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OPERA REVIEW: Whitman's poetry shadows Matthew Aucoin's 'Crossing'

"Crossing," a world premiere with libretto and music by former Natick and Medfield composer Matthew Aucoin, opened Friday evening at the Citi Shubert Theatre. A production by the American Repertory Theater, directed by Diane Paulus and conducted by the composer, "Crossing" examines part of the life of American poet Walt Whitman.

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Rod Gilfry and Hiroki Ichinose in a scene from Matthew Aucoin's opera "Crossing." Courtesy Photo/Gretjen Helene Photography



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By Keith Powers/Daily News Correspondent

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When an opera has a famous poet as its main character, but never names him, and hardly quotes his poetry, you're left to wonder.

What could it be about?

"Crossing," a world premiere with libretto and music by former Natick and Medfield composer Matthew Aucoin, opened Friday evening at the Citi Shubert Theatre. A production by the American Repertory Theater, directed by Diane Paulus and conducted by the composer, "Crossing" examines part of the life of American poet Walt Whitman.

But just a part - the part that took him to a Civil War field hospital to care for the hopelessly wounded, under abject conditions. The part that led him to befriend soldiers in that purgatory in modest, human ways: writing letters, bringing chocolate, holding hands.

But he's never named, and his poetry, although looming large over it all, is more shadow than substance.

"Crossing" intuitively takes its inspiration, motivation and stage direction from Whitman's uplifting "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," where the poet imagines himself and future generations, all linked by shared experience. Brief reminders from that poem and others dot the libretto. But those excerpts blend with Aucoin's own words, and with the ideas of other poets.

The Whitman in Aucoin's "Crossing" is an unnamed mystery man, his character outlined both by what we might know historically, and what the prodigious baritone Rod Gilfry brings to his interpretation. "A serial be-friender" is what Aucoin called the poet, and Aucoin uses that description to build his altruistic nurse, seemingly in the hospital to do good, but perhaps blinded by his own desires as a gay man, bringing his companionship to the needy out of his own needs.

The singers and instrumentalists make the work come to life. Physically large but emotionally mellow, Gilfry sings with effortless lyricism. His partnering with tenor Alexander Lewis, as the traitorous Rebel John Wormley who has lied his way into the Union refuge, makes you wish the male/male romantic repertory were more extensive.



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The ensemble - also all-male - stood out with its acting and singing finesse. As the hopelessly wounded - abandoned, no doctor, nobody to minister to them except nurse Whitman - their physical postures, and emotional pleading, were relentlessly discomfoting.

Davone Tines, singing as Union soldier/escaped slave Freddie Stowers, has one outstanding "aria" - basically his life story. Soprano Jennifer Zetlan, the messenger who brings news of the end of the war, creates a startling sonic shift, but her presence as the only female seems unnecessary. The sporadic choreography (by Jill Johnson), realized by a quartet of dancers, added little.

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