

Critic's Notebook

## **A Soldier's Racially Charged Suicide Becomes a Powerful Opera**

Andrew Stenson and Mika Shigematsu in "An American Soldier," based on the true story of a young private's death after racist hazing, at Opera Theater of St. Louis. Credit Ken Howard



Image



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Opera Theater of St. Louis  
NYT Critic's Pick

By [Anthony Tommasini](#)

- June 13, 2018

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- • • ST. LOUIS — “They can’t hear me,” the ghost of Pvt. Danny Chen sings desperately during the first scene of the new opera “An American Soldier.” “No one’s listening.” In real life, Private Chen, after months of vicious hazing and racist taunts, killed himself in 2011 at an army outpost in Afghanistan. He was 19.

The opera opens in the military court where a sergeant is being tried for negligent homicide in the death. The dead man's ghost appears, trying to speak to those assembled there — including Private Chen's suffering mother, who has come seeking justice — who can't see or hear him. But thanks to the composer Huang Ruo and the playwright David Henry Hwang, the creators of this powerful work, we're listening to him now.

Basing an opera on [a recent historical event](#), especially a story fraught with racism, is risky. But "An American Soldier," having its premiere in an expanded two-act version here at Opera Theater of St. Louis and seen on Saturday, is convincing, driven by Mr. Hwang's rueful libretto and Mr. Huang's arresting music. Turning what was a 60-minute chamber opera — seen in Washington, D.C., in 2014 — into a richly orchestrated two-hour work, the creators explore the complexities of Private Chen's life and death, the tragic tale of a young Chinese-American man who just wanted to prove he was, as he sings, a "real American, an American soldier."

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The libretto situates the story at the trial but explains how we got there through a series of flashbacks rendered vividly in Matthew Ozawa's strikingly spare production, with sets that slide on and off a shadowy stage. We see the teenage Danny (sung with raw emotion and poignant boyishness by the remarkable tenor Andrew Stenson) at home in New York's Chinatown, making dinner with his beloved mother (the affecting mezzo-soprano Mika Shigematsu, in a remarkable performance), who is distressed to find out her son has enlisted. There are increasingly awful incidents at boot camp and in Afghanistan, where he endures vulgar hazing from his fellow soldiers and sadistic humiliations from the racist sergeant (the bass-baritone Wayne Tigges, who is chilling).

Nathan Stark, center, as a judge in a scene from "An American Soldier." Credit Ken Howard



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Nathan Stark, center, as a judge in a scene from "An American Soldier." Credit Ken Howard



Elements of modernist atonality, Asian-inflected styles, jazz and eerie atmospheric noise course through the taut score. Yet you sense Mr. Huang in control of every detail. Whole stretches crackle with sputtering rhythms and skittish riffs. Strange, fractured fanfares, like would-be military marches, keep recurring. But during reflective passages, searching vocal lines are backed by tremulous harmonies and delicate instrumental flecks. Both the subtle colorings and pummeling intensity came through in the compelling performance the conductor Michael Christie drew from the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

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Mr. Huang acutely charts emotional undercurrents in his music. During the first flashback, set on a fire escape, Danny chats with his cheerful, college-bound friend Josephine (the soprano Kathleen Kim). Her music is chirpy and kinetic, but weird chords and nervous bits rustling in the orchestra suggest that Josephine fears that his plan to enlist is dangerous. Similarly, the opera depicts a boot camp ritual called “Racial Thursdays,” when the soldiers were all but encouraged to hurl racist taunts at each another, the idea being that such venting would let off steam and boost morale. But in the opera, as these soldiers mask their barbs with comradely banter, Mr. Huang’s roiling music reveals the deep hatreds at play.

One late scene struck me as a miscalculation. At the trial, after the sergeant is cleared of the most serious charges, the judge (the earthy bass Nathan Stark) and a chorus of male and female soldiers sing “E pluribus unum; from the many, one.” With music that hints of Copland, Mr. Huang tries to rescue the trope of the affirming American anthem from triteness. But especially given the political climate of today, with anti-immigrant hostility being stoked by a divisive administration in Washington, it was hard to know what to make of this attempt at redemption. I wanted more bitterness and irony.

## **A Mourning Mother’s Lullaby**

The mezzo-soprano Guang Yang performs a lullaby for the character Mother Chen at the Guggenheim Museum’s Works & Process series.

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After a harrowing scene showing Private Chen’s final humiliation (he is forced by the sergeant to crawl over sharp rocks while soldiers hurl stones at him) and the bleak depiction of his death — the shooting, which his family never accepted was a suicide, takes place offstage — “An American Soldier” ends magnificently with a sorrowful scene for his mother. She tells us of *her* American dream: simply to work, be happy and raise a family. The day her son was born, she thought: “This is enough.” Then she sings an elegiac lullaby to her dead son, though she can’t help slipping into bursts of anger.

On Friday, Opera Theater presented a new production of Mark Blitzstein’s “Regina.” It’s based on Lillian Hellman’s play “The Little Foxes,” best known from the 1941 film starring Bette Davis as Regina Giddins, a Southern woman with aristocratic airs who struggles for wealth and

independence in a deeply patriarchal culture. “Regina” had its premiere in a Broadway theater in 1949, but closed quickly; critics and audiences were baffled by Blitzstein’s hybrid of opera and musical theater.

## Video

### 1:16 Susan Graham in ‘Regina’

An excerpt from the aria “The Best Thing of All,” performed during a rehearsal at Opera Theater of St. Louis.

But “Regina” may be a piece whose time has come, especially as presented here in James Robinson’s production, suggestive of the Southern locale and early-20th-century period, and performed by an exceptional cast led by the mezzo-soprano Susan Graham in the title role. Though the score evokes spirituals, jazz, folk songs, ragtime and Dixieland, the elements of musical theater came through most strongly in this performance, led with brio by Stephen Lord. The score keeps breaking into set-piece arias that are basically Broadway songs. Leonard Bernstein admired Blitzstein tremendously, and the influence of “Regina” upon Bernstein’s stage works is unmistakable.

The plot turns on Regina’s attempt to secure \$75,000 so that she can join her two wealthy brothers in a plan to build a cotton mill on their plantation. She schemes to get the money from her ailing husband — and, as we discover, stops at nothing to do so.

The baritone Ron Raines, who has worked extensively in musical theater, and the veteran Wagnerian bass-baritone James Morris were excellent as the two brothers, Oscar and Benjamin. The soprano Susanna Phillips brought touching vulnerability to the role of Birdie, Oscar’s flighty wife, who frets and drinks too much. The youthful bloom of the soprano Monica Dewey’s voice was perfect for Alexandra, Regina’s daughter, who comes to understand her mother’s ruthlessness.

And Ms. Graham, who has [sung a lot of bubbly roles](#) in her day, seized on Regina to show her flair for fiercely dramatic singing. At one point, Regina says that when she was young, she “loathed and despised” anyone who “obeyed so easy.” This includes women, it’s clear, who simply heed their parents and husbands. Ms. Graham delivered the phrases with sneering contempt and steely tone. You believed this proto-feminist Regina.