

Looks Are Everything

Imagine a world in which you can radically alter your appearance simply by applying a new, easily manufactured cosmetic. It may seem far-fetched, but it's not really any more unfeasible than genetically modified DNA, or a war to ensure peace, or any one of several other modern miracles. To tackle the subject artistically, composer Clark Suprynowicz and multiple award-winning playwright and librettist John O'Keefe have created *Chrysalis*, an opera receiving its Berkeley Opera world premiere April 22-30 at the Julia Morgan Center for the Arts (tickets: 925-798-1300). Based on a play the prescient O'Keefe wrote in 1979, the opera explores the emotional ramifications of a world in which, if you don't like how you look, you can make yourself look like someone else.

You might legitimately ask if genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, and instant makeovers are truly the stuff of opera. According to Suprynowicz, formerly a jazz bassist with the greats, "There's an emotional message here that is something to sing about." Opera is a "huge and risky [art form] that deals with the enormity of life," he continues. "*Chrysalis* deals with the same contemporary changes that we read about daily in the newspaper. These changes aren't in black and white; they're in color. Opera and theater can help us feel what there is to feel about such enormous changes."

As someone who came to classical music after early immersions in rock, world, and

jazz, Suprynowicz understands that the traditional operatic model is in transition. He finds himself enthused by the aliveness and sense of flux in the art form. "I am so aware that opera is not in the mainstream of American consciousness," he explains. "When you tell someone who is twentysomething you're writing an opera, all they think about is Bugs Bunny cartoons and fat ladies breaking chandeliers with their voices. But a lot of the people who have this response are swept up in what has been loosely called 'alternative music,' which really isn't an alternative at all. It's a canny attempt by corporate culture to convince them that they're listening to something that sets them apart from the crowd, when in fact everyone in the crowd is listening to the same thing. If you're looking for an alternative to going to the movies or holing up in your den with a video, I think opera is your ticket." BerkeleyOpera.org

— JASON VICTOR SERINUS



Chrysalis