



Three Decembers

<https://www.operasj.org/three-decembers/>

Premiered by Houston Grand Opera in 2006, the prolific Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers* has apparently received some 30 subsequent productions internationally.

In this video produced by Jonathan Luskin, Tara Branham's efficient staging for Opera San José was dedicated to the playwright and librettist Terrence McNally, who died in March 2020 from Covid-19, and on whose unpublished play *Some Christmas Letters* Gene Scheer's libretto was based: *Three Decembers* was originally presented under the title *Last Acts*.

Susan Graham, Efraín Solís and Maya Kherani in Opera San José's filmed 'Three Decembers'



Pretty well all operas filmed during lockdown need to be reduced in some way in order to make their re-creation possible: in this instance the original scoring for ten instruments has been reduced to two pianos, skilfully played here by Veronika Agranov-Dafoe and Sunny Yoon. Ensuring steady overall musical control is the conductor Christopher James Ray.

With a set by Steven C. Kemp, costumes co-ordinated by Alyssa Oania and lighting by David Lee Cuthbert, the production is set, aptly—given that the central character is an actor—backstage at a theatre, with a curtain, costume racks and props.

The action takes place over three Christmas periods in the years 1986, 1996 and 2006. The plot concerns three members of a family—the self-obsessed actor mother Madeline Mitchell, her maritally troubled, functioning alcoholic daughter Beatrice, and her gay son Charlie—whose dysfunctional relationships lead to bitter arguments but who find some sort of reconciliation at the end of the piece, following Madeline's death (she returns as a ghost). Dramatically the 90-minute piece is full of clichés which may not be inherently better for belonging more to our own period than to earlier ones.

In terms of their vocal and acting performances, all three principals bring commitment and capability to limited material: Susan Graham knows all about the egotistical, deceptive thespian Madeline, Maya Kherani's bright, resilient soprano provides a firm foundation for unhappy Beatrice, and the baritone Efraín Solís offers a firm, centred Charlie, coping well with the loss of his first partner through AIDS.

It remains curious that Heggie's fluent and technically accomplished score, positioned roughly midway between opera and musical, registers little acquaintance with any music written later than, say, 1920, other than the impact of Gian Carlo Menotti or (more frequently) Stephen Sondheim, though there are occasional reminiscences of Ravel and (in 3/4 time) Richard Strauss.

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