AN ARCHETYPAL AMERICAN OPERA

BY THOMAS MAY

The opportunity to revisit *An American Tragedy* for the intimate Glimmerglass stage underscores its enduring resonance.

In an interview from 1927 — two years after *An American Tragedy* was published — Theodore Dreiser’s fellow mid-Westerner F. Scott Fitzgerald praised the novel as “without doubt the greatest American book that has appeared in years.” It’s a judgment that Tobias Picker’s father Julian heartily affirmed when the composer was growing up. “This was his favorite book by his favorite writer,” recalls the composer. “My father even had a signed original edition from 1925.”

Coming of age in a family with strong artistic leanings in 1960s New York, Picker was encouraged to associate his love of literature, music and the visual arts as naturally interconnected — and mutually reinforcing — pursuits. His mother, Henriette Simon Picker, remains an active painter — the Cooperstown Art Association is currently offering a show of her work, “An American Artist: H.S. Picker at 97” — and one of her boat paintings appears as an illustration in the officially published score of *An American Tragedy*. Picker dedicated the opera to his mother, in memory of his father.

Picker himself ranks among the pre-eminent creators of American opera active today. His debut stage work *Emmeline* premiered at Santa Fe Opera to widespread acclaim in 1996, and his growing body of operas, now numbering five full-scale works, is finding its place in the repertory. Although *An American Tragedy* represents only the fourth premiere commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera since James Levine began his tenure in 1971, Picker has been an active participant in one of the most abundantly creative eras we’ve witnessed over the past 100 years with regard to the development of indigenous American opera.

There’s nothing arbitrary about Picker’s impulse to create in this medium. As a composer he’s equally at home with the more abstract format of concertos and symphonic and chamber works. Yet he also identifies deeply with the role of a musical storyteller — a role he adopts instinctively when writing opera. Picker’s operas derive from literary sources featuring starkly dramatic, emotionally direct narratives. Both *Emmeline* and his most recent opera, *Dolores Claiborne* (2013), revolve around memorable female protagonists (both coincidentally set in Maine) who find a way to endure in the face of harshly oppressive circumstances. “They choose to deal with what life has doled out to them,” Picker observes. “They represent the American woman: strong and decisive and self-assured.”

And they’re the lucky ones in the admittedly grim psychological terrain that is so notably predominant within Picker’s operatic universe. The issue as to which aspects depicted by Dreiser’s novel merit the designation of tragedy — the
fates of individual characters or the social system that fuels their desires — remains open to debate, but the outcome is unmistakably merciless. So, too, in Thérèse Raquin (2001), which marked Picker’s first collaboration with librettist Gene Scheer. Here he turned to a French source, the novelist Emile Zola; like Emmeline, Thérèse is set in the 19th century. Picker’s adaptation of Roald Dahl’s Fantastic Mr. Fox (1998), with its comic ending, represents a departure of sorts — yet even this children’s story, which is “aimed at adults,” the composer points out, has its darkly sardonic side.

Because of the labor-intensive precision required by opera as both a creative and performing art, there’s a much rarer spectrum of new works that survive the ordeal by fire that any premiere production involves. Yet all five of Picker’s operas will have been presented or restaged within the seasons surrounding his 60th birthday celebration this July. These productions cover the gamut from a world premiere (Dolores Claiborne, based on Stephen King’s novel, at San Francisco Opera last summer) to revivals (Fantastic Mr. Fox in an upcoming brand-new staging at Picker’s own Opera San Antonio, Thérèse Raquin in a reduced chamber version at Pittsburgh’s Microscopic Opera last fall, and Emmeline at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2015).

And then there’s the special case of An American Tragedy, which Picker observes has become the most heavily revised of his operas. “Curiously, Dreiser’s novel has also been revisited multiple times on film,” he adds, referring to the 1931 film and the better-known A Place in the Sun (1951), as well as Woody Allen’s more oblique variation, transposed to England, in Match Point (2005, the year in which the opera premiered at the Met). Yet with this thorough reworking, Picker says both he and Scheer feel they’ve created the opera’s final version, the one “we hope will survive.”

Scheer explains that even during the initial eight-performance run of Tragedy at the Met he and Picker could sense some miscalculations they wanted to fix for a future revival. “As a younger librettist, I thought that I needed to tell the audience about where Clyde Griffths comes from rather than allow the music to communicate that information.” Scheer remarks that the experience of fashioning Moby-Dick into an opera (for the composer Jake Heggie) and other projects in the interim have sharpened his understanding of how to balance “the competing dramaturgical needs of the piece — between giving the audience information and creating a sense of forward momentum.”

So Scheer and Picker agreed that it made sense to cut out the entire first scene (close to 20 minutes) of the Ur-Tragedy, which depicts the boy Clyde and the religious fervor of his mother Elvira, as well as his ambitions taking shape while he’s a bellboy in a swanky Chicago hotel. Scheer also looked more closely at classics like Don Giovanni, admiring how it starts “so hot, with a bang,” entangling us immediately in an emotional knot. But it’s one thing to appreciate such perfection abstractly. The experience of seeing live audiences react to Tragedy in real time proved essential to figuring out how to fine tune their work. “You get very attached to things when you’re making a new piece,” remarks Picker, “but when you see it with an audience, reality comes barreling down on you.”

Subtler changes include a different staging of what happens in the boating scene between Clyde and his pregnant girlfriend Roberta, leaving the matter of whether he intended her to drown vague until the end. “We’re not supposed to know what really happened before then,” Picker says. “It puts us in the same position as the jury during the trial.” And the ending itself turns the focus away from the religious response Elvira holds out; all that fades away, replaced by Clyde’s final vision of Sondra — the embodiment of his social as well as sexual desire.

“One of the things Glimmerglass can offer is a chance to do second productions of operas,” says Francesca Zambello, artistic and general director of The Glimmerglass Festival. “Successful as An American Tragedy was in its inaugural version at the Met, I always felt that it would be interesting to see it with performers who are closer to the age of the protagonists. Why not make it more accessible for smaller theaters and even universities as well?”

This newly reworked version of Tragedy therefore aligns well with the rest of the current Glimmerglass season Zambello programmed around the theme of operatic revisions. In the cases of Madame Butterfly and Ariadne in Naxos, the creative teams were compelled by outright rejection at their respective premieres to rethink how to present their works in the best possible light.

For Puccini, who never doubted the value of his score (and was well aware of the musical politics that were behind the fiasco), this meant some structural adjustments and a new aria for Pinkerton to satisfy the stubborn expectations of convention. Strauss and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, by contrast, were still groping to clarify their vision, which had started out as a “lightweight” diversion after the exertions of Der Rosenkavalier. The audiences on hand for the first incarnation of Ariadne in 1912 had to make sense of a mixed agenda that fused an entire Molière play with Strauss’
latest opera. The later, and now familiar revision with the Prologue created a much more compelling — and practical — context for the premise of the opera, which Zambello likens to "the dilemma of a not-for-profit arts organization today."

If Puccini’s operatic genius was stimulated by sheer theatrical impact and that of Strauss by the richly allusive literary elegance of his collaborator Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Picker manifests a sturdy faith in opera as a medium for “telling stories in music.” The story in An American Tragedy appealed to him in particular because it suggested an archetypal pattern: “Clyde is chasing the American dream and ends up living a nightmare. It’s a timeless, universal story.”

Indeed, the chance to revisit Tragedy in the aftermath of the Great Recession has only underscored its enduring resonance. Zambello, who directed the original Met production, agrees: “The division in society has become much greater since then.”

It made sense, therefore, to develop a visual approach for the new production that is “less naturalistic and more focused on how the class issues play out. This kind of love triangle, with the added issue of difference — an outsider whether in terms of class or race — is a major dramatic tool.”

The director Peter Kazaras, who has also enjoyed an international career as an operatic tenor (he sings on the Chandos recording of Thérèse Raquin), points out that the new revisions of the opera “make it much more focused on why this is an American tragedy. Getting rid of the boy means the focus is even more on Clyde as a victim. He is trying to make his way in the world but transgresses by attempting to rise above his station — and he is punished for being overly ambitious. Physically, the design of this new production makes the issue of social status extremely important. It’s almost like a Greek tragedy. We want to make it clear that he’s doomed from the start by his surroundings.”

As with the stories recounted in Picker’s other “realistic” operas, these characters are ordinary people the composer believes “we can identity with,” their passions and defeats the replay of conflicts with which we are able to readily empathize. Picker says he takes it as a compliment when his brand of opera is tagged as “American verismo” — though he adds that this meme “doesn’t tell you very much about what the music sounds like.”

In his score for Tragedy, Picker remarks that he was especially excited by the opportunities for operatic counterpoint: the interweaving of voices, solo or in tandem with the chorus, that comprises the various ensembles which Scheer carefully structured to intensify significant turning points in the story. “Having different things going on at the same time is so important for me in opera,” he explains. “Without counterpoint, to me, there is no music.”

“These are the moments that are uniquely operatic,” adds Scheer, who had to invent situations such as the trios for Clyde, Roberta and Sondra that naturally don’t occur in the linear unfolding of Dreiser’s narration. “They allow you to fiddle with non-linear time, to show things that are happening simultaneously.” And the musical counterpoint enhances the social and dramatic counterpoint inherent in the story — the disparate forces that tug simultaneously at Clyde, stimulating but ultimately destroying him. ||

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