

# Opera Noir

[Cynthia Greenwood](#) December 6, 2001

Emile Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin* offended French readers in the 19th century. Considered scandalous, even pornographic, it told of a repressed young woman who kills her husband to marry a rogue painter. The author's tale has inspired New York-born composer Tobias Picker to create a more likable Thérèse for a new opera.

Picker's ***Thérèse Raquin*** deftly plots what can happen when an unhappily married woman commits adultery inside her mother-in-law's house. Thérèse's affair progresses from lurid sex to murder and ends with double suicide. With masterful staging in the style and pace of film noir, Picker and librettist Gene Scheer rely on renowned director Francesca Zambello's instinct for suspense and dazzling mise-en-scène. The Dallas Opera, L'Opera de Montreal and San Diego Opera commissioned Picker to write the new work.

At the **Dallas Opera** world premiere last Friday, the lack of hummable arias cast a chill on the audience in the Music Hall at Fair Park. Despite flawed moments when the Dallas Opera orchestra nearly drowned out the singing, the performances of Picker's dissonant and difficult music were exceptional. Still, this wasn't enough for the lukewarm crowd, which dismissed the cast after a single curtain call.

The audience may have felt an aversion to Thérèse herself, who seems more pitiful than tragic. The repressed ingénue is an unlikely opera heroine, and even when she appears mentally fragile, she doesn't inspire outrage like Lady MacBeth. Nor does she command the honor of Violetta, Verdi's beloved prostitute in *La Traviata*.

Zola invented the character of Thérèse after reading a newspaper account.

He never intended for her to elicit much sympathy. She is an orphan whose father dumps her into the arms of her aunt and adoptive mother soon after birth. She grows up indoors with her sickly cousin, a boy who becomes her husband. The novelist places the pent-up woman under a microscope before introducing the rakish Laurent. Their lust for one another melts her obedient façade.

Adapted from the novel, Scheer's libretto opens soon after Thérèse has married Camille. The couple occupies a modest two-story shop and apartment owned by Camille's mother, located on a dank, narrow street in Paris near the river Seine. In the opening scene, Thérèse (British mezzo-soprano Sara Fulgoni), Camille (Canadian tenor Gordon Gietz) and his mother, Madame Lisette Raquin (soprano Diane Soviero), appear to share a cozy existence.

Madame Raquin had arranged the marriage, and Thérèse and Camille lead a sheltered life in such close quarters. Thérèse minds the store with her mother-in-law while Camille works a desk job at the Orleans Railway. They relax once a week when Olivier (Romanian bass Gabor Andrasy); his wife, Suzanne (soprano Sheryl Woods); and Camille's colleague Monsieur Grivet (tenor Peter Kazaras) arrive to play dominoes.

When Camille announces his friend Laurent (bass-baritone Richard Bernstein) will visit to paint Camille's portrait, the couple's life changes. Unhappily married, Thérèse confides in the artist. Soon she and a bored Laurent quench their sexual thirsts in secret. When they tire of trysts, they plot Camille's death. Knowing he can't swim, the pair lures Thérèse's husband onto a boat while picnicking together, and Laurent throws him overboard.

After Camille's drowning, Madame Raquin and her friends suspect nothing. Laurent even succeeds in getting Madame Raquin's approval to marry Thérèse, but the marriage is doomed. Thérèse is overcome with guilt. Laurent's attempts to make love to his wife are ruined when the couple hears

the voice of Camille's ghost. When Madame Raquin overhears them arguing about their crime, she has a stroke. As Thérèse grows remorseful, her hatred for Laurent grows. Guilt-ridden, she stabs herself in front of her mother-in-law and Laurent. In a final gesture, Laurent swallows poisoned wine meant for Thérèse.

Though Thérèse appears less sympathetic than Picker may have intended, the composer manages to paint her in vivid detail. Dissonant instrumental strains suggest her wild, desperate nature. Insistent melody from the orchestra pit ingeniously exposes her as a creature of desire run amok, capable of lust and hatred.

Gifted with a sultry mezzo-soprano voice, Fulgoni's Thérèse gathers momentum after an early sex scene that appears more awkward than brazen. Her portrayal of Thérèse blossoms slowly, culminating in hysterics before she commits suicide. Bernstein's Laurent sounds and looks more like a jealous lover than the rake that Zola envisioned. When Thérèse refuses to make love on their wedding night, the bass-baritone cultivates a mounting, ear-pleasing rage. Paired in duet, Fulgoni and Bernstein present a formidable picture of evil.

As Madame Raquin, Soviero's soprano evinces strength and quiet endurance, especially after the stroke. Rendering Raquin as a mute invalid, she raises the audience's sympathy level. Likewise, Gietz's portrait of Camille has none of Zola's sickly, feckless qualities. He appears the innocent victim through and through. As Camille's ghost his tenor mellifluously points up the lovers' evil.

Woods' soprano assuredly depicts the childless Suzanne, infusing a tone of nostalgia in her arias and duets. As her husband, Olivier, bass Andrasy lightens the mood during domino-game scenes. He's especially funny when he and tenor Kazaras, singing the part of Monsieur Grivet, conspire to hide nettles in Thérèse and Laurent's wedding bed.

Picker's dissonant, suspenseful score creates a dark mood reminiscent of how film noir directors use shadow to portend doom. Conductor Graeme Jenkins and the Dallas Opera Orchestra adeptly negotiate the drama's peaks and valleys. Occasional scenes in Act 1 sound flawed when melodies blare so loudly they muffle the singers. In spite of this, music from the pit offers striking counterpoint to arias and ensembles.

Zambello's artful staging is evident during suspenseful scenes. To simulate Camille's drowning, her crew raises the boat holding Camille, Laurent and Thérèse halfway to the ceiling. When Camille falls overboard, a see-through curtain appears, serving as an underwater tableau painted with discarded junk and detritus littering the river bottom.

Although the director's uneven, distorted props in Act 2 mirror the couple's guilt-ridden perspective, the sets appear too abstract. Zambello's rendering of Madame Raquin's home in the first act is more effective. Her use of special effects with water is clever, heightening the aura of guilt surrounding the couple's actions. In one, water runs above Thérèse's head while she dreams of Camille's drowning.

Picker's new work is full of the makings of good opera--solid performances, a salacious plot, carefully timed intrigue and a compelling score that offers a frightening portrait of Thérèse herself. Its realism is as disturbing as Hitchcock's best.

But inside the opera house, audiences aren't always eager for reality. They yearn for tuneful arias and unlikely epic tales about heroes and heroines who fall from grace. Thérèse Raquin is neither a heroine nor the opposite. That she does kill herself in a plea for her mother-in-law's forgiveness is noble. But at heart she remains pathetic, a weak soul whose passions moved her to commit an awful murder.