

BW Opera delivers powerful staging of Tom Cipullo's *Glory Denied* (Oct. 19)

by Mike Telin



After serving their country, many veterans are faced with multiple challenges as they re-adjust to civilian life. At the top of that list is reconnecting with and re-establishing a role in the family.

These issues were brought to the forefront on Friday, October 19 when Baldwin Wallace Opera presented the Midwest premiere of Tom Cipullo's two-act, 77-minute chamber opera *Glory Denied* at Red Space in Cleveland.

Based on the book by Tom Philpott, the opera tells the true story of Jim Thompson, the longest-held prisoner of war in U.S. military history, as he tries to re-assimilate into American life after spending nine years behind enemy lines in Vietnam.

Instead of creating a narrative to tell Thompson's life story, Cipullo creatively strings together a series of remembrances delivered by four characters — younger and older versions of Thompson and his wife Alyce.

During Act I, *In Captivity*, the audience is brought up to speed about all that has happened during the years Thompson spent behind enemy lines, including attempted escapes, torture and four years in solitary confinement. We learn that Alyce, who has received word that her husband's plane has been shot down, tells her children that their father has died and begins a relationship with another man. In Act II, *Welcome*

Home, Thompson discovers that he has returned to a wife, a family and a country that he no longer recognizes. Everything in the world has moved on without him.

While the first half of the performance was uneven — the thick vocal and orchestral writing often rendered the words unintelligible in the expansive space (there were no super titles) — the second half, which provided the excellent cast with more solo opportunities, was truly gripping.



Singing with a clear, handsome sound, guest baritone Gregory Gerbrandt easily moved from being commanding to vulnerable. Cipullo gave him such

contrasting lines as “the slutty whore,” and “Everything has changed — who remembers Veterans Day — no Sandy Koufax, no Sandra Dee — there are mini-skirts, Stonewall, Roe vs Wade, and Woodstock,” and “I wanted to see where they live — I forgive you Alyce.”

Ciara Newman’s pensive delivery of “After You hear me out” was a highlight. Strong and unapologetic, she turns Alyce into the opera’s heroine as she tells Jim, “I don’t give a shit if you forgive me or not — I had to learn to fight my battles.”

Ethan Burck and Kailyn Martino showed their acting skills and vocal prowess as the Young Jim and Young Alyce. Martino’s “My Darling Jim” was superb.

Like Cipullo’s libretto, his musical



score is continuously moving as his engaging writing underpins the opera's fractured narrative. Placed behind the small stage, conductor Brian Onderdonk allowed the music to ebb and flow beautifully while the nine-piece chamber orchestra comprised of local musicians were splendid throughout.

Director Dugg McDonough made the most out of the small stage — the cast moved in out and of the parallel universes of then and now with ease. Barbed wire and chain link fences depicted enemy lines, and white picket fences represented the loving home.



As is often the case when a book is turned into a piece of theater, *Glory Denied* only tells a small part of the family tragedy of Jim and Alyce Thompson. Still, Cipullo's opera is a cold reminder of the horrors that war inflicts on families, and that the world is not always what we want it to be.

Photos: Brittany Merenda

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 1, 2018.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)