

British Theatre Guide

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Trouble in Tahiti + A Quiet Place

Composer Leonard Bernstein, *Trouble in Tahiti* libretto Bernstein, *A Quiet Place* libretto Stephen Wadsworth

The Royal Opera

Linbury Theatre, Royal Ballet & Opera

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Musical polymath, academic, director, conductor, composer across many genres, Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) was a law unto himself. If you've seen the 2023 film *Maestro*, you'll have an idea of the man, bursting with musical energy and desire. As it happens, *A Quiet Place* and *Trouble in Tahiti* are both musically referenced in the film.

These two semi-autobiographical satirical operas were composed thirty years apart, *Trouble in Tahiti* (forty-five minutes) in 1952 and *A Quiet Place* (a hundred minutes) in 1983. By 1952, he'd already worked with Jerome Robbins on *Fancy Free*, but not yet composed *West Side Story*, and had a few musicals already under his belt, as well as much classical work—the man was nothing if not prolific.

Musical theatre is to the fore in his witty, ironic take on fifties consumer-fixated America In *Trouble in Tahiti*: “it’s a wonderful life”. A Greek chorus of three (Kirsty McLean, Guy Elliott, Peter Edge in shades and marvellous harmony), high above the action, sing “Suburbia”, a catchy, jazzy TV ad jingles parody with Broadway bounce. Is he also having fun with Rogers and Hammerstein’s 1949 *South Pacific*? I’m sure I can hear echoes of “This Nearly Was Mine” in this tale of a crumbling marriage.

Sam is a businessman with no time for his wife, Dinah, a suburban housewife who distracts herself with trips to the cinema (to see *Trouble in Tahiti*—the magic of the silver screen) and shopping. We’ve seen these macho, virile men in many fifties films, they have to be winners. Whereas she hopes “love will lead to a quiet place”.

The wretched couple can’t even be bothered to see their son Junior’s school play that day. Sam is either in the office, at the gym with punch ball or at golf. A shadow (lighting designer Fabiana Piccioli) of a well-endowed, naked man in the shower: is this Tennessee Williams territory—Sam becomes “Big Daddy” in *A Quiet Place*?

Shadows fall on the wall in duplicate: designer Annemarie Woods evoking the period and the mood. There’s a depressed, histrionic air around both trying to fulfil their expected roles in society, the music full of false promise. Junior watches it all from the shadows.

Apparently, Bernstein is referencing his immigrant parents chasing the American dream, she a quiet place of her own to watch a garden grow, a picket fence, the empty dreams and clichés. The inner life is all there in the music.

Mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta, making her Royal Opera debut, is a wonderful Dinah: she played her at [Opera North in 2017](#). What a crystal clear voice, a fine match with Henry Neill’s (debuting in two

roles tonight) rich baritone, she dazzles in her performance (movement by Sarah Fahie), and those fifties dresses fit her like a glove.

I like the wide, minimalist set in shades of two-tone green—is it meant to represent the emptiness at the heart of the ten-year marriage? It also serves for *A Quiet Place*, which opens with Dinah's funeral. A suicide, it turns out, to save the dysfunctional family.

It feels as if Bernstein poured everything into it. Is it his expiation two years after his wife's death from a terminal illness, out of guilt for his behaviour, his affairs with men and women—he had a voracious appetite not only for music but for life?

The estranged family meet at Dinah's ghastly funeral (no name, just WIFE in flowers), not the best place to come together when anger is so near the surface. Sam is now sung by baritone Grant Doyle, whilst Neill is the mentally damaged Junior, blatantly gay and paranoid. He is living in Canada (to escape the draft), where his five-years-younger sister Dede and her French-Canadian husband François (a former lover of his) are caring for him.

Unsettled music, symphonic, atonal in places, with so many influences I lose track. Bernstein was heavily into Mahler, but do I hear Ravel, Copland, jazzy riffs, ballet music and more, as I gasp in awe at his musical muscle memory and hyperactive tendencies?

The Orchestra of the Royal Opera House (reduced orchestration by Garth Edwin Sunderland) under the baton of Nicholas Chalmers, also making his debut, is squashed into the small Linbury space, spilling out into the side stalls, but what fabulous music, percussion prominent, and that bassoon and the sax and the clarinet, and the horns and the strings and upright piano...

A cinematic split-screen concept, Oliver Mears directs a marvellous cast. Tenor Elgan Llŷr Thomas (François, the appeaser) has such a sweet, lyrical voice, fine soprano Rowan Pierce (Dede) is supposed to look like her mother, and she does when she tries on her dresses. Even the supporting roles are full-on. Sarah Pring as the plain-speaking ("cut the crap") Mrs Doc amuses with her American zingers—the humour is dark and wicked.

Junior is deeply scarred by his father's aggressive conduct. Can the family heal? Sam makes a pyre of his wife's clothes, her ashes, diaries, the bedroom's contents: will this herald a new start as they sit daring to hold hands? Dense smoke hangs over them, the past. Can they clear it?

Maybe too drawn-out after the shorter earlier piece, *A Quiet Place* is quite an onslaught of references and borrowings and thrilling composition, especially the reflective instrumental sections, but what an experience. Rarely performed together, it is the first time the Company has staged this double bill of Bernstein's operas: they serve it well.

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)