

Opera: Lust, murder and revenge

Emile Zola's novel 'Thérèse Raquin' still packs a punch, but Tobias Picker's operatic adaptation of the melodrama takes too many liberties, says Annette Morreau

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I have chosen people completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will, drawn to each action of their lives by the inexorable laws of their physical nature. Thérèse and Laurent are human animals, nothing more... what I have had to call their remorse amounts to a simple organic disorder, a revolt of the nervous system when strained to breaking point. There is a complete absence of soul, I freely admit, since that is how I meant it to be."

Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* was Zola's first literary "success", a success met with outcries of "pornography!" from critics, which thus guaranteed the book (and him) a future. Zola was 28 when he wrote his novel, a grisly tale of lust, murder and revenge set in the seedy, impoverished *demi-monde* of Paris during the Second Empire of Napoleon III. Zola wrote the manifesto for the literary movement of Naturalism, the logical follow-up to the Realism of Balzac and Flaubert. Gone was the prettiness of life. Politics apart, his work was underlined by the philosophy of the time: the scientific determinism of Huxley and Darwin. Any spiritual interpretation of human behaviour was replaced by physiological function and the material environment as the only explanation for man's actions.

Following the first publication of *Thérèse Raquin* in the autumn of 1867, a second edition was printed less than six months later, prefaced by an "explanation" which, in the face of critical "misunderstanding", Zola felt

obliged to give: "I had only one desire: given a highly sexed man and an unsatisfied woman, to uncover the animal side of them and see that alone, then throw them together in a violent drama and note down with scrupulous care the sensations and actions of these creatures. I simply applied to two living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses."

Thérèse Raquin would seem the perfect plot for dramatic staging. The illegitimate, half-Algerian, Thérèse is given a home as a baby by her aunt, the formidable Madame Raquin. She is made to sleep in the same bed as her cousin Camille (the weedy, sickly son of Madame R) to whom she forlornly gets married, enduring the claustrophobic boredom of petty life in the backstreet Paris haberdashery of Madame R. Only Thursday dominoes with the Michauds (Suzanne and Olivier) and Monsieur Grivet, lightens the gloom, until one day Camille returns with his painter friend, Laurent. Sexual combustion – albeit concealed – takes place between Thérèse and Laurent, leading (as these things do) to the necessity of Camille's demise. A boat ride on the Seine brings about Camille's watery end, contrived to look like an unfortunate accident. As Laurent throws him overboard, Camille bites Laurent's neck, producing a wound that will never heal.

Guilt and ghosts finally do it for Thérèse and Laurent, their hoped-for bliss beyond reach, but not before Mme Raquin, a paralysed invalid, learns the terrible truth. She is unable to communicate it to her domino-playing friends, but Thérèse and Laurent take matters into their own hands, committing double suicide at her wheelchaired feet.

Zola recognised the story's grisly potential, making his own stage adaptation, and there were plans for an opera, never realised. Marcel Carné made a film based on the book in 1953, starring Simone Signoret, and more recently, the composer Michael Finnissy made an attempt at setting it to music, and several versions have been seen on film – the BBC did a mini-series with Kate Nelligan and Brian Cox.

Raquin fever has broken out again: on Broadway, *Thou Shalt Not*, the

musical, directed by Susan Stroman, has opened (and is soon to close – perhaps deservedly, for being updated to a New Orleans bar); Kate Winslet and Judi Dench are gearing up for a new film version; and Dallas Opera, in co-commission with Montreal and San Diego, has just staged the world premiere of Tobias Picker's *Thérèse Raquin*.

Picker, in his mid-forties, is one of America's most prolific composers. This is his third opera in five years. His first, *Emmeline* – devoted also to the misfortunes of a woman (she inadvertently marries her son) – was rapturously received when staged at the Santa Fe Opera in 1996. The ubiquitous Francesca Zambello directed *Emmeline*, and it is with her that Picker works again.

Zambello's greatest achievement towards *Thérèse Raquin* may have been her introduction of composer and lyricist, Gene Scheer, to Picker, for in his reworking of Zola's text, Scheer has produced a libretto of unusual fluency and intelligence.



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Picker's opera is in two acts: the first, in three scenes, ends with a spectacular drowning of Camille – although the bite goes for nothing. Act Two, in eight scenes, begins in the Raquin family home, where it also ends. It is not a happy place.

Raquin has some superficial similarities with *Emmeline*, but Picker's music over five years has developed significantly. The score is of far greater sweep and complexity, bound by plainly audible leitmotifs that frequently appear in varied guises. In *Raquin*, Picker confidently uses set-piece arias, duets, trios, and even a septet of busy fluency that, in its "domesticity", recalls Britten's *Albert Herring*. His music hovers between tonality and atonality, clearly conveying emotion and emotional change – Act II is far more dissonant than Act I – so underlining the plot with clarity.

But the plot has been gutted: Mme Raquin's a pussy cat; Camille's no weed; Laurent no seducer. Picker, in fact, disclaims the book: "The characters in my opera are not the same characters in the book. They are my take on those characters. I'm using them to express myself. I'm not Zola's scribe, translator or spokesperson." So why confuse by calling the opera *Thérèse Raquin*? And why encourage forests of pre-premiere publicity that convey nothing of the emasculated plotline when what emerges is something dramatically between *La bohème* and *Madame Butterfly*?

Veteran soprano, Diana Soviero, in the role of Madame Raquin, while able still to muster some powerful high notes, is given no scope for her acting ability as a harmless old woman anchoring no gruesome plot, while bass-baritone, Richard Bernstein, as the lusty Laurent (regrettably shorter than Thérèse) has a gravelly voice, powerful if unsubtle. The tenor Gordon Gietz, in the role of Camille, far from a wimp, soars magnificently in Picker's high, elegant writing.

The smouldering role of Thérèse is sung by the young British mezzo, Sara Fulgoni, whose looks, voice and acting are utterly persuasive. She alone of the cast on the first night appeared convinced and convincing – without doubt a major talent. The smaller roles of the Michauds and Monsieur Grivet were expertly taken, Picker most sympathetically attending to these minor characters.

Marie-Jeanne Lecca's sets and costumes uneasily mix realism with

metaphor: the opening split-level open-plan house set on a vast revolve looks more New England than Paris, while the banks of the Seine sport discarded detritus – a half-buried bicycle, a bedstead – in an urban setting. The full panoply of watery, ghostly effects is well executed in Mark McCullough's lighting.

A second performance confirmed that the orchestra, under Dallas's music director Graeme Jenkins, suffered first-night nerves in Picker's demanding score. However, the first-night audience, perhaps surprisingly in the world of JR Ewing, expressed its appreciation palpably.