

OPERA REVIEW

# Rod Gilfry makes Matt Aucoin's 'Crossing' sing



GRETJEN HELENE/ART

**Rod Gilfry as Walt Whitman and Alexander Lewis as a wounded soldier in Matthew Aucoin's "Crossing."**

**By Jeffrey Gantz** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 01, 2015

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Walt Whitman was not a composer, but he did hear America singing, and in his youth the poet was enamored of Italian bel canto. He even averred that had it not been for Bellini and Donizetti, he could never have written "Leaves of Grass." So there's a logic to Matthew Aucoin's choice of Whitman's Civil War journals as the inspiration for his new opera, which is getting its world premiere from the American Repertory Theater at the Citi Shubert Theatre.

“Crossing” is an ambitious work with much to recommend it, not least Rod Gilfry’s extraordinary performance as Whitman.

At 25, Aucoin, a Medfield native and Harvard grad, has commissions from the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Metropolitan Opera, where he’s served as an assistant conductor. The subject of recent glowing features in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Wall Street Journal*, he’s also an accomplished pianist and poet. His opera — for which he wrote both music and libretto, and which he is conducting at the Shubert — is part of the National Civil War Project, a multi-year, multi-city endeavor in commemoration of the war’s 150th anniversary. (Among the works the ART has already staged are the Lisps’ indie-rock musical “Futurity” and the first three parts of Pulitzer winner Suzan-Lori Parks’s “Father Comes Home From the Wars.”)

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“Crossing” is opera at its most elemental, something Whitman would have appreciated. The two main characters — Walt Whitman (baritone) and a wounded soldier named John Wormley (tenor) — are complemented by a pair of minor figures, an ensemble of 11 men, and a quartet of dancers. The orchestra is the fine local chamber ensemble *A Far Cry*. The setting is a Washington, D.C., military hospital where Whitman volunteered as a nurse after his brother George was wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, in late 1862. The conditions are atrocious; as Whitman wrote of the war, “It was not a quadrille in a ball-room.”

“Crossing” takes its name and its first line — “What is it, then, between us?” — from Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” in which Whitman is asking about both what comes between us and what connects us. Aucoin’s libretto draws on Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” as well as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”; it even quotes from Federico García Lorca’s darkly exalted “Ode to Walt Whitman” (“your voice like a column of ash”). At such moments, it becomes an epic sweep across centuries of humanity past and future, since, as Aucoin has Whitman say, “neither Time nor Space/ Can keep us apart.”

The opera also has a personal side, in which the “us” gets scaled down to Whitman and Wormley, and here the libretto is less successful. Wormley, in Whitman’s “Memoranda During the War,” is described as a West Tennessee orphan who “chewed tobacco at a fearful rate” and wanted Whitman to help him wash himself and get some “clean underclothes, and a pair of decent pants.”

In “Crossing,” the two men are drawn to each other, but Wormley’s character never quite develops. Wormley lets us know, early on, that there’s something he’s keeping from Whitman. And their night in bed together leads to accusation, reproach, confession, and forgiveness. It’s

not the “crossing” Whitman was looking for.

At the Shubert, ART artistic director Diane Paulus gives the opera a handsome, energetic staging. Tom Pye’s set begins with a blue-gray panel on which Whitman’s handwriting can be discerned and a clapboard wall with a transom window. Eventually the panel rises to reveal the hospital, a makeshift affair with an American flag and a photograph of President Lincoln, in which demoralized soldiers play cards or comfort one another. Finn Ross’s projections include the flames of war, the “flood-tide” Whitman viewed from the Brooklyn ferry, and his “gorgeous clouds of the sunset.”

The score by Aucoin — son of Globe theater critic Don Aucoin (who does not cover the ART) — maintains its nervous intensity throughout the opera’s intermissionless 100 minutes, with persistent woodwind ostinatos and picturesque percussion. Expressing the relentlessness and the bitterness of war and death but little of Whitman’s characteristic exuberance, it supports rather than overshadows the singers, who enunciate so clearly that the supertitles are frequently redundant.

Alexander Lewis conveys the enigma of Wormley, and the character’s high-pitched anguish. Davone Tines brings a powerful bass to Freddie Stowers, an escaped South Carolina slave who joins the Union army. And Jennifer Zetlan copes well with the thankless role of the messenger who reports, stridently, that the North has won and the wounded can go home. The ensemble shines in some of Aucoin’s most Whitman-like lyrics: the chorus “O powerful western fallen star,” and the concluding “When the stars in heaven had risen,” with its final lines delivered in a dozen different rhythms.

But it’s Gilfry who takes “Crossing” to the other side. A gray-maned Jehovah in a suit, looking much like the famous Mathew Brady portrait of Whitman, he moves about the hospital with compassion and authority, and he manages to sound conversational and prophetic at the same time. He’s both Whitman the poet and Whitman the person, and when he opens his mouth, it’s as if all of humanity were singing.

## **CROSSING**

Opera with music and libretto by Matthew Aucoin

Directed by: Diane Paulus.

Set, Tom Pye. Lighting, Jennifer Tipton. Costumes, David Zinn. Projections, Finn Ross. Choreography, Jill Johnson.

With *A Far Cry* conducted by Aucoin. Presented by the American Repertory Theater in

association with Music-Theatre Group.

At: Citi Shubert Theatre,

through June 6.

Tickets: \$25-\$110. 866-348-9738

[www.americanrepertorytheater.org](http://www.americanrepertorytheater.org)

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