

MUSIC REVIEW

Surreal Talk-Show Host Roams Through an Opera

By JON PARELES

The Kitchen is about the size of the television studios where talk shows are taped, so it was just right for Mikel Rouse's "Dennis Cleveland": an opera in the format of a talk show, which had its world premiere last week as a five-night Kitchen production. A recording has been released by New World Records.

Mr. Rouse, who received a 1996 MacArthur Foundation fellowship, played Dennis Cleveland, the unflappable host of a surreal talk show, roaming from stage to audience with his microphone. The eight guests on stage became a chorus, while nine other performers were planted among the spectators. John Jesurun's set placed video screens overhead, showing live close-ups and au-

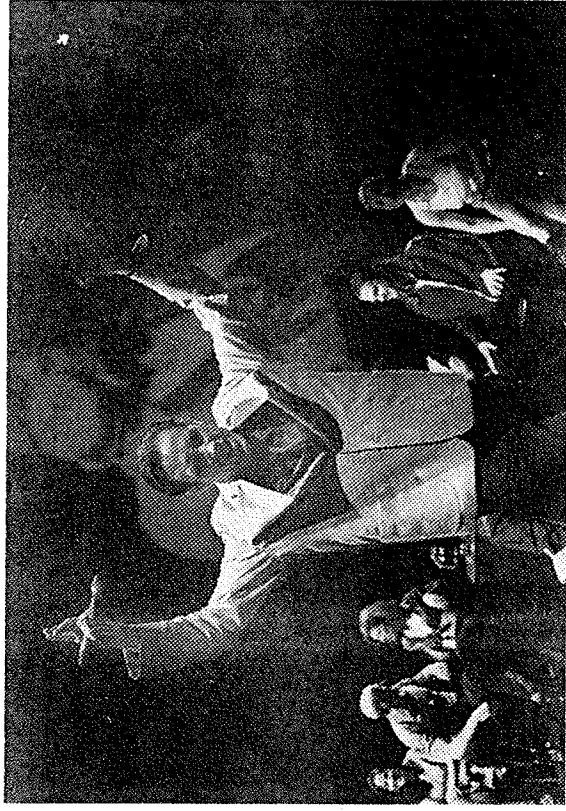
dience reactions; two cast members periodically held up "Applause" signs.

In the 90-minute opera, the stories told by Mr. Cleveland's guests revealed his own memories, while their entwined confessions gradually turned into rituals: wishing for money, worshipping self-renewal. Mr. Rouse's libretto incorporates snippets of talk-show dialogue ("She feels like she gave you so much") along with meditations on celebrity, television, love and salvation.

The words, droll and abstracted, soon melted into the music. The opera recapitulates Mr. Rouse's career since the 1980's, which has included drum-machine compositions, rock songs, Minimalist small-group music and a previous chamber opera. "Dennis Cleveland" is not billed as a rock opera, probably because it unfolds in scenes rather than songs. But the music draws knowingly on current rock.

Mr. Rouse is a pattern builder. Atop a steady pulse, which might be a basic hip-hop beat, a blues-rock bass line or brisk quasi-African drumming, he has overlaid lattices of instrumental lines (on tape) and vocals: talking, rapping or singing short melodic phrases and sustained harmonies. Juggling multiple meters and shifting between consonance and polytonality, scenes in "Dennis Cleveland" often assemble multileveled vamps that stretch out in mesmerizing repetition.

Mr. Rouse's own voice has a modest range; strategically, he used it more for speaking than singing. While no one will mistake him for L. L. Cool J., he understands speech rhythms and rhymes. Mr. Rouse has a lot in common with various deadpan downtowners: the media fascination of Laurie Anderson, the cere-



Steve Singer for The New York Times

Mikel Rouse, composer and star of the opera "Dennis Cleveland."

bral dance rhythms of Talking Heads, the plinking motifs of Steve Reich and the avuncular free-associations of Robert Ashley, to whom "Dennis Cleveland" hides elaborate mechanisms as it smoothly unfolds.