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REVIEWS

Glimmerglass II: Ugly Americans, at Home & Abroad

July 24, 2026 | By James L. Paulk, *Musical America*

The following completes the coverage of the 2026 Glimmerglass productions scheduled for the mainstage. [See also Part I](#), including a photo of *Oklahoma!* adapted to a high school auditorium.

Madama Butterfly



Francesca Zambello's 2014 production of *Madama Butterfly*, revived this season and seen on July 19th, sets almost the entire opera in Sharpless's Nagasaki consular office, rather than in Butterfly's home. This helps to dramatize her plight, as she is forced to wait her turn among other hapless Japanese as her situation becomes more desperate. The final scenes do move to the house, suggested by giant translucent screens. Butterfly's death is dramatically achieved with the descent of a giant red curtain, along with red confetti.

The opera is fictional, of course, but it's based on a very real and shameful part of America's history: At the turn of the century, it was not uncommon for U.S. military personnel stationed abroad to "purchase" women for "treaty port" marriages, to be used and discarded, and young girls were especially prized. Butterfly tells us she's 15, though in the supertitles here this was changed to 18. I asked Zambello about this, and she said it "made her more believable." But it understates the casual cruelty of Pinkerton and, more generally, of American personnel during that era, as highlighted by motifs from the National

Anthem cleverly woven into the orchestration. Zambello's staging emphasizes the shaming of Butterfly, who became an outcast to her family and her community, partly because she converted to Christianity (the "American God"), partly because of the stigma attached to prostitution.

Casting here was an issue. Japanese soprano Eri Nakamura, portrayed Butterfly with dramatic intensity and fine pianissimo high notes. But her voice is that of a mature woman, with significant vibrato, and her characterization was more notable for its sense of rebellion than childlike innocence. Still, her "Un bel di" aria was a showstopper, and her farewell to Sorrow was moving. As Pinkerton, tenor Eric Taylor perfectly inhabited the boisterous arrogance and caddishness of his character. His tendency to sing almost everything at top volume actually worked in his favor. Michelle Mariposa's radiant mezzo was well-suited to the endearing Suzuki; baritone Troy Cook's Sharpless was knowing and compassionate. Joseph Colinari led a sensitive, nuanced performance.

Fellow Travelers

After Gregory Spears's *Fellow Travelers* was cancelled due to the smoke problem on July 18th, those who stayed on to hear the rescheduled one on July 19 experienced a searing performance of one of the most successful new operas of the 21st century.

Based on a novel by Thomas Mallon, the piece premiered in 2016 at Cincinnati Opera and has since traveled around the globe. This touring production, by Kevin Newbury, has been to Seattle, Portland, and San Diego, and will go to Austin in February.

The opera is set in Washington, DC, during Joseph McCarthy's "lavender scare," when homosexuals were hunted down and fired from government jobs. Like *Madama Butterfly*, it features a manipulative, powerful American man, in this case Hawkins Fuller (Hawk), an official in the State Department. He first meets Timothy Laughlin (Tim), a much younger man, when Tim is looking for a position in government. Hawk finds him one, seduces him, and the two develop a long and complicated relationship. After introducing Tim to gay sex, Hawk tells him, "Now you're my boy," and that becomes the case, for better or worse.

The libretto, by Greg Pierce, focuses on Tim's difficulty reconciling his obsessive love of Hawk with the limits Hawk places on their sporadic relationship and with Hawk's promiscuity; on Tim's difficulty reconciling his homosexuality with his own devout Catholicism and his fierce right wing political views; and on Tim's search for a way of life that doesn't involve constantly hiding and lying. Both characters are complicated and are dealing with an environment filled with paranoia and fear. The relationship ebbs and flows, both men are interrogated by McCarthy's henchmen, and Hawk marries a woman. In the end, a disillusioned Tim leaves Hawk and Washington, hoping to find freedom and a new life in New York.

Spears's fresh score, rooted in minimalism, features recurring motifs in flexible, expressive rhythms. Vocal lines are highly melodic yet have a natural, conversational feel. Vita Tzykun's sets are simple, attractive and efficient, with wheeled boxes that rotate to represent filing cabinets, a kitchen, a church, or a bedroom. Devario Simmons's costumes—boxy suits for the men, pretty dresses for the women—are spot-on period fare.

Hawkins was portrayed by Joseph Lattanzi, who sang the role in the Cincinnati premiere and elsewhere, and he exuded both the charisma that made him attractive to Tim and to everyone, and the cynicism and selfishness



that hover over the relationship. With his sturdy, bright baritone, he dominated the stage. In his aria, "I'm not one of those, Skippy," he successfully showcased all of the demons that possess him.

Tenor Colin Aikins embodied the role of Tim, using his posture and powerful acting chops to accentuate his character's neediness, his subservience to Hawk, and his innocent idealism. His youthful voice is attractive and unforced, with a nice top. His Act 1 aria, "Last Night," when he confesses to a priest, was the emotional apex of the night. Keely Futterer (who had also sung as Despina in *Così*) performed as Mary Johnson, Hawk's assistant who becomes Tim's close friend and confidant, with a side story of an unwanted pregnancy. Her aria "I worry about you, Timmy" unveiled a lovely, flexible soprano. Supporting roles, including those filled by several members of the Resident Artist program here, were equally well put forth.

Newberry managed to get vivid portrayals from his cast. Kelly Kuo conducted with a nice mix of energy and grace. Few new operas manage to pack as much emotional power and complexity as this one; small wonder it has had such success.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

To some extent, this season looks back on American history at the country's 250th anniversary, but it also reflects the current political climate, as the "ugly American" image resurfaces worldwide (*Madama Butterfly*), and homophobia is on the rise, along with a level of red baiting not seen since the McCarthy era (*Fellow Travelers*). Only the finale of *Oklahoma!*, when the farmers and the cowmen set aside their differences, offers a glimpse of hope for the future.

In a conversation about Glimmerglass's future with Artistic and General Director Rob Ainsley, he indicated that the company has had an operating deficit since the pandemic, and that the situation "has not entirely been turned around. Coming out of the pandemic, audience habits have changed and costs have shot up. We've raised more money in the last couple of years than we've ever raised, and it just isn't enough." [Note: the festival raises \$12 million a year in a town of 1800, far from a major center.]

Will the model of four mainstage operas per season continue? "That is dependent on how much money we can raise. We're going into a full strategic planning process in the fall. The finances are very hard, and there will likely be some concessions to the model. We can't continue to run deficits.

"But I couldn't be prouder of what we're doing artistically. We treat the classics in an innovative way, and there are things we can do because of the size of the house, where the music physically touches you. The mix we do, and the fact that we have a resident ensemble of talented artists rather than a call list, means we have great flexibility."

Next year, the model will bend slightly, with one of the four mainstage slots given over to a "family opera," *The Little Prince*, by Rachel Portman. The others: *The Barber of Seville*, *Rusalka*, and Sondheim's *Into the Woods*.

The season here continues through August 17.

Top photo: Cio-Cio San (Eri Nakamura) and Pinkerton (Eric Taylor)

Lower photo: Hawk (Joseph Lattanzi) undergoes lie detector test as part of his "interview" during the McCarthy Lavender Scare

Photo credits: Kayleen Bertrand (top), Brent Delanoy

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