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Harrowing Times: 'Fellow Travelers' Triumphs at Cincinnati Opera

June 24th, 2016 [Matthew Wexler](#)

by *Ryan Leeds*



'Fellow Travelers' at Cincinnati Opera.

Tales of forbidden love are as old as storytelling itself, but rarely are they told with as much painstaking heartbreak as *Fellow Travelers*, a new opera by composer Gregory Spears and librettist Greg Pierce having its world premiere at the [Cincinnati Opera](#).

Based on the 2007 historical novel of the same name by Thomas Mallon, *Fellow Travelers* tells the story of Hawkins Fuller (Joseph Lattanzi) and Timothy Laughlin (Aaron Blake), a gay couple who find themselves embroiled in Senator Joseph

McCarthy's (Marcus DeLoach) witch hunt to prosecute homosexuals amidst the 1950s threat of communism.

Fuller, a dashing, masculine state department employee meets the sweet, "boy next door" type Laughlin at a park in the Washington D.C. neighborhood of Dupont Circle. In spite of their polar opposite world views, Fuller and Laughlin—whose pet names for each another are "Hawk" and "Skippy," respectively—fall madly for one another.

Hawkins assistant, Mary Johnson (Devon Guthrie) and another office secretary, Miss Lightfoot (Alexandra Schoneny), overhear the lovers at an office party, setting the wheels of suspicion and scrutiny in motion. If their surreptitious affair weren't enough, it is further complicated by their own internal struggles. Fuller is torn between marriage to a woman for career and convention's sake, and his affection for Laughlin.

Laughlin's inability to reconcile his Catholic faith and gay relationship plagues him. Librettist Greg Pierce has done a remarkable job with character depth. He has adapted Mallon's fictitious leading roles into multi-layered men of complexity. It should also be noted that Mallon, who identifies as a gay conservative Catholic, based Laughlin after himself, making the piece all the more potent.



The Jarson-Kaplan Theater at the Aronoff Center for the Arts.

Pierce has also achieved success by keeping his story and the cast lean. Composer Spears has created a score that is often hauntingly beautiful yet simultaneously tuneful. Its musical resonance within the intimate Jarson-Kaplan Theater at the [Aronoff Center for the Arts](#), can also be attributed to conductor Mark Gibson's passionate skill.

Vocally, there is not a weak performer on the stage. Lattanzi's rich baritone, combined with his imposing height is swoon-worthy and could probably charm the pants off of Rush Limbaugh; an incredibly unsettling image, but I think I've made my point. Blake's tenor is spectacular and clear. Even in his upper register, his tone remains wholly focused. The rest of director Kevin Newbury's cast is stellar but it is Lattanzi and Blake who do most of the heavy lifting here.

Victoria (Vita) Tzukun's set design is appropriately sparse, yet slick. With a few simple pivots, we are transported between the office and various apartment settings. Paul Carey's stylish costumes evoke the strict conformity of the era and **Thomas C. Hase's dramatic lighting adds a subtle yet important layer of profundity to the tragic tale.**

By the time the curtain fell, there were stifled tears, caused not only by the events on stage, but because they inspired serious reflection about the state of our nation. While this is a gay themed opera, it is impossible not to draw a correlation between McCarthy's lavender scare and the anti-Muslim sentiment that has recently become sickeningly acceptable in our country. In addition, the Orlando tragedy remains on the forefront in our community and has rippled throughout the world.

Thankfully, stories like this provide a civil, but extremely powerful catalyst for change and help reinforce a defiant pride suggesting that we will not remain invisible, bullied, or powerless. Not only does love ultimately win; music shares in the triumph.

Fellow Travelers

Cincinnati Opera

Aronoff Center for the Arts

650 Walnut Street, Cincinnati, OH

Through July 10

For more information on arts and culture in Cincinnati, visit www.CincinnatiUSA.com.

Ryan Leeds is a freelance theater journalist who lives in Manhattan. He is the Chief Theater Critic for Manhattan Digest and a frequent contributor to Dramatics Magazine. Follow him on Twitter @Ry_Runner or on Facebook