

British Theatre Guide

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Lili Elbe

Tobias Picker, Libretto by Aryeh Lev Stollman

Konzert und Theater St Gallen

Theater St Gallen, Switzerland

8 December 2023–8 June 2024

Tobias Picker's *Lili Elbe* is the first full-scale opera about a transgender person. It had its world première in October at the oldest professional theatre in Switzerland, which has just been newly renovated. The production was directed by Krystian Lada, who has also designed the set and the video projections. Modestas Pitrenas was the conductor.

Lili Elbe (1882–1931), a man trapped in a woman's body, is the Danish landscape artist, who changed sex. You may have seen the 2015 film, *The Danish Girl*, in which Eddie Redmayne was amazing. His excellent performance, however, received a lot of flak because he was a straight actor. The politically correct felt the role should have been played by a transgender person. The flak was such that later Redmayne felt obliged to apologise and said that, with hindsight, he should not have accepted the role.

Tobias Picker composed his opera expressly for American transgender baritone Lucia Lucas. It is interesting to look at photographs of the real Lili Elbe and then to look at photographs of Lucas and Redmayne in character as Lily Elbe and to think who is most convincing.

The libretto is a series of short scenes set in Copenhagen, Paris and Dresden in the 1920s. Einar Wegener was married to Gerda Wegener (Sylvia D'Eramo), an Art Deco portrait artist. He remained in the closet until the day Gerda's female model let her down and she asked him to stand in and pose for her. The painting session led Einar to decide to identify as a woman all the time.

Einar changed his name to Lili Elbe and had surgery to remove his testicles. Since the law then did not allow two women to be married, Lili went to the highest court in the land. King Christian X of Denmark acknowledged Einar's new identity and annulled the marriage. Lili wanted to be a real woman and have children. She had an operation to have a uterus implant. The operation failed and she died. She was 48 years old.

Krystian Lada's production is uncanny, theatrical, expressionistic and psychedelic. The singers appear mostly in their underwear. There is a figurative scene when Lili is being pushed forward by a chorus of women and being pulled back by a chorus of men in a tug-of-war. Picker took his inspiration from the Orpheus / Eurydice don't-look-back legend and from Webern and Schoenberg's use of *sprechstimme*.

His melody-driven score also includes foxtrot, waltz and French cabaret music. When Einar Wegener says very loudly, "I AM A WOMAN NOW," you half-expect Lucia Lucas to start singing "I Am What I Am," Jerry Herman's big number in *La Cage aux Folles*.

Tobias Picker's *Lili Elbe* can be watched on the OperaVision channel free.

Reviewer: [Robert Tanitch](#)