

A Gay Rights Hero Life Writ Large and Tunefully

By Stephen Holden

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“Hello, family!”

That warm salutation by Whoopi Goldberg set the triumphal mood for the New York premiere on Monday evening at Avery Fisher Hall of the Broadway composer Andrew Lippa's stirring oratorio “I Am Harvey Milk.” This concise, forthright tribute to that gay folk hero who was shot to death at San Francisco City Hall in 1978 is a dramatic choral work consisting of a prelude (a recorded fragment of “La Bohème”) and 12 songs that remember Milk during the months preceding his assassination.

Semiformal and semiclassical, and lasting one hour, it eulogizes a gay rights pioneer and one of the first openly gay men to hold public office in the United States as a courageous, saintly social prophet. Because the concert coincided with the Supreme Court's decision to let stand court rulings allowing same-sex marriage in five states — a tacit victory for the gay rights movement — the atmosphere at Avery Fisher Hall was euphoric. Following Ms. Goldberg was Cleve Jones, a friend and protégé of Milk's, who founded the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and delivered a brief, touching reminiscence.

But to a degree it was a one-man show. Mr. Lippa not only wrote the words and music but also sang the title role in a fervent voice that maintained a secure balance between operatic declamation and Broadway informality. Two other soloists — the soprano Kristin Chenoweth (in fine voice), playing a worried mother figure, and Noah Marlowe, who embodied Milk as a boy — rounded out the cast of characters.



Whoopi Goldberg gave an introduction.
Emon Hassan for The New York Times

The forces surrounding Mr. Lippa, included the 120-voice All-Star Broadway Men's Chorus, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Joel Fram. The chorus's processional choreography had a ceremonial precision but stopped mercifully short of puffed-chest militaristic pomp. The sound was impeccably focused.

Mr. Lippa's accessible, melodic score is devoid of highbrow pretension and dissonance, but it couldn't quite be called pop. His words are an exhortatory public poetry with the expected rhetorical flourishes. Two of the strongest songs are a disco number, “Friday Night at the Castro,” in which chorus members became dancers and a mirror ball whirled, and “Sticks and Stones,” in which the chorus reiterated anti-gay epithets and slogans, then extended the list to include racial and ethnic slurs. The blunt message: “Sticks and Stones can break my bones/Names can really hurt me.” The song was a kind of ritual exorcism of pain.

The most touching number, near the end of the piece, was the slow waltz, “San Francisco,” a yearning lullaby in which the city is envisioned as a mystical sanctuary: the Emerald City, if you will. A boy from Iowa calls out, “San Francisco/I am broken/But you welcome the broken/to come and heal.” The sheer size of the chorus singing in hushed tones gave it the feeling of a mass prayer.

In the climactic anthem “Tired of the Silence,” which used words from a speech Milk gave shortly before his death, Mr. Lippa and the chorus joined voices in a militant plea for everyone within earshot to “Come Out!”

More than 35 years after Milk's death, its message still applies.