

Fellow Travelers

Music by Gregory Spears, Libretto by Greg Pierce
Based on the novel by Thomas Mallon

Study Guide to the Opera

Cincinnati Opera, Production Photo by Philip Groshong



Red Scare, Lavender Scare, and a Love Story

During a State Department Christmas party in Scene 6 of *Fellow Travelers*, an office worker confides a bit of gossip to her boss: “They fired Bobby Carter. For being in the wrong bar.” That’s the context of the McCarthy era and the “lavender scare”, which swept homosexuals into the wider dragnet of the “red scare” intended for Communists and other “subversives”. The opera’s plot follows the relationship between two men working for the federal government; their experiences illuminate a dark chapter of gay history. In the 1950s, homophobia was pervasive and the cost of being found out was high.

The “red scare” during the Cold War in the 1950s—and its most visible public face, Senator Joseph McCarthy—fueled fears of widespread communist subversion. McCarthy alleged that numerous communists, Soviet spies, and sympathizers had infiltrated the federal government, film industry, and universities. The “lavender scare” that arose at that time lasted decades longer; the moral panic reflected supposed security threats posed by gay and lesbian employees. Many government employees were dismissed from government service and persecution of homosexuals became normalized. Some believed that due to the stigma around homosexuality, gay people were vulnerable to blackmail, which could lead to a breach in national security. A document in the National Archives, “These People Are Frightened to Death” by Judith Adkins, provides a detailed report about the political rhetoric that increasingly linked “Communists and queers”. Both were thought to be morally weak or psychologically disturbed, both were seen as godless, both purportedly undermined the traditional family, both were assumed to recruit, and both were shadowy figures with a secret subculture.

These themes became rich material for creating an exciting opera that holds a mirror up to a dark chapter in history. Basing the opera on the novel by Thomas Mallon, Gregory Spears and Greg Pierce crafted an opening act that Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim called “a near-perfect example of fast-flowing musical drama” (*New York Times*). The creators wrote music and words for 10 artists singing 18 roles, with a 17–person chamber orchestra. Since its premiere in 2016, the opera has been performed and critically acclaimed in Cincinnati, New York, Chicago, Des Moines, Virginia, Arizona, Minnesota, Boston, Florida, Columbus, Madison, San Francisco, and London. But like many operas, *Fellow Travelers* is still a love story and a human story.

Fellow Travelers Scenes

September 1953 to May 1957, in Washington, D.C. Eisenhower is president. Senator Joseph McCarthy is stoking fears that the U.S. federal government is full of Communists, Soviet spies, and homosexuals.

Scene 1 Park in Dupont Circle

A fledgling reporter, Timothy Laughlin, sits on a bench reviewing his notes from McCarthy's wedding when he is approached by State Department employee Hawkins Fuller.

Scene 2 Senator Charles Potter's Office

Timothy is hired as a speechwriter for Senator Charles Potter. Timothy meets Tommy McIntyre, who gives him unsolicited advice about Washington politics.

Scene 3 Hawkins's Office

Timothy stops by Hawkins's office to drop off a thank-you gift. He meets Hawkins's assistant and best friend Mary, and his secretary Miss Lightfoot, who mocks Timothy after he leaves.

Scene 4 Timothy's Apartment

Timothy is at home cooking soup and writing his sister a letter when Hawkins unexpectedly stops by to tell him about the delights of Bermuda, among other things.

Scene 5 St. Peter's Church

In the afterglow of last night's encounter with Hawkins, Timothy is torn between his deep Catholicism and his blossoming passion.

Scene 6 The Hotel Washington

At a Christmas party, Timothy is approached by an Army general about enlisting; Mary warns Hawkins about his reckless behavior with Timothy; McIntyre tells Potter about McCarthy's latest political troubles; Miss Lightfoot overhears an intimate exchange between Hawkins and Timothy.

Scene 7 Interrogation Room M304

An interrogator puts Hawkins through a series of humiliating tests in an attempt to determine whether or not he is a homosexual.

Scene 8 Timothy's Apartment

Timothy and Hawkins discuss the interrogation, McCarthy, and Hawkins's illicit amusements in New York City.

Intermission

Characters

Mary Johnson

soprano

Close friend and colleague to both Hawkins Fuller and Timothy Laughlin.

Timothy Laughlin

tenor

An ambitious recent college graduate who arrives in 1950s Washington, D.C., ready to join the fight against Communism. A chance encounter with Hawkins Fuller results in his first job and first romantic relationship with a man.

Hawkins Fuller

baritone

A handsome and charismatic State Department official who loves Laughlin, but comes under the watchful eye of McCarthyism and faces charges that could cost him his job and his freedom.

Miss Lightfoot

soprano

A colleague of Mary's.

Senator Joseph McCarthy/Estonian Frank/Interrogator

[combined roles] *baritone*

The men representing the era's persecution. McCarthy, a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, was the public face of fear of communist subversion during the 1950s Cold War tensions.

Lucy

soprano

A woman who marries Hawkins for appearances.

Tommy McIntyre

baritone

A fellow student of Timothy's.

Senator Charles Potter/General Arlie/Bartender

[combined roles] *baritone*

A U.S. Senator from Michigan, Potter figured prominently in the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings. Potter is a close friend and colleague to both Fuller and Laughlin.

Sen. Potter's Assistant/Bookseller/Priest/Technician/Party Guest

[combined roles] *bass*

General Zwicker

spoken [pre-recorded]

A highly decorated American Army officer who came to the public's attention during McCarthy's 1954 investigation.

Scene 9 McCarthy's Office

Senator Potter warns McCarthy that the "Adams Chronology," which details how Roy Cohn and McCarthy pressured the Army to give Cohn's friend David Schine special treatment, will be McCarthy's downfall unless he gives up Cohn.

Scene 10 Mary's Kitchen/ Timothy's Apartment

Mary invites Timothy over to warn him of Hawkins's fickle nature. She tells Timothy she is pregnant from a one-night stand. In Timothy's apartment, Hawkins rejoices that he's been cleared of allegations of homosexuality. Timothy is shocked by how Hawkins wants to celebrate.

Scene 11 Roof of the Old Post Office

Timothy, in agony over his fraught relationship, tells Hawkins he's decided to enlist in the Army.

Scene 12 Hawkins's Office

Mary tells Hawkins she is quitting, as she can no longer work in an atmosphere of panic and persecution.

Scene 13 Timothy in France/ Hawkins in Chevy Chase

Three years pass. Timothy writes letters to Hawkins and Mary from France, where he is stationed. Hawkins is now married to a woman named Lucy, with a house in the suburbs, but would clearly like to rekindle his relationship with Timothy upon his return.

Scene 14 Brick House

In a house in D.C. that Hawkins has rented for his afternoon flings with Timothy, Hawkins expresses that he cannot be everything Timothy wants. Hawkins resolves to end the affair himself.

Scene 15 Mary's Kitchen/Brick House/ Room M304

Mary is packing when Hawkins stops by, distraught. Hawkins confesses that in order to push Timothy away, he has given Timothy's name to those investigating alleged homosexuals. He asks Mary to tell Timothy about this betrayal in hopes it will make Timothy hate him.

Scene 16 Park in Dupont Circle

His dreams dashed, Timothy decides to leave Washington, D.C., and Hawkins Fuller for good. Both heartbroken, they say goodbye.

—Courtesy of Greg Pierce, Cincinnati Opera

Meet the Librettist and the Author

Greg Pierce is a playwright, librettist, and lyricist. Born in Vermont, he now lives in New York City. He wrote librettos for the operas *The Hours* (with composer Kevin Puts), *Fellow Travelers* (with composer Gregory Spears), and *The Glitch* (with composer Nico Muhly). Pierce wrote two musicals with composer John Kander, *The Landing* and *Kid Victory*, and wrote the plays *Slowgirl*, *Her Requiem*, and *Cardinal*. With his brother, composer Randal Pierce, he wrote *The Quarry* for Vermont Stage Company.

Pierce has received fellowships from the Edward F. Albee Foundation, Yaddo, The Djerassi Institute, Baryshnikov Arts Center, and New York Public Library. Pierce has a B.A. from Oberlin College and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Warren Wilson College. He is a member of Dramatists Guild and Writers Guild of America. He plays ping-pong.



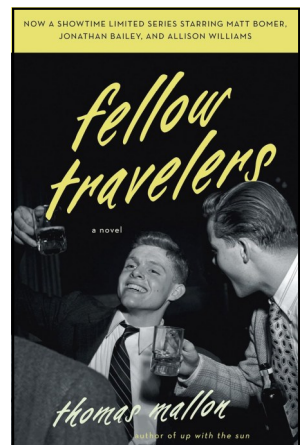
Greg Pierce

Thomas Mallon is an American novelist, critic, and essayist. He is Professor Emeritus of English at George Washington University. His novels are renowned for their attention to historical detail and context and for the author's crisp wit and interest in "bystanders" to larger historical events. He is the author of ten books of fiction and has also published nonfiction on plagiarism, diaries, letters, and the Kennedy assassination, as well as two volumes of essays.

Mallon's 2007 novel, *Fellow Travelers*, has been adapted into other genres: the 2016 opera by Spears and Pierce and the 2023 television mini-series streaming on Showtime/Paramount+.

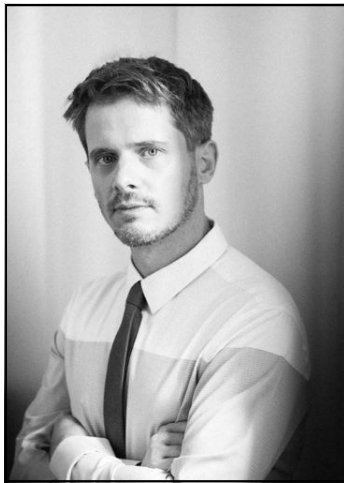


Thomas Mallon



Meet the Composer

Gregory Spears is a New York-based composer whose music has been called “astonishingly beautiful” (*The New York Times*), “coolly entrancing” (*The New Yorker*), and “some of the most beautifully unsettling music to appear in recent memory” (*The Boston Globe*). His commissions include The New York Philharmonic, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Santa Fe Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Volti, Houston Grand Opera, Seraphic Fire, The Crossing, BMI/Concert Artists Guild, Vocal Arts DC, New York Polyphony, The New York International Piano Competition, and The New York Youth Symphony.



Gregory Spears

Photo by Dario Acosta

www.gregoryspears.com

Spears earned multiple degrees in composition: a B.M. from The Eastman School of Music, an M.M. from the Yale School of Music, and a Ph.D. from Princeton University. He has been an artist-in-residence at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. The JACK Quartet commissioned him to write a piece based on his experience as composer-in-residence at the Buttonwood Psychiatric Unit in New Jersey. Spears was a Fulbright Scholar at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, where he studied Danish minimalism and orchestration. His musical style blends minimalism, early music, and romanticism. Spears has won prizes from BMI and ASCAP as well as honors from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Composers Forum, the Fulbright Foundation, and the Vagn Holmboe Competition.

Operas by Gregory Spears

The Righteous, world premiere at Santa Fe Opera, libretto by Tracy K. Smith, 2024

Castor and Patience, world premiere at Cincinnati Opera, libretto by Tracy K. Smith, 2022

Jason and the Argonauts, world premiere at Lyric Opera of Chicago, libretto by Kathryn Walat, 2016

*Fellow Travelers**, world premiere at Cincinnati Opera, libretto by Greg Pierce, 2016

O Columbia, commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, libretto by Royce Vavrek, 2015

*Paul's Case**, world premiere at UrbanArias, libretto by Kathryn Walat, 2013

Wolf-in-Skins, work-in-progress with choreographer and librettist Christopher Williams

The Bricklayer, commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, libretto by Farnoosh Moshiri, 2012

*performed at Pittsburgh Opera

Pittsburgh Opera Education thanks our generous supporters:

Allegheny Regional Asset District	Wallis Katz
Rachel Barker	Tara Kovach
The Olga Barry Fund	Dr. Albert Lin and Karen Jeng Lin
Sandra L. Bettor	David and Dina McCormick
Elizabeth Biller	Michalka Family Charitable Fund
Francois Bitz	Celestine Montalvo
Robert and Jillian Boldin	Karin Morgan
Jalyn Booker	Nancy N. and Maurice A. Nernberg
David A. Borkovic	Robert and Christine Pietrandrea
John and Carol Brinjak	The PNC Advisors Charitable Trust Committee
Dr. Chris W. Brussalis and Christine Brussalis	Chad Quayle
The Buhl Foundation	Dominic Rupprecht and Gregory Vose
The Jack Buncher Foundation	Steve Seibert
CentiMark Foundation	Dr. Felicia Snead
Dr. Lisa Cibik and Bernie Kobosky	Drs. Robert H. and Janet E. Squires
Dr. Harry Clark	Rochelle Stachel
Rebecca Dyas and Alden Merchant	Janice Talerico
Michele Fabrizi	Dr. Jack Tomayko and Ms. Martha Yannessia
First National Bank	Christine J. Toretti
Dr. Donald R. Fischer and Hon. Nora Barry Fischer	Charles Torie
William Z. Friedlander and Andrew Sloan	John and Nancy Traina
Hilda Pang Fu	Dr. Nancy D. Washington
Alice V. Gelormino	Gene M. Welsh and Martin Healey
Paula Good	Patricia and S. John Whitehill
The Grable Foundation	Kendra Whitlock
Christopher Hahn	Ingram and Ben Ingram
Dr. Jean Anne Hattler	
Dr. Shellie Hipsky	
Dr. Susan Candace Hunt	
Intermediate Unit #1, Pennsylvania Department of Education	

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
www.pittsburghopera.org