

Opera Meets Oprah

Can't Stand the Heat

Rouse's talk-show opera has come together against the backdrop of an avalanche of resignations at the Kitchen—six over the last few months. Reports of a ritual bloodletting are exaggerated, but there's no denying that the place has been shaken up. Executive director Lauren Amazeen resigned after five years in the job, apparently due to differences with the board. With her went producing director John Maxwell Hobbs and development director Josie Caporuscio. However, Caporuscio reportedly had been already planning to leave to spend more time with her family, and the remaining resignations are apparently unconnected. Production coordinator Cat Domiano and technical director John Plenge left earlier in the summer, one to pursue a career in stage managing, the other to teach. Marketing director Phillip Bahar got a higher-profile job in Chicago, while production manager Alex Kahn merely went on leave for a previously scheduled project.

Coincidence? "Natural attrition," according to composer Bernadette Speech, a powerhouse personality with a long history of new-music administration who has taken over temporarily the reins as director. Eyebrows might have remained at half-mast had it not been for previous controversies surrounding the Kitchen, including a *Voice* cover story two years ago. What seems undeniable, though, is that Amazeen held the Kitchen together through a tough period of change, and that at least a few people in the organization were unhappy about recent programming procedures, if not the programming itself. Every position except one has been replaced by internal candidates, and though the technical production for *Dennis Cleveland* looked shaky when everyone involved suddenly vanished, the necessary resources are back in place. Music director Ben Neill has survived, and the Kitchen's pivotal role in new-music history seems likely, if anything, to benefit from the changes. —K.G.

Dennis Cleveland is cool and in control. In white sport coat and dark glasses, waving his microphone like the magic wand it is, he mediates among his puppets, his performers, his guests on the first-ever new-music talk show.

Dennis Cleveland is really—though his show makes you question what reality is—New York composer Mikel Rouse. And for all his slickness, Rouse is a product of rural Missouri, the boot-heel region down near Arkansas. As a teenager, he ran away from home to join a carnival. He learned how the shell games worked, how the ball tosses were rigged, how the whole show was cynically set up to create a false reality. It was good preparation. For now, 20 years later, he's tackled two of society's most unreal phenomena—talk shows and opera—and fused them into a talk-show opera, *Dennis Cleveland*, premiering at the Kitchen this week through November 2.

For years Rouse has mentioned his dream of having his own, liberal-biased talk show, and he's finally, sort of, done it. Even before he started work on *Dennis Cleveland*, he took an English friend to see *Geraldo* because he wanted to give her a massive dose of American culture. As the guests poured out their private neuroses and screamed epithets at each other, Rouse glanced at his friend and saw her crying and laughing at once, mumbling, "This is so fucked up." Since then Rouse has returned to *Geraldo* and sat in on *Ricki Lake* and *Gordon Elliott*, plus a few local shows. "I like kitsch," Rouse admits in his Hell's Kitchen apartment, where he's been rehearsing his singers. "Talk shows were a phenomenon that started 15 years ago, then 10 to seven years ago started going further and further in a ritual direction. I was already working on a set of pieces about people looking for some type of meaning or faith or awakening through popular culture. When I zeroed in on the talk-show thing, I realized that was the format I was looking for."

A lot of composers have drawn elements from pop culture, but few have embraced it so whole hog as Rouse. For his first opera, *Failing Kansas*, he spent five years researching the murders that were the subject of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and couched the vernacular he found in a cool rock idiom of subliminally intricate cross-rhythms. For *Dennis Cleveland*, he wanted something more topical. He began by taping talk shows on dozens of hours of DAT tape, feeding sound bites into his computer and analyzing and mimicking inflections. Found phrases from real people—for example, "If you don't love me the way I am, then you can go"—be-

came the ostinatos and rhythmic patterns of *Dennis Cleveland*. Ironically, Rouse thought this new opera would be a cinch after the research-intensive *Failing Kansas*. The Capote opera, though, had one performer: Rouse. *Cleveland* has 19. The piece represents a major leap in Rouse's compositional ambitions. He's not only negotiating a

cameramen who are both functionaries and performers. The libretto appears on cue cards that Cleveland/Rouse is reading, and the audience can read them too, just like the supertitles at the Metropolitan. Singers will rise from among the audience to sing, and the audience will watch themselves on video screens. If talk shows are a mir-

television drama, most viewers could lay out the scenario that will follow, including the conclusion. Given the first line of banter in most scenes, a regular viewer could probably rhyme off the next three or four lines.... There is more flexibility in a Catholic mass or in classic Chinese opera."

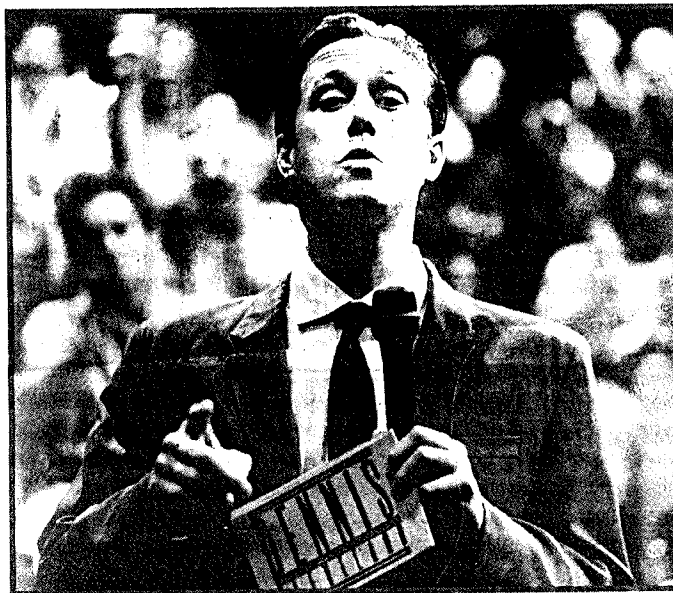
Accordingly, Rouse/Cleveland is both host and priest. When he yells to two audience members to "Come on down!" Rouse wants you to think of a televangelist eliciting conversions, but also of prize-hawker Bob Barker on *The Price Is Right*. The piece's conceit is that each audience member tells a confession, but by the end you realize that the confessions tell the story of Dennis's own life.

Like Burt Lancaster in the film version of *Ebner Ginty*, he's selling salvation, but painfully aware that he hasn't found the meaning of life himself. "All of my life I've been loveless," he repeats as a refrain, but turns it into an advertising slogan by ending, like a lettered phone number, "I-O-V-E-L-E-S."

Rouse's artistic subtext is that he's trying to revive what he calls "the broken promise of *Einstein on the Beach*," the promise that opera could shed its European pretensions and relate to everyday life. (The piece is dedicated to that genius of operatic vernacular, Robert Ashley.)

"I'm taking a format that everyone's familiar with," Rouse explains, "and placing it in a new context. It takes the intellectual snobbery away from opera immediately, and puts you in a frame of mind to accept new information. It's always been a strategy of mine to provide some area within the format, whether it's the production of the CD or the use of a rock groove or whatever, that the audience will be already familiar with. If they've got that, you can slip them more complex information under the door."

For Rouse himself has something to sell: rhythmic complexity. Counterpoint. Thematic unity. Aesthetic richness. The idea that music can be popular in format and yet still perceptually challenging, that we can, in effect, upgrade the daily discourse of American life. It's a John Ralston Saul idea as well. Rouse hopes that maybe, just maybe, a few of those people in the talk-show audiences will see *Dennis Cleveland* and start to think about the fact that we who complain about what goes on as observers are also participants. We may be watching the show, but we're also the actors. We let the media tell us we're helpless, but we have the power to change the world. ♦



Mikel Rouse as Dennis Cleveland: a mirror mirroring mirrors

film version, but hoping to take the piece to Off-Broadway.

What's more, participating in talk-show audiences opened up Rouse's ideas of what theater could be. "When I sat there and looked at it as a theatrical experience instead of a live TV taping, it opened up whole new vistas in terms of breaking down the fourth wall. Here you've got a multimedia situation where there's no separation between the people onstage and the audience for two reasons. One is the lighting. The other is that the only thing that makes the person onstage more of an expert than the person in the audience is that he's onstage. More importantly, the show is being taped live, and the audience can watch the live taping on the monitors as it's going down. They're doing two things at once: they're live participants within the action, but they can also watch the thing on TV. The minute I stepped back from that and looked at it as a theatrical experience, which of course nobody in that audience does, it was mind-blowing."

The result was an overhauling of the operatic genre. Just as the cameramen in a live taping are seen by the audience, *Dennis Cleveland* contains

ror of society watched by the participants as in a mirror, then *Dennis Cleveland* is a mirror mirroring mirrors. "Finally," the poster for the piece announces, "real opera for real people."

That's not to say it's a light, easy piece. The overarching viewpoint for the opera comes from *Voltaire's Bastards*, a wide-ranging critique of modern culture by Canadian novelist, historian, and businessman John Ralston Saul. Saul writes about the corporatist takeover of the Western world, the dismantling of democracy by multinational corporations, and the consequent increased reliance on the illusions of mass culture as a source of personal meaning. Talking about TV, Saul (who is reportedly flying down from Toronto to see *Dennis Cleveland*) wrote:

"The most accurate context in which to place television programming is that of general religious ritual.... Like television, [religious rituals] eschew surprise, particularly creative surprise. Instead, they flourish on the repetition of known formulas. People are drawn to television as they are to religions by the knowledge that they will find there what they already know.... After watching the first minute of any