

A Houston World Premiere

THE EVENT
by Irving Kolodin

THE CITY
by Horace Sutton

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On a day when communities around the country were presenting returning hostages with keys to their cities, friends and neighbors of a hostage from Houston, Texas, presented their returnee with a yellow Cadillac. Later that evening, Houston's opera lovers attended a performance in Jones Hall of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, in the original Opéra Comique version with a new English translation by Sheldon Harnick (librettist of *Fiorello* and *Fiddler on the Roof*).

If the two events seem unrelated, consider one further fact. Both acts were made possible by the generosity of individuals rather than of local governments. The neighbors of William Boyer, Jr. (who refused to have their names published) raised the money for his Cadillac on their own. The *Carmen*, in the highly appropriate production funded, for use in several cities, by the Gramma Fisher Foundation, was given in excellent style by the Houston Grand Opera, which would probably disband if it weren't for private philanthropy: The Texas Commission for the Arts' output per capita—5.3¢ per person, annually—ranks, among 50 states and 5 U.S. territories, 55th or last.

Individual enterprise is the well-spring and balance wheel of the Houston Grand Opera, whose 25th anniversary will be celebrated, April 24 through May 1, by the world premiere of *Willie Stark*, the 11th opera by Carlisle Floyd, still best remembered for his first, *Susannah*. As subject, again writing the libretto as well as the

music, Floyd has reached for Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. Following the six performances in Houston there will be 16 through the month of May at Washington's Kennedy Center.

But, as has not always been his custom, Floyd was able, during his work on *Willie Stark* (going back to 1976), to



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Above: Carlisle Floyd, whose new opera debuts this month in Houston. Opposite: Houston's Tranquillity Park, with the Pennzoil Building in the background.

observe, in workshop surroundings, scenes, an act, eventually the whole opera (last May) as it progressed. Present were friends and colleagues, even members of the press, who expressed judgments on what they heard and saw, as if Floyd were living, not in a Texas metropolis, but in the Munich of Richard Wagner's mad King Ludwig. Floyd has been able to find such a community because he is M.D. Anderson Professor at the School of Music in the University of Houston. That brings him in direct contact with the University's Opera Studio, where young performers get funded vocal education while pursuing practical experience with the Houston Grand Opera.

Out of this community has come a work that profited, in its preproduction phases, from the opportunity to evaluate pros and cons of treatment, to add, to deduct, to reconsider. As an instance, Floyd had a concept of utilizing film clips, in newsreel style, to create an atmosphere of time (1935) and place (a state capital in the Deep South—the character of Willie Stark was suggested by the career of Louisiana Senator Huey Long). That is now replaced by the voice of a radio announcer, heard eight times during the three acts. Among those who cheered the change was director Harold Prince, who is staging the world premiere. Though Prince didn't take a life-or-death exception to the newsreel idea, he was delighted when it was abandoned.

A perusal of *Willie Stark*'s score uncovers two elements that prompt a belief it is Floyd's best, most mature work. One is a crafty combination of sung and spoken elements; the other is a

strength and distinction of melodic ideas evolved from basic themes that come and go. Characters are resourcefully defined, from recognizable thematic patterns that are suitable for development; over his 10 operas, Floyd has vastly extended his ability to shape such patterns, work with them, and draw them together when it suits dramatic purpose. Judgments about forthcoming musical productions should remain in limbo until all the problems of presentation are resolved, but I can strongly recommend a visit to Houston or Washington for *Willie Stark*.

In addition to bringing new operas to the world's attention, the Houston Grand Opera helps nurture emerging artists through its interconnections with local music organizations. These interconnections, as extensive as the underground tunnels that link most of downtown Houston's office buildings, begin with the University of Houston's Opera Studio. However, the Studio is by no means the only example of the Houston Grand Opera's outreach.

For instance, the Houston Symphony plays in the pit, and the Grand Opera's adjuncts include a third group, the Texas Opera Theater, which plays approximately 200 performances a season. These appearances are not only in its home state, but as far east as Florida and as far north as Michigan. The rule of the Opera Theater road is: leading parts one night, bits the next. Much can be learned from such intensive work, as was demonstrated by the jump made by tenor David Kuebler, from the Opera Theater's ranks to the Houston Grand Opera in one year and, after a few more years, to the Met.

Such well-planned interrelated activity does not simply emerge from the soil. It is the product of the brilliant, opera-minded general director of the Houston Grand Opera, David Gockley, whose background includes a venture as an aspiring singer with the apprentice group of John Crosby's Santa Fe Opera in New Mexico. The outcome persuaded Gockley that he would be better off on the other side of the footlights. He was indoctrinated in the business aspects of the Santa Fe Opera before he found the opportunity in 1973 to sink roots and grow in Houston. There was talk, in 1975, of Gockley coming to the Met as an assistant to Anthony A. Bliss, when Bliss became executive director of the Met. Gockley wisely decided to stay and exploit his



operatic ideas in hospitable Houston.

High among Gockley's ideas is a conviction that serious opera and light opera have more in common than is commonly recognized elsewhere (except, from time to time, at the New York City Opera). Whether the interchange is exclusively artistic, or also commercial, depends on circumstances. The participation of Broadway veteran Harnick as creator of a new English text for *Carmen* is essentially artistic. It produced the best solution to be offered in this country in many years to the problems posed by the quest for a theatrically valid version of *Carmen*. Harnick's version strips the work of the sung recitative provided, after Bizet's death, by Ernest Guiraud (a musician born in New Orleans in 1827, who went to Paris at 15 and settled there).

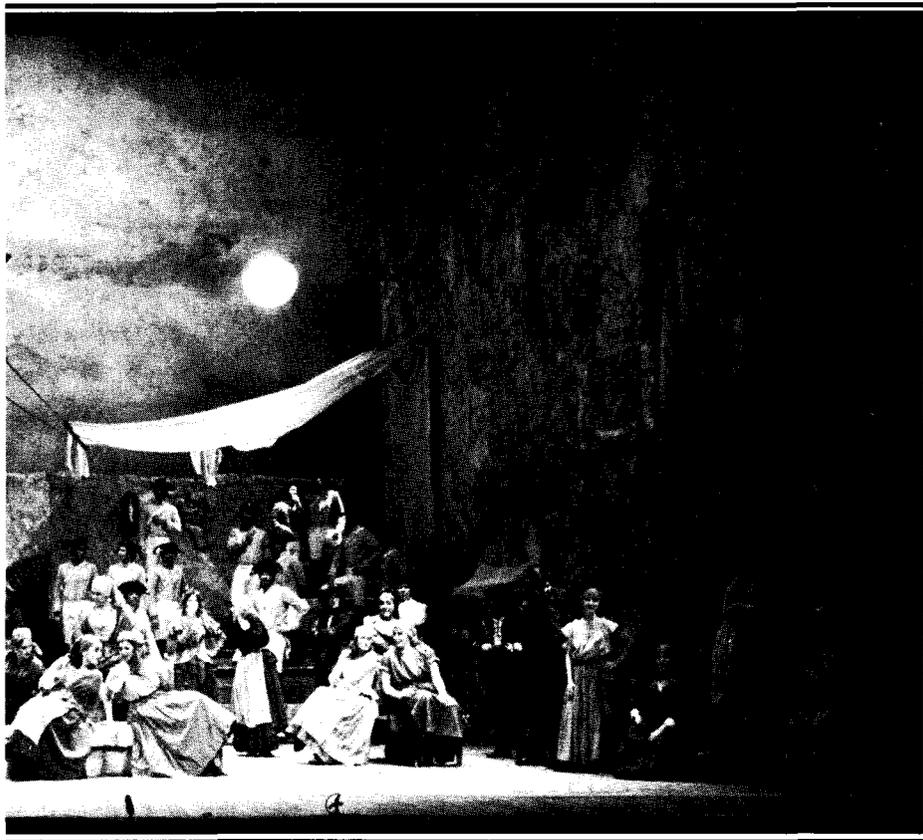
Some may object: "Well, didn't the Met do it that way in 1972 when the late Goeran Gentele's scheme was pursued, after his death, by Schuyler Chapin, with Leonard Bernstein conducting?" Yes, to a point; but with Marilyn Horne and James McCracken, and nearly 4,000 people in the theater.

Nothing of such grand opera character prevailed in the Houston *Carmen*. The cast was fresh, mostly young and comely, of the age and impulse to make a living experience of the caprices of Carmen. This version, as directed by Michael Kahn, clings closely to what Bizet conceived: a musical score carried

forward by a play's speech and action. And from the start—by converting Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy's "Sur la place, chacun passe, chacun vient, chacun va" into "Through the square, from everywhere, the passersby come and go"—Harnick strikes a stride of suitable speech pattern whose combination of rhythmic values and colloquial meaning carry to the end.

What emerges is a *Carmen* amounting to more than the mezzo's interpretation of the "Habeñera" or how the tenor delivers the "Flower Song." In the





The Houston Grand Opera's *Carmen*, Act I: "the best solution offered, to the problems posed by the opera in years."

cast I saw, Cynthia Clarey was a vividly plausible Carmen, with a good young voice that can be developed into everything the role requires. Likewise the Don José, Riccardo Calleo, and the outstandingly good Micaela, Elizabeth Knighton. The smugglers' quintet in Act II went brilliantly, thanks to three sure, pure sounds from members of the Opera Studio. John DeMain's conducting was highly idiomatic.

Where the artistic and the commercial in Houston's approach can be found in closest communion was in the

production of the Gershwins' and Dubose Heyward's *Porgy and Bess* of 1977. Immediately at hand was a responsive audience in Jones Hall that sent the production to Broadway, and from there to far places. Houston's *Porgy* could very well, on its 10th anniversary, get the kind of revival being accorded Scott Joplin's *Tremonisha*, which also reached Broadway, on its 10th anniversary this year.

Listening to the clear, well-carrying sound of *Carmen* reinforced what had been heard on a previous visit in November for Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. I asked Gockley whether amplification was utilized. He did not equivocate but answered directly: "For some productions, yes."

Asked to explain the rationale for this sinful evasion of artistic proprieties, he went on: "If you look carefully, you will see two pillar-like structures in the *Carmen* production. They enclose acoustical aids designed by Christopher Jaffe for building up the sounds of sibilants [s,z,ch,sh] to add word intelligibility through a hall as large as Jones." Does this enlarge the size of the individual voice sound? "I don't think so," he replied. "It applies to all voices equally. And we only use it with English. If you came back for Verdi's *Ballo*

in *Maschera*, you wouldn't hear it."

One reality generally accepted in Houston is: Jones Hall is too overcrowded with bookings—concerts, opera, a resident ballet, and outside attractions—for the city's own home-based activities to co-exist compatibly. A now-empty street corner in the downtown artistic enclave may provide the answer when the Lyric Theater rises on it. Originally priced at \$40 million, it has inched up to \$60 million, and ground-breaking is urgent before construction costs climb further. When realized, this will add to Houston's resources a theater seating 2,000 for opera and ballet, and a smaller, much needed recital hall of about 500 seats. All would share a huge, interconnected underground parking garage now serving Jones Hall and nearby structures, such as the Alley Theater.

By then, the Houston Symphony and the Houston Grand Opera might also share the talents of Sergiu Comissiona, who has been named the Houston Symphony's music adviser and principal conductor. Comissiona began his career with the Rumanian State Opera before emigrating to Israel and then to the United States, so he offers much experience with opera. Interconnection is, after all, a way of life in Houston. ■

THE CITY

It is hard to imagine that Houston once called itself the Magnolia City. If there is one thing which it in no way represents, it is that fragrant, sweet symbol of the Old South. Yet, that is what it chose to be dubbed in the Twenties only shortly after its ship canal opened giving it access to the Gulf of Mexico, 50 miles away along Buffalo Bayou. Now it is the third largest port and the fifth most populous city in the nation. As for money, a commodity in which it is eminently interested, its total annual wages and salaries, based heavily on oil and petrochemicals, is pegged at \$25 billion.

There are those who insist that this restless encampment is destined to emerge as the nation's largest city. Surely it is the most free-wheeling. It has no zoning laws and few taxes. It is spread all over what was once Texas



SCOTT WINNINGHAM

The Houston Ballet's *Four Last Songs*, choreographed by Ben Stevenson, the company's artistic director.