Meet the Author—
Willa Cather’s Pittsburgh Connection

by Jill Leahy

Willa Cather (1873-1947) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, famous for her works about the American frontier. She is one of the leading figures of American literary Modernism, and scholars have been drawn to her life as well as her twelve novels, short fiction, and poetry collections. Among her most famous novels are *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*.

The oldest of seven children, Willa Cather was born in Winchester, Virginia. When she was nine years old, her family moved to Nebraska, and she became a star student at the University of Nebraska. Cather originally planned to become a medical doctor, but discovered her talent for writing and entered the world of journalism. After graduation, she moved to Pittsburgh in order to satisfy her desire for music concerts and intellectual companionship. She took a job as managing editor for *Home Monthly*, a women’s magazine, and became drama critic and telegraph editor for *The Pittsburgh Leader* newspaper.

Cather taught at Old Central High School and then at Allegheny High School, where she headed the English department. Her short story, “Paul’s Case,” was written in Pittsburgh and was based on the suicide of a local youth. Many of her poems and stories were based on activities that centered here at the turn of the century in fashionable residences of Fifth Avenue and Old Allegheny. According to *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* architect Patricia Lowry, Cather lived in homes and boarding houses in Shadyside and the East End on Marchand Street, South Highland Avenue, South Craig Street, North Sheridan Avenue, and Harvard Street. The house most closely identified with her is the large Squirrel Hill home of her friend Isabelle McClung at 1180 Murrayhill Avenue. Even after Cather left Pittsburgh for New York, she returned for visits to the McClung home, where she would write; it was there that she finished *O Pioneers!* one of her prairie masterworks. In 1944, Cather received the gold medal for fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, an award given once a decade for an author’s total accomplishments.

**Pittsburgh Opera**

**Education thanks our generous supporters:**

- Allegheny Regional Asset District
- American Eagle Outfitters, Inc.
- Bayer USA Foundation
- Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation
- Bridges General Contracting
- The Jack Buncher Foundation
- Anne L. & George H. Clapp Charitable Trust
- Clearview Federal Credit Union
- Dominion Foundation
- Eaton Corporation
- Eden Hall Foundation
- EQT Foundation
- First Commonwealth Financial Corp.
- Fort Pitt Capital Group
- The Frick Fund of the Buhl Foundation
- Giant Eagle Foundation
- The Grable Foundation
- Hefren-Tilston, Inc.
- The Heinz Endowments
- Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield Intermediate Unit #1
- Levin Furniture
- Massaro Corporation
- Richard King Mellon Foundation
- National Endowment for the Arts
- Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
- Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development
- Pennsylvania Department of Education
- The PNC Financial Services Group
- PPG Industries Foundation
- Bobby Rahal Automotive Group
- Chemical, Reed Smith
- The Techs - MetalTech
- Triangle Tech Group
- United States Steel Corporation
- UPMC and UPMC Health Plan

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera’s education programs, please contact:

Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org
412-281-0912 ext 242

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
www.pittsburghopera.org

**Paul’s Case . . . Misfit or Misunderstood?**

by Jill Leahy

*Paul’s Case* is a two-act chamber opera for seven singers lasting approximately 85 minutes. The opera premiered on April 20, 2013, at Urban Arias, Artsphere in Arlington, Virginia and was developed by American Opera Projects, in part with funds from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The libretto is based on Willa Cather’s 1905 short story of the same name. Published in *McClure’s Magazine*, the story reflects both the experiences of two of Cather’s Pittsburgh pupils and her own struggle growing up in a small Nebraska town.

Paul, a frustrated and sensitive high school student, lives in dirty turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh. He dislikes school and his teachers, has dreams of living a more luxurious life, and fuels these dreams by spending his free time working as an usher at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Hall and hanging around with theater people. When Paul gets suspended from school, his father forces him to take a job as a clerk where he has the responsibility to deliver cash to the bank for deposit. Frustrated, Paul takes the cash and runs away to enjoy the luxury of New York City’s Waldorf Astoria to try to live the life of his dreams. Realizing it can’t last and he will have to return and face his punishment, he chooses to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train.

*Paul’s Case* is frequently studied in schools as a case study in adolescent issues and temperament. Gregory Spears, the composer, said in an interview: “To me the story, with its tragic end, resonates with debates today concerning gay bullying and teenage suicide. Cather never mentions gayness, yet to modern readers Paul is often seen through this lens. Paul’s teachers seem particularly disturbed by his flamboyant dandyism. Part of what frustrates them is that they don’t have the vocabulary to directly articulate what seems different or ‘wrong’ about Paul. My hope is that the piece reminds us of how difficult it is to grow up. It’s a challenge people experience from many perspectives, as teachers, as parents, and as teenagers. It’s a universal struggle.”

**PITTSBURGH OPERA EDUCATION**

**Study Guide to the Opera**

[Image of the Pittsburgh Opera’s Education guide]

*Courtesy UrbanArias, Paul's Case: Misfit or Misunderstood? by Jill Leahy*
**Paul’s Case Synopsis**

**ACT I: Pittsburgh, 1906** Paul is seated in front of three teachers and the high school principal to appeal his suspension. Paul stammers out the refrain "I do not mean to be polite, or impolite either." The teachers are infuriated by his dandified behavior and appearance, epitomized by the red carnation he wears. Paul is eventually dismissed. He bows gracefully and exits.

Later that evening, Paul’s father is calculating figures at his desk, while Paul is changing into an usher’s uniform at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Music Hall. The father describes his son’s disdain for middle-class values, while Paul tells of his love for all things exotic and theatrical. Unexpectedly, Paul’s English teacher arrives at the hall with two tickets given to her by a steel magnate. Paul reluctantly guides her to her seat. Waiting for the show to begin, the English teacher recounts a life full of disappointments. Two opera singers take the stage; Paul and the English teacher are enchanted. Paul’s father, still simmering at home, warns that this will be Paul’s last night working at the theater, on account of his recent suspension from school.

Paul’s father sends him to work as a cash-boy clerk. Distraught, Paul describes his contempt for the banalities of workaday life in Pittsburgh. He decides to steal the firm’s weekend deposit and catches the next train to New York City. Paul then bathes and takes his dinner in the Waldorf’s dining room. There he encounters a Yale freshman in town for a visit, and the two join up for a drunken night on the town.

Paul wakes the next afternoon hung over. He asks for the Pittsburgh newspapers, in which the maids read of his theft. He smugly catalogs his purchases from an afternoon shopping spree. Paul then bathes and takes his dinner in the Waldorf’s dining room. There he encounters a Yale freshman in town for a visit, and the two join up for a drunken night on the town.

Paul wakes the next afternoon hung over. He asks for the Pittsburgh newspapers, in which the maids read of his theft. Paul discovers that he has been spotted at a New York hotel and that his father is coming to take him back home. He then unwraps his final purchase, a shiny revolver, and contemplates his final actions.

He puts the revolver away, arranges his things in his room, and heads for the Newark train yard.

**ACT II: New York City, 1906** Three hotel maids prepare a sumptuous suite at the Waldorf Astoria. Paul enters triumphantly and sings of his arrival on the train. He smugly catalogs his purchases from an afternoon shopping spree. Paul then bathes and takes his dinner in the Waldorf’s dining room.

Paul wakes the next afternoon hung over. He asks for the Pittsburgh newspapers, in which the maids read of his theft. Paul discovers that he has been spotted at a New York hotel and that his father is coming to take him back home. He then unwraps his final purchase, a shiny revolver, and contemplates his final actions. He puts the revolver away, arranges his things in his room, and heads for the Newark train yard.

**Meet the Librettist**

**Kathryn Walat**, an accomplished playwright and professor, has written plays produced at theaters across the country, including off-Broadway. Her credentials include:
- Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing, Brown University, 1996
- Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting, Yale University, 2003
- Playwriting teacher, Savannah College of Art and Design
- Adjunct Assistant Professor, Marymount Manhattan College Theater Department
- Visiting Lecturer at the college seminar program, Yale University
- Resident playwright, Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, with a 2010 workshop of her play *Creation*, about music obsession and the creative process

She states, "Teaching is an integral part of my own creative life as a playwright. Being around enthusiastic, gutsy young writers feeds me artistically, and my time in the classroom allows me to investigate more closely my own writing process and ideas about the dramatic production, theatrical history, and the literature of plays.”

Walat’s collaboration with Gregory Spears for *Paul’s Case* is her only operatic work to date. Reflecting on the development of *Paul’s Case* with Walat, Spears says that the two of them "conceived of the piece as being told from Paul’s perspective. As Paul is obsessed with art, music, and the theater, we figured that he would have chosen opera as his preferred medium—opera seemed more appropriate than musical theater for the time period.”

**Meet the Composer**

**Gregory Spears** has composed critically-acclaimed music that has been performed by Houston Grand Opera, American Composers Orchestra, American Opera Projects, Center City Opera Theater, Present Music Ensemble, and Sebastian Chamber Players. His music composition degrees include a Bachelor’s from Eastman School of Music, a Master’s from Yale School of Music, and a Ph.D. from Princeton University.

He has been an artist-in-residence at Yaddo (an artist community in New York) and the MacDowell Colony, and was commissioned by the JACK Quartet to write a piece based on his experience as composer-in-residence at the Buttonwood Psychiatric Unit in New Jersey. Spears spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, where he studied early Danish minimalism and orchestration with composers Hans Abrahamsen and Per Nergård. His work with those composers influenced the musical style of *Paul’s Case*. The style of his music, both instrumental and vocal, blends together stylistic aspects of romanticism, minimalism, and early music.

Spears has won multiple prizes, grants, and honors, including ones from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Composers Forum, and the Fulbright Foundation. His music has been called "astonishingly beautiful" (*New York Times*), “coolly entrancing” (*The New Yorker*), and “some of the most beautifully unsettling music to appear in recent memory” (*The Boston Globe*).