

**CIM Opera: *Glory Denied* at
the Cleveland Museum of Art (Jan. 27)**

by Sicily Xiao



Based on the book by Tom Philpott, Tom Cipullo's two-act, 80-minute chamber opera *Glory Denied* 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.

What keeps Jim going is his loyalty to his country and the memory of his beloved wife, Alyce, and their children. At the same time, without any message from her husband, Alyce needs to find a new life for herself and her children, eventually moving to Massachusetts with another man.

After Colonel Thompson was released, his status as the longest-held POW was ignored, costing him the acclaim he deserved. When he finally returns to the United States, he is faced with the reality that the country has changed during his years of imprisonment in ways that are too much for him to adapt to.

With more than forty productions, *Glory Denied* has become an important work in the American opera repertoire since its debut in 2007. On the afternoon of January 27, CIM Opera Theater presented this thought-provoking work in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, staged by Kathryn Frady, with an outstanding cast and the CIM Orchestra conducted by Kamna Gupta.

The tension in the opera is evident from the beginning. As the young Jim Thompson, Connor Vrooman opened the story with a powerful performance that fully conveyed the torment his character suffered in Vietnam. His movements were expansive, and his voice that resonated from his twisted body remained steady, bringing out Jim’s inner strength in the face of immense pain.

Glory Denied requires the four-member cast to perform multiple roles. Armando Contreras, who performed the role of Older Jim Thompson, also appeared as a Vietnamese military officer — a bold move that allows the plot to travel freely through time and space.



The highlight of the opera is “It doesn’t matter,” the angry, profanity-laden aria Jim sings after returning to the States and finding out that Alyce is now living with another man. He also found society changed, the culture changed, lifestyles changed. Contreras’s gripping performance fully realized Older Jim’s pain and confusion.

In the midst of this heated soliloquy, the orchestra confidently played complex rhythms and interwove instrumental timbres.

Ruby Pine brought pain, helplessness, and confusion to the role of Older Alyce, while Ella Sobkowicz as Younger Alyce brought a sweet and tender quality to the aria “My Darling Jim.”

The staging was minimal with four square boxes provided for the four singers to sit, and a rectangular platform in the center where the main action took place. The singers remained on stage during the entire performance, which gave the whole story a more intertwined sense of time and space.

The concluding cello solo provided a deep ending, leaving room and time for reflection. *Glory Denied* is based on a very real piece of history that builds bridges between art and reality.

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