

# The public confessional: Talk shows become opera

By Robert Hicks

Composer Mikel Rouse loves to watch television -- even while he's working, but he doesn't consider himself a couch potato. One thing he noticed over about a 7- to 10-year span was the emergence of a confessional on talk shows, so he decided he wanted to write an opera about television and popular culture, but he didn't quite have a handle on its direction until he read John Ralston Saul's "Voltaire's Bastards."

"It's a huge treatise on Western culture and society after Voltaire and the Age of Reason and how we got to where we are today. One of the things that he talks about that weaves through the book is this celebrity of culture and how this illusion keeps us in a very tranquil state and he started talking about television as the ritual that is normally associated with religion. I found that as a really intriguing thing," says Rouse.

## A witness

Rouse's new multimedia opera, "Dennis Cleveland," which is now at The Kitchen, is set entirely on a television talk show. As its host, Cleveland serves both as TV personality and narrator for the opera in his personal search for spirituality through popular culture. He's a witness to confessionals from the program's guests, who appear on stage in a Chorus, and audience members that he questions are actual soloists in the opera who are placed in the actual audience at The Kitchen.

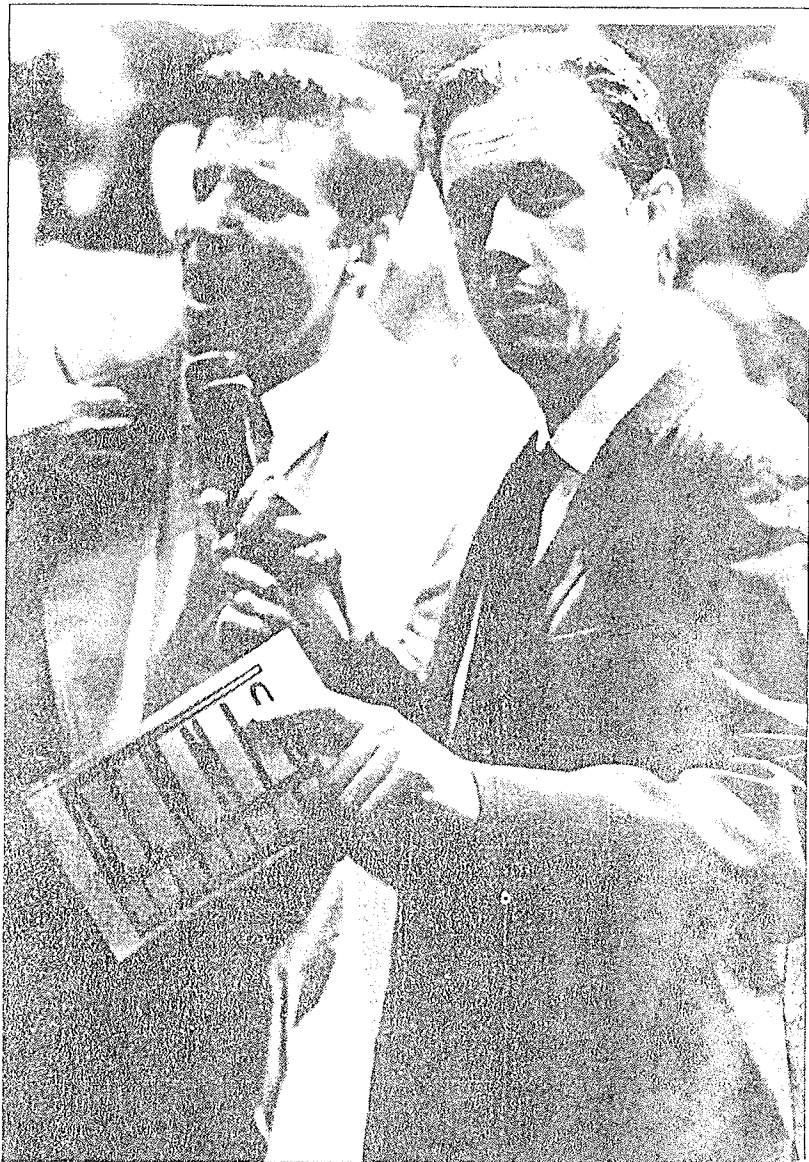
The guests' stories parallel Cleveland's life so closely as to become his story and more broadly an examination of how faith and religion in a society dominated by popular culture icons can find its only promise of salvation through television.

"I looked specifically at the confessional nature of talk shows. Here were people confessing things that I think 15-20 years ago they wouldn't even tell their families and now they're telling millions of people. I saw a real connection with what John Ralston Saul was talking about and a public phenomenon that slowly evolved.

## Merged ID's

"Regardless of how legitimate something on Phil Donohue was, he did have so-called experts on his show. They would discuss nuclear disarmament or they'd discuss women's rights, whatever. That slowly evolved into a situation where guests and audience members were almost identical. The only thing that separated a guest and audience member was who was in the audience and who was on stage. As the topics became more and more sensationalist, the idea of expert was completely up for grabs. That really appealed to me," says Rouse.

For Rouse, it is important to make an opera that is contemporary with today's issues, relevant to our times, if you will, not so much to be trendy, but to avoid the accoutrements of traditional 19th Century opera, with its grand sets and staging and full orchestra.



Mikel Rouse, foreground, in 'Dennis Cleveland.'



Those operas were relevant to their time, but in contemporary opera, even a piece like John Adam's "Nixon In China," Rouse sees topics that have a modern appeal, but often the staging and music in some ways hark back to an earlier period for an audience accustomed to traditional opera.

"I wanted something that people could immediately relate to. My theory has always been that if you can not dumb down to the audience but somehow give them a comfort zone, something that they're familiar with, then you can do about anything thing that you want," says Rouse. "So I've designed a staging that allows people to be completely familiar with that format and perhaps intrigued with it, then present a lot of musical

ideas that would not usually happen in that kind of show."

Born in 1957 in St. Louis, Rouse grew up in nearby rural Poplar Bluff. Studies in painting and film at the Kansas Art Institute and in music at the University of Missouri at Kansas City revealed an early penchant for multi-media work. His interest in composition though was strictly instrumental. It wasn't until much later when he began work on "Failing Kansas," (1994) an adaption of Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood," that he showed a liking for opera. That grew out of his emphasis on good songwriting and his development of "counterpoetry," a weaving of dialogue and arias with unpitched voices in metric counterpoint.

Mikel Rouse's new opera, "Dennis Cleveland," at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St.; until Nov. 2, 8 p.m.; \$15. 255-5793.