

OPERA



Aaron Blake and Joseph Lattanzi in 'Fellow Travelers.'

Forbidden Loves

By Heidi Waleson

Fellow Travelers” by Gregory Spears, which just concluded its world-premiere engagement at the Cincinnati Opera, has history and timeliness going for it, but it ultimately succeeds as a sad, tender love story of two men. The opera is based on Thomas Mallon’s 2007 novel, which explores the purges of gay government employees in the early Cold War period: the Lavender Scare that went along with the Red Scare. Greg Pierce’s taut, clean libretto keeps just enough of the political background to evoke the atmosphere of secrecy and paranoia of the period, but it zeroes in on the central relationship. That is unequal from the start: Timothy Laughlin, a neophyte from Fordham University, is seduced by Hawkins Fuller, a State Department official who is older and worldlier, a privileged Harvard man.

Mr. Spears’s subtle, lyrical music is beautiful without being obvious or sentimental. It captures Tim’s superficial shyness and hesitancy as well as his deeply passionate nature, which finds an outlet in his devotion to the Catholic Church, anticommunism and, most of all, Hawk. In Act I, their love affair unfolds dreamily in 6/8 time; in Act II, it comes apart as Hawk, unable to truly commit, perpetrates a stunning act of betrayal. Yet such is Mr. Spears’s talent that we feel for Hawk as well: In the poignant, revealing aria “Our very own home,” the rhythmic heartbeat on the piano shows that Hawk is suffering too. Mr. Spears also writes exquisitely for vocal ensembles: The large ones have a madrigal-like quality that makes the world around Tim and Hawk multidimensional.

Baritone Joseph Lattanzi was superb as the smooth-talking, handsome Hawk; tenor Aaron Blake was touching and explosive as Tim. Soprano De-von Guthrie brought richness and sincerity to Mary Johnson, Hawk’s assistant, who cares about both men. All three singers had superb diction. Marcus DeLoach was forceful as Sen. Joseph McCarthy; Alexandra Schoeny was nicely spiteful as Hawk’s secretary. Other roles were capably taken by Christian Pursell, Paul Scholten, Vernon Hartman and Talya Lieberman. Mark Gibson led the 17-member ensemble in Mr. Spears’s alluringly transparent orchestration.

The simple production read clearly in the 400-seat Jarson-Kaplan Theater in the Aronoff

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Center for the Arts. Small set pieces—a bed, a desk, blocks of file cabinets that reversed to become walls—designed by Victoria (Vita) Tzykun were pushed on and offstage by the characters, contributing to the feeling that Tim and Hawk’s secret relationship was always under observation. Paul Carey designed the apt period costumes, Thomas C. Hase the lighting, and Kevin Newbury’s directing, particularly of the love scenes, was as honest and touching as the opera.

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Beethoven’s “Fidelio” was staged on a grander scale in the 2,500-seat Procter & Gamble Hall in Aronoff Center. The effective production, designed by Robert Dahlstrom and originally from the Seattle Opera, suggested a modern high-security prison, complete with a barbed-wire fence, guards in riot gear dragging a prisoner with cloth bag on his head,

Exploring the purges of gay government employees in the early Cold War; a wife’s attempt to rescue her husband from prison.

and especially some follow spots that functioned as menacing searchlights. Jonathan Dean’s supertitles also helped update this tale of Florestan, a political prisoner held communicated by an old enemy, and his courageous wife, Leonore, who dresses as a man (“Fidelio”), gets a job at the prison, and rescues him.

“Fidelio” stands on its two principal singers, and Christine Goetke’s fierce Leonore was a work in progress. Her soprano, so thrilling in Wagner and Strauss, seemed restrained here, its potent middle register not quite united with the soaring top notes in her character’s money aria, “Abscheulicher!” She was also hampered by an exceedingly unflattering costume (by Rebecca Senske) whose shapeless uniform jacket and cap made her look like an insecure Cub Scout. It was a relief when she pulled off the cap and let her red hair tumble to her shoulders.

As Florestan, the superb Russell Thomas held nothing

back in his big aria, his clarion tenor rising inexorably to the desperate cry of “Freiheit,” truly a man in extremis. Nmon Ford made a ruthless villain, Pizarro, though his baritone didn’t carry in its lowest register. Nathan Stark brought complexity to Rocco, the jailer, playing his humanity tinged with his fear of Pizarro without resorting to caricature.

Laura Tatulescu was a sweet Marzelline, Rocco’s daughter; Thomas Blondelle a petulant Jaquino, her suitor. Chris Alexander’s directing was sharper with the bigger groups—the prisoners rejoicing in their first taste of open air; the finale in which relatives, carrying pictures of their “disappeared” loved ones, stormed the prison—than with more intimate scenes. Jun Märkl’s conducting was uneven, and he rushed into the climactic moment, when Leonore removes Florestan’s shackles, without leaving any space for wonder.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.