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LAVENDER SCARE MCCARTHYISM MADISON OPERA

Gay Love in the McCarthy Era

Madison Opera's "Fellow Travelers" centers around two men working for the federal government during the Lavender Scare.

IN 1953 PRESIDENT Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450 into law, which set security standards for federal government employees. The Lavender Scare, taken from the term "lavender lads," was an order passed to fire federal government employees who were thought to be homosexual, or have homosexual tendencies. Homosexual men and women were felt to be more susceptible to being manipulated by Communism, and thus caused a national security risk. Hundreds lost their jobs.

The new opera "Fellow Travelers" by Gregory Spears and libretto by Greg Pierce, is based on the novel of the same name by Thomas Mallon. The opera centers around two men working for the federal government during the Lavender Scare: Hawkins "Hawk" Fuller, a State Department official; and Timothy Laughlin, a young English major at Fordham University working as an intern in Washington, D.C.

"We wanted to focus on the love story," said Spears. "Opera is about people, not about abstract ideas. You can find a lot of truth if you just watch people living their lives."

Spears wanted to ensure that the true focus was on the central love story, and the novel showcases the personal connections but also a lot about actual historical events. This doesn't necessarily lend itself to a successful opera. According to Spears, it was most important to make this as natural as possible. This piece contains a fair amount of dialogue, which is not typical of the usual opera.

"I had to build and grow new tools," Spears said, "and it is a lot of work to keep it natural like a conversation. To find the

simplicity you have to work through a lot of complexity, finding the nuances to allow the singer to bring the character to life."

Director Peter Rothstein, who graduated with his MFA from UW-Madison, is directing this piece for the third time. "The central characters in this opera are three-dimensional, complex characters," Rothstein said. "With each new cast, it has been important to build a process where the artists have the space to find their personal place in the story,



Acosta



Smith

building these rich characters from a place of honesty and integrity. As a result, the performances have been quite different from company to company." He also feels a close connection to the story. "As a gay man, it's been exciting to finally direct gay characters. I directed my first opera while doing my MFA at UW-Madison 25 years ago, but not until 'Fellow Travelers' have I directed a queer story for the stage. I have a profound gratitude for the gay women and men who came before me. Too many of them were forced to live their lives in the shadows, and that's where their stories remained. It's an honor to shed light on both the victims and heroes of the Lavender Scare," he said.

Cuban-American tenor Andres Acosta sings the role of Timothy Laughlin, the college intern discovering and struggling with his own sexuality. This is Acosta's third time playing the leading male, and he's excited to reconnect with this character once again.

MADISON OPERA

COMPLICATED LOVE. UNFORGIVING TIMES.

Fellow Travelers

MUSIC BY GREGORY SPEARS
LIBRETTO BY GREG PIERCE

FEBRUARY 7 & 9, 2020
CAPITOL THEATER



"A near-perfect example of fast-flowing musical drama." -The New York Times

Sung in English with projected text | 608.258.4141 | madisonopera.org/Travelers



Too many of them were forced to live their lives in the shadows, and that's where their stories remained. It's an honor to shed light on both the victims and heroes of the Lavender Scare.

walk away with both emotional catharsis and an understanding of how vibrant the American opera scene has become."

This opera is about people and the natural and environmental complexities of a relationship. You see the good parts and the bad parts; they are flawed, their relationship is flawed, and their world is flawed. The characters are very strong, very real.

All great operas have an emotional core, which allows audiences to connect to them in their own way dependent on their personal

experiences and emotions. This opera allows audiences to sit back, take in the beauty of these human relationships, and enjoy this ever-evolving artform.

"Music steps in where words fail." Rothstein explained. "The characters are often unable to speak the truth, sometimes because of ignorance and other times because of fear. I hope audiences are moved by the story and hear the truths it has to tell in both words and the more universal language of music." ■



ROBERT A. GODERICH is an out professional opera singer and musical theater actor based in Madison. He's performed regionally with Madison Opera, Skylight Music Theatre, Capital City, CTM, Four Seasons Theatre, and even with San Francisco Opera.