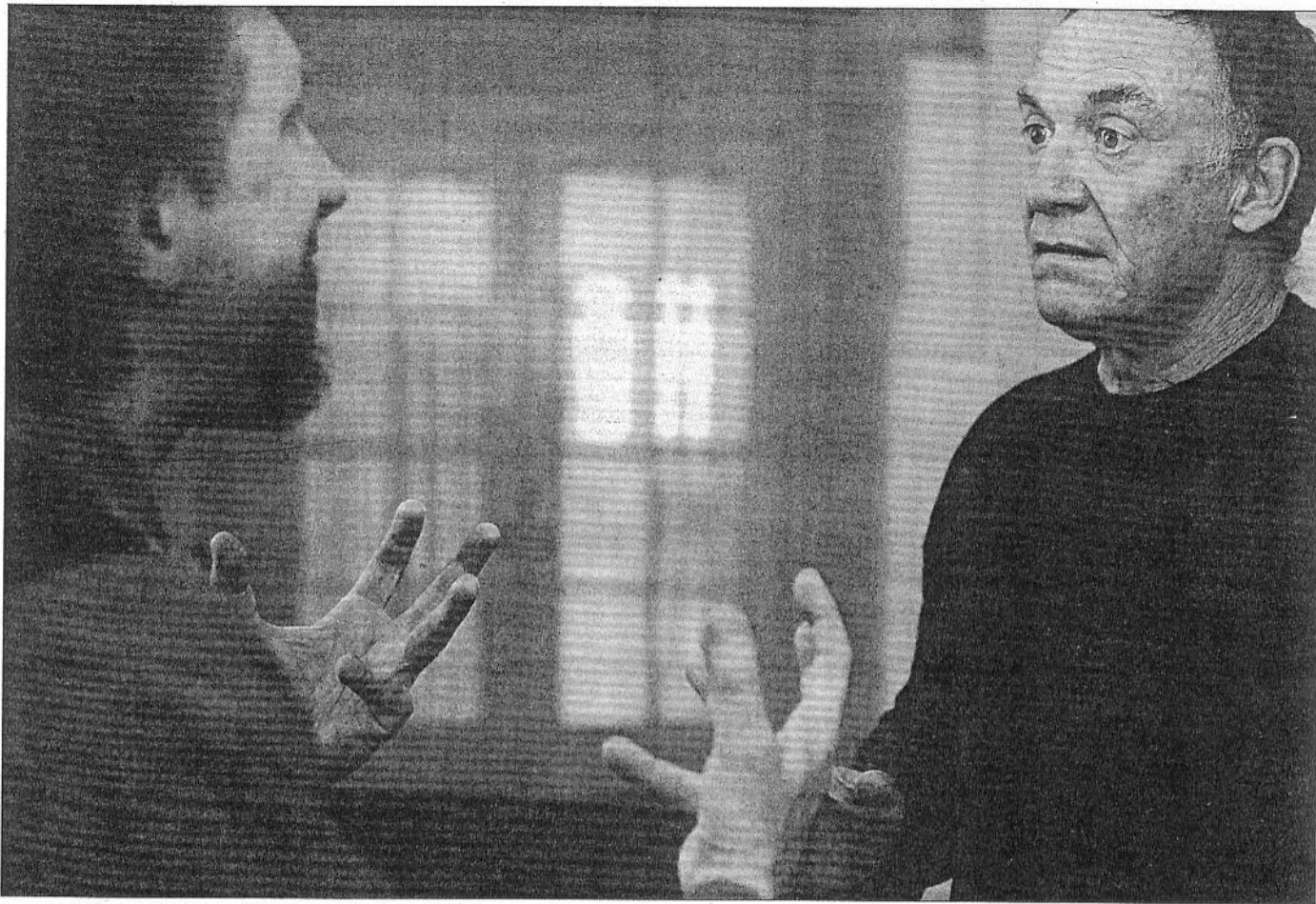


AN OPERA FOR OUR TIMES



Award-winning Bay Area playwright John O'Keefe (right) and Oakland composer Clark Supryn timer collaborated on the Berkeley Opera-commissioned "Chrysalis."

BY SAM HURWITT

It's a classic scene, like something out of an etching: The composer sits at his instrument playing what he thinks to be the last few minutes of his opera while the librettist stands staring intently at the score over his shoulder. If you're picturing them huddled over a harpsichord in powdered wigs, your mental image of opera could use an update.

The instrument in this case is a high-tech control center ringed by musical and computer keyboards.

Clark Supryn timer gazes at one of two stacked computer

screens in a workroom in his south Berkeley house as he discusses the epilogue of his new opera — which plays with themes of cosmetic surgery and designer genes — with collaborator John O'Keefe.

Developed in residence at the Berkeley Opera over the past 2½ years and set to premiere this weekend, "Chrysalis" is the first collaboration between erstwhile East Bay jazz musician Supryn timer and O'Keefe, the award-winning longtime San Francisco playwright and co-founder of Berkeley's legendary Blake

Street Hawkeyes in the early '70s.

This is O'Keefe's first outing as a librettist, though it turns out that he started out as a singer and went to the University of Iowa on a voice scholarship before switching to philosophy and finally to theater as a grad student. He says that, in a way, opera suits his artistic goals better than theater at this point, and it's a wonder he hasn't done it before.

"The last few pieces I've been doing, they really are highly emotional and like grand opera in some ways," O'Keefe says. "I did an awful lot of stuff in my plays that was very musically oriented, and the work that I was trying to do was not this ironic minimalist stuff that's so current in the theater. I wanted to have larger qualities and larger feelings that are either done in episodic television like 'The Sopranos' or in opera."

O'Keefe had a definite idea of what he wanted to do. He had an unfinished play that he'd started in the mid-'80s, fascinated by the dawn of the yuppie and what seemed to him an obsession with facade. He envisioned cosmetics companies dedicated to making anyone into anyone else, an idea that takes on new resonance in an era of plastic-surgery television.

"If you think about Maybelline and Revlon and where they'll be in 10 years, it's not very far-fetched at all as technology moves along that they would be interested in helping people look like whoever they want to look like," Suprynowicz explains. "Imagine that you go to wherever you like to hang out after work, and you don't know if you're meeting your best buddy or not, because your best buddy doesn't look like your best buddy anymore. I'm always a little careful talking to people about it, because I realize it starts to sound like a science fiction movie."

The play's focus on new technology, both real and imagined, led Suprynowicz, who hadn't dabbled much in electronic music before, to incorporate a synthesizer and samples along with the 20-piece San Francisco Chamber Orchestra. Even the ancient convention of the chorus becomes thoroughly modern when one is made up of people shouting into their cell phones, and another is an answering machine's outgoing message repeating.

Suprynowicz is well known in these parts as a jazz musician since he moved here from the East Coast in 1982, collaborating with the likes of John Zorn, Max Roach and Tom Waits. In recent years, he has shifted his focus to composing, including previous operas such as "Ariadne," developed at Z Space and premiered at San Francisco City College in 1998, and the "Tempest" riff "Caliban Dreams" with Amanda Moody at the Magic Theatre two years ago, commissioned by the San Francisco Opera.

Despite sometimes appearing as C. Janusz Suprynowicz in his composer credits, he says he doesn't draw much division between his jazz roots and his operatic endeavors.

"When I say I'm writing an opera, people lean forward a little," Suprynowicz says. "They want to know, well, is this opera music? And I kind of know what they're asking me. But I can only say that it is potentially the most exciting theatrical form. You have people singing, everybody loves songs, and a story's being told, almost everyone loves stories. You've got

music, which can be tremendously evocative and powerful.

"You've got the beauty of language, movement, emotion — it's all there. So to me, that's opera, if it was written by Verdi a hundred years ago, or by Ravel more recently, or by us guys here. I believe we're seeing some pieces emerging now that are going to be of great interest to people who might have said, 'Oh, I don't like opera.'"

The trouble is that the popular perception of opera isn't necessarily informed by it being a living art form. People like their Verdi and Puccini and Wagner (or don't) and often don't feel much need to look beyond them. On the other end of the scale, there are new works such as John Adams' "Doctor Atomic," which premiered at the San Francisco Opera last year.

Suprynowicz points out that the much smaller Berkeley Opera, housed in the intimate Julia Morgan Theatre, is in an excellent position to explore strange new work.

"I know Jonathan (Khuner) feels that this is the sort of riskier stuff a younger, smaller opera company that doesn't have million-dollar patrons to satisfy



Berkeley Opera mezzo-soprano Buffy Baggot and soprano Marnie Breckenridge rehearse "Chrysalis."

should be doing," he says. "It's a way they can differentiate themselves from the big companies."

Founded in 1979 and helmed by Khuner since 1993, the company gave John Thow's "Serpentina" its world premiere in 1999 and has unearthed a number of rarely heard works such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Undine" and Vivian Fine's "Women in the Garden." It's also had great success with new adaptations of older operas such as "The Riot Grrrl on Mars" (Rossini's "Italian Girl in Algiers") and "Bat out of Hell" (Strauss' "Die Fledermaus").

There's nothing wrong with trotting out "Carmen" for the ten-thousandth time, any more than there is with staging another "Hamlet." There's life in the old girl yet. But as the "Chrysalis" creators point out, it's an entirely different proposition to interpret classic work or simply try to do it justice than to actually create something.

"When you have an old opera or piece of work, you're looking at the people who perform it," O'Keefe says, "but when you have a new piece of work, you're actually understanding the whole nature of the form itself: How much are we progressing into new ways of expressing music and opera?"

In that sense, a premise that sounds straight out of science fiction seems appropriate, because O'Keefe and Suprynowicz are hard at work bringing opera into the future. ■

CHRYSLIS opens Sat. and runs through April 30 at the Julia Morgan Theatre, 2640 College Ave., Berkeley. \$10-\$40. (925) 798-1300. www.berkeley