

Truth in Tahiti

By Leighton Kerner

Leonard Bernstein and librettist Stephen Wadsworth's new opera, *A Quiet Place*, is decidedly unquiet. It lives on painfully exposed nerves. It transcends what is easily belittled as a soap-opera plot (is Piva's libretto for *La Traviata* anything else?) by the ugliness of its dramatic confrontations and the intense purposefulness, not to mention the emotionally apt beauty, of its music. The triple commission from the Houston Grand Opera, Kennedy Center, and La Scala was proven justified when the Houston company gave the first performances over the last 12 days in that city's Jones Hall.

A Quiet Place is a 30-years-later sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*, the 1952 one-act opera in which Bernstein, working as librettist as well as composer, told of the failed but somehow existing marriage of Sam and Dinah in their "little white house" nestled in whatever Suburbia, U.S.A. the listener chose, from Wellesley Hills to Beverly Hills. *Trouble in Tahiti*, which served as the 45-minute curtain raiser to the four-minutes-short-of-two-hours one-act *A Quiet Place* in Houston, as it will in Washington this fall and in Milan next June, has worn well in its many revivals in theaters and on TV since its premiere under the composer's musical direction at Brandeis University. I first encountered it on TV and heard it for the second time when New York City Opera performed it, with Bernstein conducting, at the City Center in 1958. At each new hearing over three decades, the piece seemed less and less a superficial Broadway-style satire of prosperous-middle-class angst and more and more a candid portrait of two miserable people, a portrait often hilarious but deeply depressing despite the undeniable slickness of the writing. (The opera's title is that of

a Dorothy Lamour-type movie Dinah describes in derisive detail.)

A Quiet Place begins with a prologue sung and spoken from behind the still-closed curtain and dealing with the automobile crash in which Dinah was killed, and the curtain rises on family and friends gathered for her funeral. (The recent death of the composer's wife—from cancer—and of the librettist's younger sister—in a car accident—obviously figured in the work's many moments of bitterness.) The son, Junior, whose school play both Sam and Dinah avoided attending in *Trouble in Tahiti*, had dodged the Vietnam War draft by moving to Canada, where he fell in love with François, who in turn became the husband of Junior's sister Dede (not yet born in the earlier opera). Junior also is something of a pistol-packing psychotic, given to talking in obscene rhymes whenever the fit comes upon him. So it's one strange funeral scene when, amid tensions already drawn among the stonily silent Sam, Dinah's life-long-devoted brother Bill (who seems to be the chief mourner), her best friend, her doctor, the latter's brutally sarcastic wife, Dinah's analyst, and the unctuous funeral director, the ménage à trois from Canada puts in its embarrassing appearance. Junior's disheveled and late arrival triggers a lacerating outburst-aria from Sam, which in turn sets the son on a verbal eruption of his own that drives everyone else out of the room.

Wounds are only temporarily healed after Sam gladly envisions the young Dinah in the person of Dede trying on the pink dress we saw Dinah wearing in *Trouble in Tahiti*, after François has managed to calm Junior down into a peaceful sleep, and Sam manages enough forgiveness to gently kiss his sleeping son.

But there's a next morning. At first, all goes well. And here I must refer back to the first opera; in its most lyrical scene, Dinah tells her analyst of dreaming herself in a ravaged garden from which she can't escape but where she hears an unknown voice telling her of another garden, where "love will teach us/Harmony and grace" and "lead us/To a quiet place." The music up to this point in the new opera has been almost relentlessly involuted, especially in the first scene, where an inwardly curling 12-tone series dominates. True, Dede's entrance-song about driving from Canada is melodically wide open, even as it lives up to the score's marking of "Valse manique." Equally true, Dede's and François's scene of re-awakened love after father and brother have been dealt with in the second scene is replete with lyricism. Further release from the musical tension is derived from quotations of Dinah's sweet, harmonically open and diatonic-fresh "garden" melody from the earlier opera, but the tune is enhanced in its new, nervous context, as if it were a life preserver almost within reach of these emotionally drowning people.

That next morning begins with Dede working in her mother's long-abandoned garden, and her song at this point salutes Dinah's memory, François, and herself with one of those Bernstein melodies whose tonality smoothly changes within the first phrase. In this case, it's a downward, stepwise line, richly but not thickly harmonized, shifting from A major to F major, and in a repeat from G major to E-flat major. The harmony seems to move with each note, yet there's never a feeling of clutter. Junior comes in with breakfast, and the pair revert to children's games involving radio commercials and tag. (A quote here from the finale of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto takes the place of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* tropak Bernstein remembered from the 1950s.) François and Sam join in, and, after a time, the moment comes to read a note Dinah left before the car crash, a note telling them, in effect, to learn from her unhappiness and accept one another. Later that day, Dede, Junior, and Sam slip into hickering that erupts into fury,

and it takes all of François's knack for hard-headed command to bring them into an embrace from which, Bernstein and Wadsworth indicate, a precious but difficult acceptance can be realized.

If that is soap opera, the composer, librettist, performers, and production team have made the most of it. At any rate, it is opera, soap or non-soap, with crucial differences. That involuted 12-tone writing I mentioned tests the singers' musicality, especially when phrases are strung out in segments leading from one singer to the next, all unaccompanied. *A Quiet Place* is also a ghost-opera. Music and words from *Trouble in Tahiti* spring out at you throughout the sequel. The very first music you hear in the latter (flute over soft strings) is the tune to which Sam and Dinah voiced their secret yearning (to themselves) for communication. The garden Dede tries to cultivate is overgrown with literal echoes from *Trouble in Tahiti*.

As for the performers, one can imagine baritone voices more powerful for Sam than Chester Ludgin's, but this veteran of American opera has enough personal charisma and musicianship, especially in his spectacular first-scene aria, to make a convincing older version of the young smoothie Sam had been in *Trouble in Tahiti*. Edward Crafts was just about perfect in that earlier role, as was the uncommonly touching Diane Kesling as Dinah. Sheri Greenawald sang and acted a bright-voiced, fiery-spirited Dede; Timothy Nolen a scary, explosive, vulnerable Junior; Peter Kazaras a witty, strong François; Theodor Uppman a painfully grieving Bill; Carolyn James a sharply sassy doctor's wife; and Douglas Perry a slyly one-upping analyst, in a company consistently fine right down the line. *Tahiti*'s jivey commentator-trio of Lee Merrill (made up to look like Marilyn Monroe), Mark Thomsen, and James Michael McGuire socked their supercool music across just right. John DeMain conducted and Peter Mark Schifter directed both operas to optimum effect within David Gropman's depressing vistas of suburban and urban life.

In sum, a huge success and the birth of a powerful new opera. ■