COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — Lycurgus, the fictional New York town in which much of Theodore Dreiser’s novel “An American Tragedy” is set, was based on Cortland, just 70 miles west of the Glimmerglass Festival here. The plot’s crucial murder takes place in the Adirondacks, which the characters get to by traveling right through this area.

If Tobias Picker’s operatic adaptation of the novel is going to feel urgent and relevant anywhere, it’s here, on the tale’s native soil.

But even shorn of a few minutes, Mr. Picker’s “An American Tragedy,” which had its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 2005 and has been revised for its first professional revival as one of four productions at this summer’s festival, is as dull and dreary as it was when it opened. Perhaps drearier, since it now lacks the Met’s starry cast, which did its best to convince you that the piece, with a pallid libretto by Gene Scheer, had a beating heart.

While there are trims and adjustments throughout, the major intervention of this new version is a decapitation. The opera has lost its 20-minute opening scene, which sped through the early life of its desperately striving antihero, Clyde Griffiths. The story now begins in Lycurgus, where Clyde (Christian Bowers) has arrived to take a position at his rich uncle’s shirt collar factory.
He ends up seducing and impregnating a naïve factory girl, Roberta Alden (Vanessa Isiguen), then murders her when he falls for a society fixture, Sondra Finchley (Cynthia Cook). Or is it murder? In both novel and opera, we are left to wonder exactly what goes on in that rowboat on the lonely Adirondack lake. But while Dreiser uses the ambiguity as a spur to moral musings, the opera’s death scene, in Peter Kazaras’s ineffectual production, is merely confusing.

Mr. Picker’s “Dolores Claiborne,” which opened at the San Francisco Opera last year, took an intimate Stephen King novel and blew it up to exaggerated grandeur. “An American Tragedy” has the opposite problem: It reduces Dreiser’s sweeping social canvas to a miniature.

This could have resulted in brutally effective melodrama. But neither the score — vacillating between bustling churn and lurid surges — nor this staging has made Clyde and Roberta’s illicit relationship anything more than an innocuous excuse for mild duets. Without secrecy or shame, there’s no drama.

Surely there was a way to give a whiff of Clyde’s fatal sexual desire as he watches a vaudeville showgirl dance, but that scene seems merely an excuse for some antic music. A long sequence set in a church similarly goes for nothing.

The main characters have been dutifully assigned arias, full of vocal writing that’s neither melodically compelling nor vividly expressive. Clyde’s social climbing is summed up in a risible salute to fast cars, while Sondra has a sourly swinging paean to New York City. Roberta’s music is riddled with stark, thankless high notes, and Clyde’s pious mother (a stentorian Patricia Schuman), introduced at the start of the original version, now arrives out of nowhere to plead his innocence loudly.
The cast, full of members of the festival’s Young Artists Program, is plainly at sea, and the orchestra, led by George Manahan, awkwardly approaches Mr. Picker’s sharp angles. Dominated by ironwork, Alexander Dodge’s set doesn’t evoke the natural landscape that’s so integral to the story.

The performance on Friday was dispiriting. But over a weekend in which Cooperstown was dominated by the Baseball Hall of Fame induction ceremony, Glimmerglass eventually rallied to end up going two for four at the plate. An inert production of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Carousel” on Saturday afternoon was followed by a lithe performance of Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly” that evening, and Strauss’s “Ariadne auf Naxos” was cozy and charming on Monday.

The Japan of “Butterfly” felt nearer than the upstate New York of “An American Tragedy.” Much of this is because of Puccini’s genius for emotional immediacy, but the performance also featured a strong cast, sound direction and acute, delicate conducting by the festival’s music director, Joseph Colaneri.

While “Butterfly” was conceived as unusually unified in location — the libretto sets the whole work in and outside a single house — Glimmerglass’s production, by Francesca Zambello, the festival’s artistic and general director, sets several key scenes in the office of the American consul. This broadens the opera’s scope — there is, for one thing, the pointed presence of other Japanese women and their babies, presumably also abandoned by American officers — even as it detracts from our appreciation of Butterfly’s radical isolation.

That her brave, pathetic loneliness nevertheless came through clearly was the work of the soprano Yunah Lee, an assertive, mature Butterfly. Her grainy voice is not the plustest, but she sang clearly and articulated the text eloquently. The mezzo-soprano Kristen Choi brought commitment and strong, grounded tone to her companion, Suzuki, and the baritone Aleksey Bogdanov was a firm-voiced Sharpless, dignified even in despair. The tenor Dinyar Vania, as the callous Pinkerton, was nuanced in a role that can be monochromatic.
The reverse was a nagging issue with the festival’s “Carousel”: Ryan McKinny, as the magnetic deadbeat Billy Bigelow, was wan and monochromatic in a richly nuanced role. But he was not the only one to steer clear of the complexities of the show, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s deepest and darkest. Its songs are imbued with tragic, irresistible Puccinian lyricism, and its exploration of sexual fantasy and anxiety is even more powerful than that of “An American Tragedy.”

Andrea Carroll, as Julie Jordan, has a lovely, gentle voice and a tender presence. But her relationship with Mr. McKinny’s Billy lacked intensity, the electric charge that presses the strange, moving plot forward. Supporting performances made more of an impact, particularly Sharin Apostolou’s bright, confident Carrie and Joe Shadday’s genial Enoch Snow.

Charles Newell’s production, richly conducted by Doug Peck, had little of the visionary quality that energizes the destructive, doomed passion at the heart of the story. The attractively stylized set, by John Culbert — simple, sinuous curves of rough-hewed wood, evoking both hills and coastal Maine — would have been an ideal backdrop for a more vivid, visceral, even surreal take on this unsettling work.

Instead, the production was clumsy and slight. It seemed to exist only because Ms. Zambello and the festival make a point of presenting a classic musical every summer — with full orchestra and without amplification — rather than because it was an essential project.

More essential was Strauss’s “Ariadne,” which fielded the only true star turn of this year’s festival: the soprano Christine Goerke, calmly commanding in the title role. Ms. Goerke’s voice is not without its flaws, sometimes turning dry at the top of its range and uncertain of pitch as it descends from the heights. But its dark colors are alluring, its middle molten and free, and it pours out with joyful, infectious confidence in a performance that’s slyly funny and deeply affecting.

Ms. Zambello’s agreeable contemporary-dress production, set in a barn in upstate New York and lucidly conducted by Kathleen Kelly, presents the backstage drama of the work’s prologue in English and the opera proper in German, though the clowning Zerbinetta and
her troupe keep up the English even then. This is the way “Ariadne” was once often presented in the United States, and it’s exceptionally effective.

There are ample opportunities for the game, talented supporting cast to dance, mug and posture, though no one is on Ms. Goerke’s level. Ms. Zambello has reimagined the Composer — written, in a nod to Classical style, for a woman playing a man — as a lesbian, to inoffensive if hardly innovative effect. (The problem is the mezzo Catherine Martin’s strain in her soaring monologue.) The soprano Rachele Gilmore is a winning Zerbinetta, and the tenor Corey Bix does valiant battle with Bacchus’ sadistically arduous lines.

Even more than the other productions this summer, “Ariadne” benefits from the intimacy of Glimmerglass’s 900-seat theater. It is a revelation to see and hear this gleaming work, a chamber piece at its core, in a space that could have been built for it.

The Glimmerglass Festival runs through Aug. 24 at the Alice Busch Opera Theater, Cooperstown, N.Y.; 607-547-2255, glimmerglass.org.

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