted to make her as sympathetic as possible. Reserve judgment until you see the opera. Thérèse is everyone who's sexually alive who is trapped in a dead marriage. That's a lot of people. This isn't an opera for children."

Zola, be assured, had no great love for Thérèse. Not only did he deny her any beauty of face, he also called her "a human animal, nothing more." But never mind. What, after all, is the adapter's prime commandment?

Thou shalt not kowtow to thy source.