



For the SUN-TIMES/Dan Reel
Joan Gibbons stars in the title role in the Lyric Opera production of "The Guilt of Lillian Sloan."

Opera proves Lyric composer a prized asset

By Robert C. Marsh
Classical Music Critic

The world premiere of "The Guilt of Lillian Sloan," the first product of the Lyric Opera's composer-in-residence program, proved to be a powerful and effective piece of music and theater in its performance at Cahn Auditorium in Evanston Friday.

If you take the view that a theatrical experience must be evaluated in its totality, the effect here was that of a tightly unified, fast moving and intensely dramatic story of a crime of passion based on an actual British murder case of some 60 years ago. The libretto, credited to the composer, William Neil, and Frank Galati, is a strong book, a sturdy foundation for the action. The score consistently illuminated and intensified the words, and the cumulative effect in this staging, directed by Galati, was one of significant talents significantly employed.

Those who think of opera in traditional terms might deplore the absence of arias and ensembles of the conventional sort. The chorus is used both to comment on the action and to develop it, and Neil's writing here is most effective. The problem with the musical line of the work is that there is no real climax. The ending is quiet, and the dramatic range of the instrumental writing is restricted. You wait for a big outpouring of emotion which never comes.

Lillian Sloan, beautifully played by Joan Gibbons, is unhappily married to a man some years older than herself, Howard Sloan. She is basically a romantic, and in this performance the complexity of her character was always clear. Stefan Szkarafowsky brought the unsympathetic husband to life most convincingly. Lillian turns to a man younger than herself, a sailor, Owen Evans, whose efforts to liberate her result in her husband's murder. Donald Kasch as Owen gave another almost perfectly

"The Guilt of Lillian Sloan" by William Neil. Presented by the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists and the Northwestern University Theater and Interpretation Center at Cahn Auditorium, Evanston, Friday. Conducted by Lee Schaenen. Directed by Frank Galati. Lillian Sloan, Joan Gibbons; Owen Evans, Donald Kasch; Howard Sloan, Stefan Szkarafowsky; Solicitor General, Patrick Wroblewski.

realized performance. Neil gives Lillian and Owen a lot to sing, but I wished he had given them a little more. The character development could be strengthened, and the drama would benefit from it.

The setting of the opera is the courtroom in which Lillian and Owen are being tried. It is not the fault of Patrick Wroblewski, who played the solicitor general, that he is given too much to sing, nor the fault of Richard Drews, barrister for the defense, that he is given too little. These men should interact more. And a courtroom is really a better frame for a play than an opera anyway. Opera needs more freedom.

The action takes place on a simple, black unit set by Diane Ferry Williams. It worked well. I have nothing but admiration for the way Lee Schaenen prepared the score and directed the orchestra. Seldom has a young composer heard his work in a performance of this level. The secondary roles were all well realized, none better than that of Lillian's mother, sung by Lisa Bonenfant, and she had some of the more obviously lyric phrases in the score.

Neil is an opera composer of genuine talent, and in his three years with the Lyric has undoubtedly learned far more than this work is able to reveal. He should write a second opera soon. His apprenticeship is over, and the value of the program (established by Brenna and Lee A. Freeman) has been established beyond doubt.