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# NEW YORK

CNN OPERA, A MUSICAL GENRE VIGOROUSLY cultivated by American composers, of late, continues to thrive as yesterday's headline celebrities become today's operatic heroes. We've already heard Marilyn Monroe, Richard Nixon, Malcolm X, and Harvey Milk sing their hearts out on the opera stage, and this March, in Houston, it will be Jacqueline Onassis's turn to vocalize the big aria, in Michael Daugherty's *Jackie O*—if there is not a superheated *gran scena e duetto* with Maria Callas somewhere in the score, I shall be most disappointed.

Meanwhile, back in New York, we have been treated to the first opera in the form of a TV talk show: Mikel Rouse's **Dennis Cleveland**, which recently had a brief run at the Kitchen. The idea is an inspired one, and Rouse has fashioned a stunning 90-minute musical drama out of it. The whole talk-show ritual, with its aggressive confrontations and confessional aria-and-ensemble format, is already operatic by nature, and Rouse—who also played Cleveland, the show's host—takes every advantage of that fact. His opera derives much of its theatrical energy from craftily deploying another special talk-show feature: the lack of separation between the guests onstage and the audience, two competing worlds that are manipulated, blended, and controlled by the officiating host. As Cleveland/Rouse roamed the aisles and drew audience members into the action, the line between those of us who had come to watch and those who could well be the next to jump up and join in the fray became wonderfully blurred.

None of this would have worked as effectively as it did had not Rouse found such a convincing musical context in which to place his operatic chat show. He writes in an idiom that downtowners call "totalism," an apt label to describe the work of young composers who grew up with an earful of rock, academic serialism, jazz, Asian and African music, rap, heavy metal, Steve Reich's rhythmic phasing, Philip Glass's minimalism, and more. Rouse draws on all that as well as a technique of vocal writing he developed himself: counterpoetry, the use of multiple un-pitched voices in strict metric counterpoint, a device he used in *Failing Kansas*, based on Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. It's even more to the point here, especially in the harrowing finale as guests, audience members, and Cleveland himself become swept up in a chilling anthem hailing the promise of salvation through popular culture. This disciplined music can be appreciated in greater detail on New World Records (80506-2), impressive even without John Jesurun's set and video design, which contributed so much to the piece's impact at the Kitchen. ■