



The opera *Dennis Cleveland* might easily be subtitled *Talk Shows and the Viewers Who Love Them Too Much*.

But as composer Mikel Rouse (who also performs the title role) stresses,

Talk Show Arias

Mikel Rouse brings opera into the 20th century with *Dennis Cleveland*.

Dennis Cleveland is no mere parody. Taking inspiration from *Voltaire's Bastards* by John Ralston Saul, the piece examines how the rituals of television have replaced organized religion. Our grandparents memorized the Lord's Prayer, we quote *The Brady Bunch*.

"But now there's an even further wrinkle than the blandness and repetition of television, which supplants this idea of mind-numbing ritual," says Rouse. "With talk shows, you actually get what amounts to religious confession, where people stand up in front of millions of people and [admit] things that they privately wouldn't even have told their families."

The sheer outrageousness of the topics addressed on talk shows also reminded him of performance art. "You can see something where people are taking baths in food, and you say, 'A million people are watching this, and it's the same [as performance art]!' What happens if, even though the intent is intellectually and conceptually different, it amounts to about the same thing?"

But when Rouse communed with Ricki and Geraldo in the flesh, he had a revelation: "Going to the shows live, instead of just watching them, gives you an amazing perspective," he confesses. "You have the host, and he's talking into a camera. Unless he's talking to an audience member, [he] isn't addressing them. They can either watch him or watch the show that's being taped

on the monitors. But since they're all in a television studio, they don't think about it, so they don't see it as this really amazing multimedia experience."

By staging *Dennis Cleveland* in exactly the same fashion as talk shows, with video and set design by artist John Jesurun, Rouse aspires to test his theories. He thinks that the familiar format will allow him to slip some challenging music past people. A forthcoming feature film of the opera, directed by Alex Steyermark, will test that notion further, and an album of the work has been released on New World Records. The person next to you may spring up and sing. "For me, it gives [opera] the same kind of impact that it had in Mozart's time, when people used to go and drink beer and watch opera."

Previously known for his chamber ensemble Broken Consort and avant-funk band Tirez Tirez, Rouse dovetails a pop sensibility with larger classical forms. *Dennis Cleveland* continues to explore a vocal writing technique that Rouse describes as "counterpoetry: unpitched voices in metric counterpoint," weaving lines of actual show dialogue into arias.

"If there's new opera in America, be it Philip Glass or John Adams, even if it's got a really cool set by Robert Wilson, it's still not relating to people because it's being staged in a 19th-century idiom." Rouse hopes *Dennis Cleveland* will change that. "My God, we're entering the 21st century," he sputters. "I'm just trying to bring opera into the 20th century."

Dennis Cleveland at the Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., 255-5793. Oct. 29-Nov. 2. ★

BY KURT B. REIGHTLEY



Opera as talk show by Mikel Rouse