

## MONDAY

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**man Project** was successful enough during its run at Balliwick Repertory that it's moving to all off-night, slot at the Free Shakespeare 08 N. Wells. The musical version of the orality play will be staged at 8 PM Monday through December 17. Tickets are \$3, with a \$ at 337-1025.

**er Past Midnight** is another limited edition production—a one-night, one-man stand that is for 7 PM at the ETA Creative Arts Foundation, leago. The one man is Runako Jahl, backed up onist Eli Hoe Nai, vocalist Dee Alexander, udlul Hakeem, and dancer Joan Gray. \$5; more \$8.

hat's also the regional final of the **ten Opera auditions** will be held at 7:30 in Hall, 2208 Michigan. Mezzo-soprano Mignon official judge. Free; 444-8411.

## TUESDAY

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ressa Orantes gives a concert titled **Cante of the Spanish Experience** at 12:15 today in Library Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington. **Resencia Hispanica**—a survey of Hispanic arts. It's free; information at 346-3278.

**the Pedestal: Heroic Sculpture of French in the 19th Century** is the catchy title of ure at 12:15 at the Art Institute, Michigan at conjures up a picture of a guy who has his (in the front of his smock and wears his straw ys in the rakish style popularized by Napoleon. of me. The talk is related to the current exhibit **Country: Impressionism and the French** and is free with museum admission: \$4.50, ids; 443-3600.

## WEDNESDAY

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make it to the seminar on **Fitting Children fessional Lifestyle** at noon today at ern University's Norris University Center, dan in Evanston, then one of three things is ue: (a) you've got the problem licked, (b) you 1 kids yet, or (c) your life-style isn't as rigidly i as it might be. Marjean Suelzle will lead the Free, BYO lunch. 492-7360 for details.

et Paul Carroll and New York poet John Yan dlection for writing about other artists in a; hence the title of their joint reading **Poets bout Art**, which will be held at 8 tonight at ern University's Flak Hall, 1845 Sheridan in Admission is free; 492-7348.

## THURSDAY

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that food that is low in sodium, fats, and calories can also be described as "a array of taste and eye appealing treats" strikes noronic and not a little implausible. That s is the claim being made about tonight's tion of **Gifts From a Healthy Heart Kitchen**, Illinois Masonic Medical Center, 836 W. . It costs \$5, and advance registration is 83-7005.

**ner of State and Modin**, "an original farce" by Michele Rifkin, opens at 10 AM and 7 t the Spertus Museum, 618 S. Michigan. I have at my knowledge of Hanukkah customs and d primarily on a **Saturday Night Live** skit I ago—and all I remember is Maccabees and a couldn't go out. In Rifkin's treatment, a i apparently ends up riding around Chicago in one Norman Mandelbaum at the wheel. A oe will also be given at 10:30 AM on December r students, seniors, and museum members. or information.

## Hot Tips: William Harper reinvents the opera

After a long, agonizing, and indisputable death, that old behemoth opera has arisen phoenixlike from its ashes, and in a new and almost unrecognizable form. Gone now are the bel canto arias, the fat sopranos belting out high Cs, the freakishly silly plots, and sometimes even the orchestra, replaced by small ensembles with electronic instruments, a vernacular idiom, and a flat, matter-of-fact urbanness. Once a costly dinosaur and a frivolous spectacle for the rich, opera is now making a strong bid for social relevance and popular appeal.

In New York this operatic renewal is manifested by Robert Ashley, Philip Glass, and Laurie Anderson, among others. Chicago, meanwhile, will have to make do with William Harper, composer and artistic director of ARTCO (American Ritual Theater Company). Were Harper's increasingly ambitious stage works reminiscent of those New York composers, he would be easy to write off. But from the beginning, with the folk-songy humor of **John Ball Shot Them All** (1981) and the powerful, rock-based energy of **Dead Birds** (which set attendance records at MoMing in 1983), it has been clear that Harper is working out his own untrodden path, one that leads toward a truly Chicagoan operatic theater. There is no one quite like Bill Harper.

Next Thursday begins the run of Harper's most ambitious and apparently best-integrated project to date: **Crimson Cowboy**, an urban, multimedia reworking of the Orpheus myth. Orpheus, as those of you who paid attention to your high school English teachers will recall, was the greatest musician of his time, a man who could charm the birds and wild beasts with his singing. When his new bride Eurydice was fatally bitten by a snake and whisked off to Hades, Orpheus sought her out and sang so sweetly that Pluto allowed Eurydice to follow him back to the upper world on the condition that he not look back. He did look back, of course, whereupon Eurydice vanished back into Hades forever.

No story has been set to music so often as that of Orpheus. It was the basis of the earliest surviving opera, Peri's **Euridice** (1600), and has

been set to music more than 30 times since. It seemed, then, an appropriate question to ask, Why another Orpheus?

For a moment, Harper looked nonplussed. "Why? Because I'm a composer. Composers will always be interested in Orpheus."

"And also, it's such a universal problem. Our interpretation is basically that Orpheus is so obsessed with his art that he is unable to appreciate Eurydice for what she is, he's more interested in his song about his love for her than he is in the love itself. He's more interested in fantasy. And the manifestation of fantasy in this piece is the **Crimson Cowboy**, who's an actual character."

"I can see that in myself... You get so involved in your own ideas that you have no time for anybody outside your ideas. In your own world, of course, you're the most important thing, but that world is based on such flimsy evidence, there's no real substance beyond yourself. That doesn't carry on forever; you need your family and friends, and if you ignore them you get into major trouble... like Orpheus. It's a universal problem, but I think it's especially true of artists."

Harper cannot be faulted for any lack of originality in his treatment of the myth, nor has any of the 30-odd previous settings drawn on such a variety of styles. **Crimson Cowboy** opens with a pillow talk that establishes the intimacy of the two lovers, followed by a "wild" underworld scene in which Hades takes the form of a Wisconsin Dells-type amusement park. The core of the work consists of four scenes revolving around Orpheus's and Eurydice's nuptials, each in a different musical style, in which the **Crimson Cowboy** appears as the embodiment of the characters involved: The bridal shower, in which the Cowboy appears as a hairdresser, is based on 80s rock and roll and ends in a reggae version of "Goin' to the Chapel." The stag party, for which the Cowboy plays MC, uses a more intense and contemporary rock and roll. The Cowboy appears as the Bishop during the wedding service itself, which ends in a gospel-style sing-

along, and as the ultimate fantasy—a rock star—at the following reception.

As one of Harper's choreographers, Gigi Buffington, explains it, "The point here is about fantasy entering into a relationship between two people. Eurydice has a past, revealed in the course of the opera, that Orpheus can't deal with, and he is threatened by the very thing that makes him fall in love with her. It's that you always want what you can't have, and that you don't want what you can have. If you don't deal with the fantasy, and it becomes large enough, it can destroy the relationship."

Harper is becoming well-known for his collaborative work; **Dead Birds**, for example, was done with choreographer Jan Bartoszek, and he recently wrote a very innovative score for an Atlanta production of **Julius Caesar**. More than previous works, **Crimson Cowboy** is all Harper's own, despite its complex integration of music, theater, dance, and video (the latter including the **Crimson Cowboy**'s commercials for "Redpack Canned Termites—Can't beat 'em"). Still, no previous work has taught Harper so much about the advantages of collaboration.

"Get this—I farmed out the horn parts because they're in funk style, and I really wanted the style, not just my conception of it. It was a real major move for me, and a revelation that I could do it. Danny Weiss (ARTCO's business manager) came up with his own ideas for the horn parts too, some really amazing things. Having this input into your work enriches your piece beyond anything I could have imagined."

"And I hired out the mixing, too. Marc Dimmitt is mixing the music in this major studio downtown, and he's an absolute genius at mixing. In the underworld music, for example, I've got a baby crying, an old man crying, a main theme, an important bass theme, people howling, and a million things going on... The way he's done it you can hear absolutely everything in it, crystal clear. It makes me want to cry, the amount of work he's done."

"Everybody's working way beyond the call of duty in this piece. Mary Royal is a major musician in this town; a great pianist and a beautiful, beautiful soprano, and she's leading my singers. Ever since **John Ball** she's been my right hand in getting these groups together. She's absolutely magnificent."

No one, though, has added more to the work than choreographers Gigi Buffington and Poonie Dodson, who play the parts of Eurydice and Orpheus, and who have collaborated together on every scene of the piece. "The strongest challenge for me," says Buffington, "is that you're trying to present this very specific story line, and for me, dance does not work well as a representation of a story. I can't stand mime, and this is definitely not a play—it's got text, and it's got movement, and all that stuff, but it isn't that literal. We're working in a new zone."

New zone or not, **Crimson Cowboy** is not intended only for connoisseurs. Buffington claims, "You don't have to be a composer or a choreographer or a playwright to appreciate the piece, though I hope those people will appreciate it." Harper agrees. "We're trying to be entertaining but serious, sophisticated without being demanding; to have technical interest, but also visceral interest. ARTCO's purpose is to bring art outside of that elite circle."

**Crimson Cowboy** runs from Thursday, November 29, through Sunday, December 16, at 8:30 PM on Fridays and Saturdays, 7:30 PM Sundays, at MoMing Dance and Arts Center, 1034 W. Barry. Tickets and reservations are available through the MoMing box office or by calling 472-9894. Chances are you've never seen anything like this opera of combined myth and sexual fantasy. Whether you like **Crimson Cowboy** or not, though, William Harper's is a career to keep an eye on.

—Kyle Gann



Poonie Dodson, Gigi Buffington