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Heard Milk?

Iconoclasm, politics, passion: Harvey Milk the man and *Harvey Milk* the opera have a lot in common

BY FLORA SUSSELY

It is not often we get an opera about a modern hero. And, as librettist Michael Korie points out, an ode to a Great American Civil Rights Hero has never before been done on the opera stage. So, we have a lot to celebrate: Not only has it now been done, but it has been done about a Gay American Hero and it is a very good opera.

Listening to *Harvey Milk*, the opera, is a chilling experience. It begins with an eerie aural collage of the Jewish prayer for the dead in Hebrew and the sampled voice of Diane Feinstein speaking the words: "As President of the Board of Supervisors, it is my duty to make this announcement.... Both Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk have been shot and killed. The suspect is Supervisor Dan White."

It is perhaps one of the most powerful openings of any opera in any generation. But the subject of this opera is a man who really did exist; this is not an imaginative drama, it is history.

Stewart Wallace has composed a decidedly American musical piece. The syncopated rhythms are reminiscent of young Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* or *West Side Story*. The whole piece has a musical impatience that builds as time frames overlap—Harvey at fifteen, Harvey in the closet, Harvey's mother mourning him and warning him about the "golems." In some moments it veers into territories well charted by composers like Giuliani and Weill, who put us into metaphoric make-believe with dramatic and musical cues.

In essence, this is a documentary opera about the life and assassination of a gay Jewish man in the United States. And, because the two themes were of such equal importance in Harvey Milk's identity, librettist Korie and composer Wallace give both subjects musical and poetic juxtaposition. You hear the campy lyrics and show-tune melodies and sudden ancient Hebrew cadences.

There are obvious parallels between the persecution Harvey's parents suffered under Hitler and the homophobia and gay bashing Harvey endures. Mama sings, "They forced us to wear a yellow star"; the lover of a friend sings, "The Nazis hated the queers. They made them wear the pink triangle and threw them in the camps with the Jews"; Harvey sings, "My

star is a pair of triangles: one pink, one yellow"; and Harvey's closest lover tells how he "Got thrown in a D.C. jail, knocked out with a steel pipe and raped, fourteen times in one night".

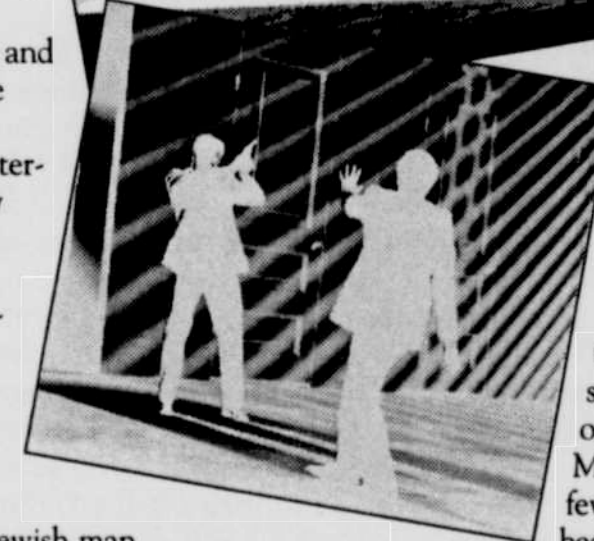
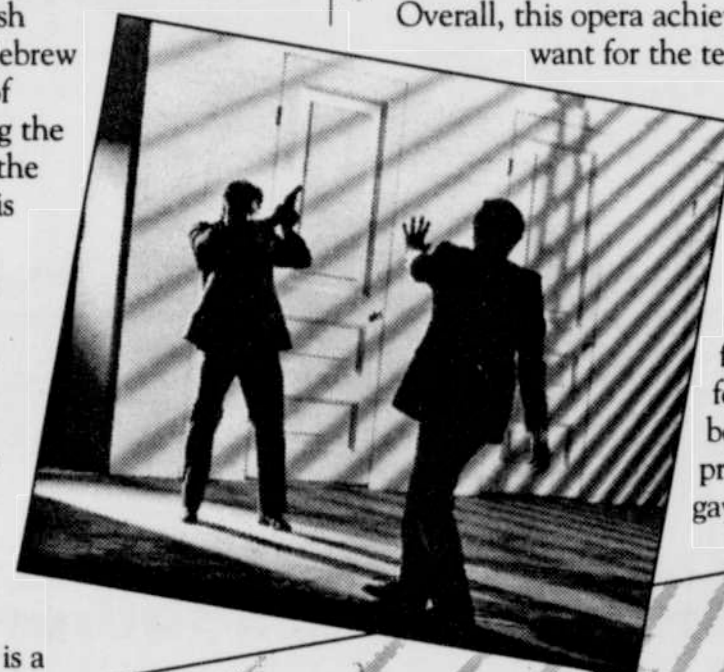
This opera is not easy listening. Even the humor is noir:

"Fourteen times?"

"At least I didn't have to cook them breakfast. That many eggs Benedict could wreck a girl's budget."

Overall, this opera achieves what we would want for the telling of one of our

heroes. It stands on its own musically, and eloquently tells a tale of bravery. Harvey Milk and the dozens of friends interviewed for this work should be proud. This opera presents Milk as a gay icon, an activist



for gay and minority rights, a crusader for all who felt alienated from the U.S. political power structure, a man true to himself and passionate about life.

Anecdotal to his life—and to how fitting it is that his story should be told as an opera—is the fact that Harvey Milk loved opera and, in fact, a few days before his death had been a guest, with his lover, Scott, at a production of Puccini's

Tosca. In the third act of *Tosca*, shortly before his assassination, the idealistic lover Cavaradossi sings "E lucevan le stelle," an aria in which he says, "and never have I loved life so very very much."

Ultimately, this is an opera that should be seen and heard, but the CD, featuring the original cast, is now available with accompanying libretto and history lesson.

For those of us who were not in San Francisco on that chilly November morning in 1978, listening to this is our chance to experience a moment in history when the streets filled with thousands of mourners for one of us.

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