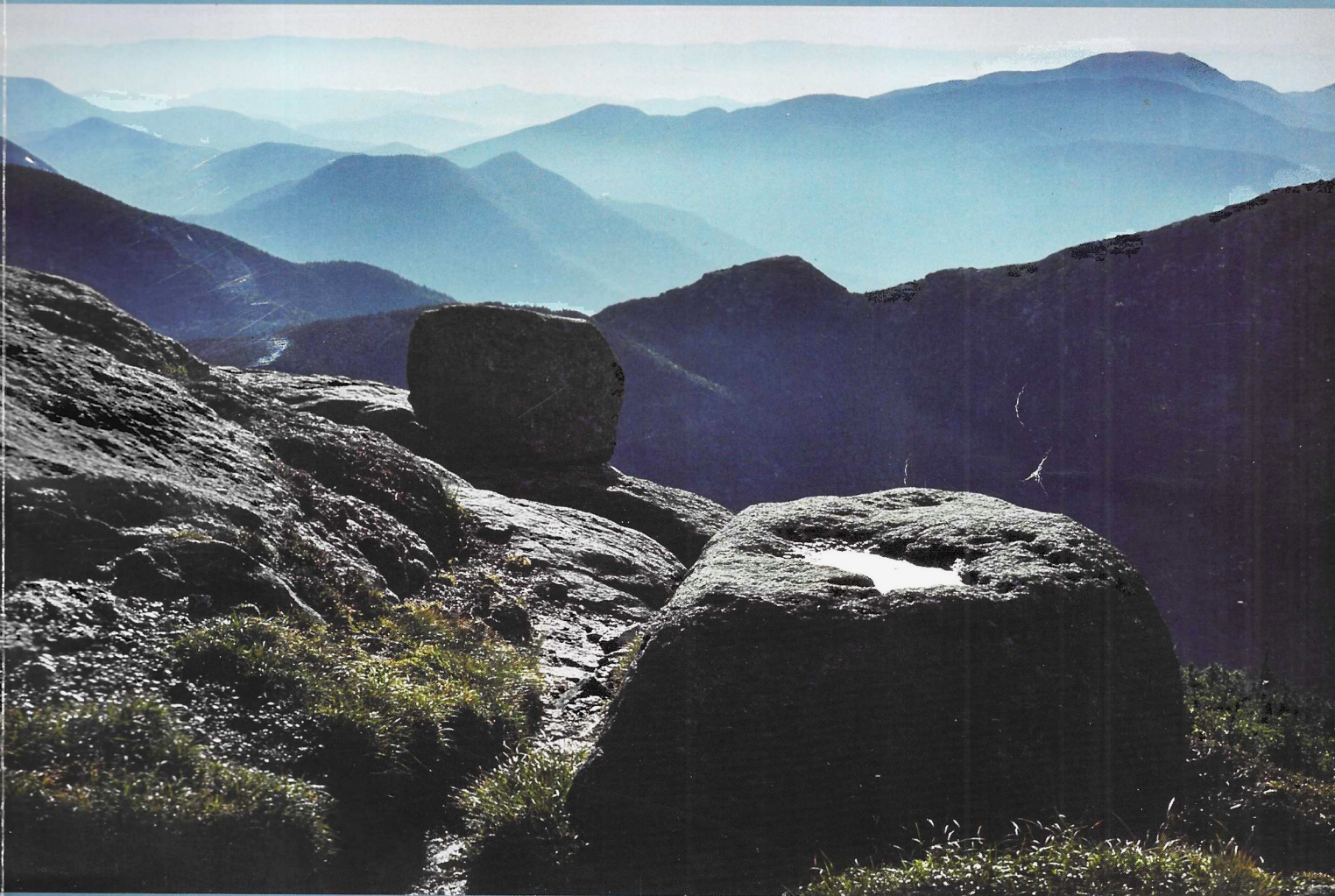


# Glimmerglass FESTIVAL 2014



MADAME BUTTERFLY • CAROUSEL • ARIADNE IN NAXOS • AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY





# AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (2005/2014)

Music by Tobias Picker

Libretto by Gene Scheer

Based on Theodore Dreiser's novel of the same title

## CAST, IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

Gilbert Griffiths	Daniel T. Curran*
Clyde Griffiths	Christian Bowers*
Roberta Alden	Vanessa Isiguen*
Grace	Samantha Guevrekian*
Elizabeth Griffiths	Jennifer Root*
Samuel Griffiths	Aleksey Bogdanov*
Bella Griffiths	Meredith Lustig*
Sondra Finchley	Cynthia Cook*
Reverend McMillan	John Kapusta*
Orville Mason	Thomas Richards*
Elvira Griffiths	Patricia Schuman
Judge	Matthew Scollin

The Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra and Chorus

## PRODUCTION

Conductor	George Manahan
Director	Peter Kazaras
Choreographer	Eric Sean Fogel
Sets	Alexander Dodge
Costumes	Anya Klepikov
Lighting	Robert Wierzel
Projected Text	Kelley Rourke
Hair & Makeup	Anne Ford-Coates
Assistant Conductor	Nimrod David Pfeffer*
Assistant Director	Sarah Hutchings*
Principal Coach/Accompanist	Christopher Devlin
Assistant Coach/Accompanist	Dan K. Kurland*
Stage Manager	Richard K. Blanton

\*Members of the Young Artists Program

\*Alumnus of the Young Artists Program

Clyde Griffiths, the poor son of a street preacher, has moved to Lycurgus to work in his uncle's factory. Roberta, a factory worker, catches his eye, and he begins to pursue her. Not long afterward, he meets Sondra, a friend of the Griffiths family, and is intrigued; the feeling is mutual. Although Clyde continues to see Roberta, he spends more and more time with Sondra. Roberta reveals to Clyde that she is pregnant and pleads with him to marry her; he agrees.

As Roberta waits for Clyde to make good on his promise, she writes him a series of increasingly desperate letters. Clyde, lost in his dreams of a future with Sondra, continues to put her off. When Roberta confronts Clyde at church, he pulls her aside and convinces her not to embarrass him, agreeing to come for her later that evening. Clyde fantasizes about making his problems disappear.

Clyde takes Roberta to the Adirondacks. As they share a rowboat, Clyde tells Roberta they will be married first thing in the morning. When she is distracted by water lilies, he contemplates pushing her in, but cannot bring himself to do it. A few minutes later, their movements cause the boat to capsize.

Clyde, charged with Roberta's murder, claims her drowning was an accident. Sondra's circle urges her to protect her reputation by forgetting Clyde. Elvira, Clyde's mother, comes to Lycurgus to ask the Griffiths family to use their political power to help her son; they refuse. Clyde is tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. He admits to his mother that he could have saved Roberta; she prays that he be forgiven and leaves him. Clyde spends his last moments reading a letter from Sondra.

# 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 60<sup>th</sup> 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 Griffiths 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 identify 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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*Thomas May is a writer, educator and translator whose books include Decoding Wagner and The John Adams Reader. His essays appear in the publications of such institutions as the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall, the National Symphony, San Francisco Opera and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.*

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For at fifteen, and even a little earlier, Clyde began to understand that his education, as well as his sisters' and brother's, had been sadly neglected. And it would be rather hard for him to overcome this handicap, seeing that other boys and girls with more money and better homes were being trained for special kinds of work. How was one to get a start under such circumstances? Already when, at the age of thirteen, fourteen and fifteen, he began looking in the papers, which, being too worldly, had never been admitted to his home, he found that mostly skilled help was wanted, or boys to learn trades in which at the moment he was not very much interested. For true to the standard of the American youth, or the general American attitude toward life, he felt himself above the type of labor which was purely manual. What! Run a machine, lay bricks, learn to be a carpenter, or a plasterer, or plumber, when boys no better than himself were clerks and druggists' assistants and bookkeepers and assistants in banks and real estate offices and such! Wasn't it menial, as miserable as the life he had thus far been leading, to wear old clothes and get up so early in the morning and do all the commonplace things such people had to do?

For Clyde was as vain and proud as he was poor. He was one of those interesting individuals who looked upon himself as a thing apart — never quite wholly and indissolubly merged with the family of which he was a member, and never with any profound obligations to those who had been responsible for his coming into the world. On the contrary, he was inclined to study his parents, not too sharply or bitterly, but with a very fair grasp of their qualities and capabilities. And yet, with so much judgement in that direction, he was never quite able — at least not until he had reached his sixteenth year — to formulate any policy in regard to himself, and then only in a rather fumbling and tentative way.

— Theodore Dreiser,  
*An American Tragedy*

...the ultimate  
expendable.

*An American Tragedy* is a particularly American story in that it deals with one man's attempt to rise above the circumstances of his birth. Clyde's climb involves a certain amount of talent and hard work, but he also relies on charm and sex appeal to fight his way through the class structure, including the class structure in his own family.

In our production, the ironwork gives a nod to the growth of industry, while other architectural features signal an almost unattainable upper-class utopia. We also feel the omnipresence of others as Clyde's story plays out — factory workers, churchgoers, domestic help, society types. In this world, there is opportunity for tremendous wealth for some — but not all. The human detritus of the fortunate few is visible throughout, and Clyde, of course, is the ultimate expendable.

— Peter Kazaras

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