

OPERA NEWS

Morning Star

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Cincinnati's *Morning Star*, with Smith and Pojanowski
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AFTER OPENING ITS ninety-fifth season with a triumphantly traditional *Trovatore*, Cincinnati Opera looked boldly forward for its second production with a world premiere — Ricky Ian Gordon's *Morning Star*, a product of Cincinnati's Opera Fusion: New Works program and the company's first individually commissioned work (seen June 30).

Based on a play by Sylvia Regan, William M. Hoffman's libretto is cast in two acts, with a prologue and epilogue. The opera opens with mourners awaiting hearses bearing victims of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Focusing on the Felderman family, Act I recounts events during the year leading up to the fire. Becky Felderman, a widow sung by soprano Twyla Robinson, is struggling to hold her family together, while her three daughters, all young adults, dream of better lives with the men they love. In addition to a younger son, Hymie (Owen Gunderman), not yet a teenager, the other principal figures are Aaron Greenspan (Morgan Smith), a lodger in love with Becky; Harry Engel (Andrew Lovato), a would-be teacher in love with Esther, the youngest daughter (Elizabeth Zharoff), but also the object of the affections of Sadie, the eldest (Elizabeth Pojanowski); Irving Tashman (Andrew Bidlack), a songwriter in love with Fanny, the middle daughter (Jennifer Zetlan); and Pearl and Prince (Jeanine De Bique and Larry D. Hylton), fishmongers who have migrated from the South.

Act II returns to the remaining family in 1932, at the height of the Great Depression. Becky is visited by the ghosts of Esther, who died in the fire, and Hymie, killed in World War I (sung as an adult by Spencer Viator). Much of the action is driven by Sadie, now a ruthless businesswoman married to Harry. She has forced Aaron out of business and is intent on manipulating her mother and Aaron to break the union. Harry, terminally ill, ends his loveless marriage to Sadie, and Becky finally accepts Aaron's proposal. The act ends with them toasting

everyone they have loved. The epilogue represents the 1911 fire. As most of the singers step out of character to narrate the event, the Rabbi (Kenneth Shaw) sings the Kaddish while Esther and her friend Mary prepare to jump from the burning building.

Morning Star is a rich, complex work likely to repay repeated hearings, but a single encounter can justify only the most general observations. As in his other works, Gordon creates a series of closed forms, typically complex ensembles built around extended scenes for individual characters. The composer also uses music to distinguish each of the characters and comment on the action. For example, Fanny, a frustrated singer, gets an operatic style, complete with trills and a bit of coloratura, whereas the ambitious Sadie employs a hard-edged, almost jazzy idiom as she recounts her career. In Act II, when Harry Engel finally breaks with Sadie, his longing for freedom is underscored with Esther's music from Act I. Gordon sets text beautifully, moving seamlessly from a conversational style shaped by the words to more lyrical passages that reveal the feelings underlying those words. A good example occurs in Act I as Esther and her friend Mary (Adria Caffaro), both pregnant, express their fears and determination to keep their children. There is affectionate pastiche in the ballad that Irving writes for Fanny and outright comedy in the ragtime enumeration of the things that are and aren't kosher.

The imaginative production, directed by Ron Daniels and designed by Riccardo Hernandez (sets), Emily Rebholz (costumes) and Thomas C. Hase (lighting), was well suited to the intimate Corbett Theater of the School for Creative and Performing Arts, with projections (designed by Wendall Harrington) of period photographs and newspapers helping to advance the story and clarify the action. The cast was uniformly strong, paced by conductor Christopher Allen. The few lines of dialogue spoken over the orchestra were usually inaudible, but that was the only miscalculation in the opening-night performance. —Joe Law