



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.



Cassat's "Mother and Child," from the John A. and Audrey Jones Beck collection at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts.

grazing land, and in its rambling way resembles Los Angeles. If it had a symbol, it would be a steel crane rampant on a building site. For lodgers coming to town, it is spending half a billion dollars this year and next to build 22 new hotels.

Now decorously known as the "Golden Buckle of the Sunbelt," Houston is a town where one can buy a mink cowboy hat for \$2,400. Or alligator boots for \$2,500, both available at a Western store called Cutter Bill's, which has a shoeshine stand that charges \$5 for a polish.

Houston is a city that barely comes up for air in the hot summer; it has built a downtown tunnel system that connects 40 of its buildings, most of them shining skyscrapers (including one in pink granite) designed by America's most celebrated architects. This spelunker's paradise roams underground for three miles and is lined with way-stations of nourishment such as Sam's Brooklyn Deli, as well as with assorted boutiques, restaurants, and bars.

The tunnel also deposits seekers of culture and the arts a few steps away from Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, an elegant playhouse given by the Houstonian who was Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Commerce. It seats in velvety red chairs 3,000 patrons who come to be entertained by opera, ballet, and symphony. Wrapped in wheat-colored travertine, Jones Hall bursts into a blaze of light at eventide as if to portend the gala night about to unfold.

To the visitor standing under the

marquee of Jones Hall on the western fringes of downtown, the heart of cultural Houston unfolds. With its nine towers rising like some castle that is at once avant-garde and medieval, the Alley Theater—now called the Nina Vance Alley Theater—sits cater-corner to Jones.

Despite the power and private treasuries this growing downtown forest of buildings represent, Houstonians do not want to be without the manna they know best. It is a saving grace to many that a branch of Luther's has opened in these environs, serving beef and chicken barbecues, and "link," a local diminutive for link sausage. Draft beer is 80 cents.

For more fanciful fare downtowners might repair to Harry's Kenya Restaurant whose presence is marked by a copper, brass, and stainless-steel safari tableau applied to the outside wall. Inside one might attack the quail Véronique or the lobster St. Tropez under the watchful gaze of assorted ibexes, water buffalo, and other trophy heads mounted on the walls.

Beyond barbecue, and beyond the view of a water buffalo staring into one's soup, lie such rarefied corners as the straight-to-the-point Restaurant de France in the new Meridien, a hotel that is as French as *foie gras frais*, which employs a full complement of French chefs, several of them disciples of Roger Vergé and Paul Bocuse. The chefs have brought to the Southwest a true Gallic culinary exercise that would be difficult to find in New York—a terrine of wild duck baked in sherry and served with

morello cherries, a silky mousse of sea bass with pistachios served in Nantais butter and onward into a culinary *septième ciel*. With all that Gallic folderol one can still engage lodging here for \$87 double, \$72 single. Try to find prices like that in Paris.

No one need come down with scurvy over at the Hyatt where T.J. Peppercorn's rotisserie specializes in duck finished with a choice of six sauces including honey with amaretto and macadamia nuts. Or just plain and crispy. Hyatt's Regency suites come with velvet robes, a profusion of soaps, creams, and perfumes, and a tot of liqueur and a mint on the bed table. Nirvana in the sky.

Feeding the muse is not overlooked in Houston, and it is interesting to note that the works of Frederic Remington, that eminent reflector of the West, have been relegated to the basement of the Museum of Fine Arts. At the entranceway of its Mies van der Rohe building is its newest acquisition: four sculptures of human backs by Henri Matisse. The Beck collection of Impressionists and post-Impressionists is a vast treasure.

Houston's most moving artistic experience may well be the Rothko Chapel, an octagonal oasis of repose in a plain brick Philip Johnson-designed building adjoining the quietude of the campus of St. Thomas University. The meditative and religionists of all faiths flock to it.

The handiest hostelry to this cultural cluster is the seasoned Warwick. Bob Hope has called the view from its presidential suite to the parklands below and the small Arc de Triomphe on which the equestrian statue of Sam Houston reposes one of the most engaging views from any room in hotel-dom.

The Johnson Space Center, the 1,600-acre homeland of NASA, lies 25 miles from town. Its exhibits of space shuttles, Saturn rockets, Apollo capsules, and moon rocks draw over a million visitors a year.

Wonders never cease in Houston. Considering all the adrenalin that's being pumped here by Buffalo Bayou, it's no wonder that the first astronauts to escape to the absolute repose of the moon labeled their lunar patch Tranquility Base. ■

Somogi

ONSTAGE

PBS
Monday, April 6
9:30 P.M. EST
8:30 Central*

GREAT MUSIC AND INSPIRING TALENT ONSTAGE WITH JUDITH SOMOGI

"It is the positive you go for in life. Believing in yourself and really surging forward with that."

This is the attitude Judith Somogi brings to her craft – an attitude we will share Monday night on PBS in the delightful "Onstage with Judith Somogi," a film production of the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute.

Be it from the podium of the world's leading opera and concert halls, or working with talented teenage musicians in the open air of an Oklahoma summer, Judith Somogi welcomes us into a world few of us will ever experience at such close range.

This is an evening to share the joys, the demands, the frustrations and the excitement of a life in music today.

The curtain is pulled back and you and your entire family are welcomed "Onstage with Judith Somogi" at 9:30 P.M., Monday, April 6th.

A 30-minute program produced by the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute.
Presented on PBS by WQED/Pittsburgh.

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Tom Wolfe

by Joshua Gilder

Interrupted in the midst of finishing his new book, *Under the I-Beams* (to be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux next fall), Tom Wolfe answers the door in his work clothes—a powder-blue suit, high tab collar (“I feel one should suffer for style”), flat-yellow tie, broad blue-and-white striped shirt complimented nicely by the blue piping running up his white socks, and glossy yellow shoes. The total effect is nothing less than. . . well, beautiful. Wolfe the renegade dandy has exacted his share of critical howls with devastating critiques of New York high society’s flirtation with radical politics (“Radical Chic”), the soporific prose style of *The New Yorker* (“Tiny Mummies”), and the theoretical contortions of contemporary art (*The Painted Word*).

When not satirizing the social scene, the chief banner-waver of *New Journalism* turns his talents to what he has called “field work among the noble savages in search of a lifestyle.” He chronicled the “happiness explosion” of the Sixties in *The Kandy Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, the birth of the psychedelic movement in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the society of surfers and racers in *The Pump House Gang*, and most recently the brotherhood of astronauts in *The Right Stuff*.

In contrast to his exclamatory, whammo prose, the 50-year-old Wolfe is surprisingly soft-spoken and gentlemanly in manner. We talked in the Manhattan town house where he lives with his wife of three years, Sheila, and their six-month-old daughter.

Q Tell us about your new book, *Under the I-Beams*.

A It’s a sequel to the *Painted Word* that will be mostly about architecture,

but it also brings in a little bit more about painting, about dance, about serious music, structural philosophy, and other allied arts. I think in the arts and in all matters that relate to the intellectual, we still have a colonial complex. It’s always better if it comes from France or someplace similar. It’s really very funny. V.F. Calverton coined the term “colonial complex” way back in the Twenties, saying “now it’s all over, we’ve found our own.” Except it’s utterly not true. Our painting—much that we’ve gloried in since 1943—will be seen by the historians of the 21st century as a footnote to French Cubism. Of course we have our own moves, but always within the tracks set by the French in painting, in philosophy and literary criticism.

Q And in architecture?

A It came directly from the Bauhaus. There’s a very funny thing going on right now. The architects, the established people like Philip Johnson, talk about modernism almost as if they had nothing to do with it. They’ll talk about “glass boxes” with a snigger. They realize that this is an exhausted form; quite aside from aesthetic considerations. It’s old now, real old. But they only move a few steps off from the center track. They’ll add an “historical reference,” a slightly reinterpreted cornice stuck in always very archly to show it’s a gesture rather than a conviction.

Q It’s kind of a comic self-reference, isn’t it?

A It’s not meant to be comic. They’re quite serious about it; the word that they use is ironic, or witty. But it’s dead serious. That’s something that is—sometimes willfully—misunderstood

about *The Painted Word*. I keep seeing it referred to both by enemies and the few friends the book has as something that seeks to expose the fraud of modern art. And I kept trying to make it clear all through the book itself that it is the very opposite of fraud. You’re looking at upland Baptists. You’re looking at people who seat the men and the women on opposite sides of the church and have them wash each other’s feet out of conviction. They’re not going to go through a strange ceremony with the idea of “Oh, I’m going to put one over on anyone who might be watching.” And that’s to me, the exciting part—that these are believers.

The Painted Word was taken as an attack on modern art, an attack on the critics. In fact I don’t believe there’s a single aesthetic judgment passed. If anyone is implicitly attacked—there is such a thing as an implicit attack through satire—it’s the painters, not the critics. It’s the artists who were very willing to give up personal vision to illustrate theorems. The book is a history of the rise of theory. And this new book takes that a bit further, in a historical fashion. People in the art world tend to very much resist the type of social analysis they quickly make elsewhere.

Everybody knows that there are forces of class and status that affect businessman, that in some places in history the military have become the tools of economic interests. I try to tell people in the arts that the same sort of social pressures can have an influence on the course of art. They refuse to believe it, but I think that when they unconsciously know it’s true, they scream.

Q The virgin artist complex?

A Yes. The idea that what comes from