

just entertainment

PGMC premieres Caesarian opera

The true story of Julius Caesar's love for Nicomedes, King of Bithynia

BY RICHARD BROWN

Opera will come busting out of its closet this spring with the first full-scale staging of *Young Caesar*, an opera by Lou Harrison that tells the true story of Julius Caesar's love affair with an Eastern king.

Young Caesar will be produced and performed by the Portland Gay Men's Chorus on Saturday and Sunday, April 9 and 10, in the Intermediate Theatre of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts.

As a musical event, this premiere is important enough that critics from several other cities are expected to attend. As an event in gay cultural history, it is unique: an opera on a gay theme by a major composer.

Ric Young, the audacious and sometimes controversial theater director, has staged the opera and designed the elaborate costumes. Visually, the production is inspired by Fellini's *Satyricon*.

The story derives from a biography of Caesar written by Suetonius, a second-century Roman historian. Robert Gordon, a successful San Francisco playwright, has written the text in modern English. It follows Caesar's life from his coming-of-age through his visit to the capital of Bithynia (now Turkey). He went there as an envoy to hasten the delivery of some ships promised to Rome by the Bithynian king, Nicomedes.

The king was enchanted with the brash young Roman, and persuaded him to remain in Bithynia during the course of a fervent love affair.

Eventually Caesar's ambition prompted him to leave the king and return to the Roman army. The opera ends with Caesar sailing out of the harbor and Nicomedes broken-hearted on the quay.

Most of the story is treated in a light way, aiming to be tender and funny.

Ric Young summarizes the opera's theme this way: "Caesar gives up love for power; Nicomedes jeopardizes his power for love."

The composer, Lou Harrison, has a worldwide reputation that continues to grow as younger composers are influenced by his music and philosophy. His works have been performed by major artists for some 50 years (he is now 70). Last November the Philadelphia Orchestra recorded two of his symphonic works; his recent piano concerto has been played by the San Francisco Symphony, the Tokyo Symphony, and in Carnegie Hall by the American Com-

posers Orchestra.

The premiere of Harrison's first opera, *Rapunzel*, was sung by Leontyne Price, and won the composer the Twentieth Century Masterpiece Award, which was presented to him in Rome by Igor Stravinsky.

An earlier version of *Young Caesar* was completed in 1971. It has been performed in sophisticated puppet theater productions, but has never been staged with live singers.

About one of the puppet productions, the music critic of the San Francisco *Chronicle* wrote, "It was one of those rare modern events in music, in which artistic attainment outweighed the importance of the original ground plan... The historic significance of *Young Caesar* has much to offer the creative field in general. Its lesson is the viability of simplicity as an end. Taken seriously, this might well be the salvation of opera."

The critic wrote of the libretto, "It was peppered with marvelous one-liners within a constant shift of mood: now serious, now comic, never gross."

Harrison has written a new orchestration and added men's choral music, written especially for the Portland Gay Men's Chorus.

Sets are by Jim Gilsdorf; lighting is by Jeff Forbes. Both are well known in Portland for their work with Storefront Theatre.

Robert Hughes, distinguished guest conductor from the Bay area, has been engaged by the Chorus for *Young Caesar*. He has conducted the Oakland Symphony, the San Francisco Ballet, and the Western Opera Theater of the San Francisco Opera. He led the original puppet theater presentation of *Young Caesar* at the Cabrillo Music Festival in 1971.

The orchestra will be the Virtuosi della Rosa, made up of players from the Portland Opera and the Oregon Symphony.

David York, conductor of the Chorus, will sing the title role in the opera. Other major roles will be sung by Steven Fulmer (narrator) and Kevin Walsh (the king). Barbara Irvin (who played Mrs. Lovett to striking effect in Civic Theatre's *Sweeney Todd*) will sing the role of Caesar's scheming aunt.

Staging includes extensive blocking for the Chorus, and will take advantage of the huge stage and state-of-the-art technical equipment in the new Intermediate Theatre.

By far the biggest project the Chorus has undertaken, *Young Caesar* is funded in part by grants from the Oregon Arts Commission, the Metropolitan Arts Commission and the White-



Ric Young,
Director of *Young Caesar*.

photo by Lisa Stone

light Foundation.

Tickets are \$15, \$12, and \$8 at the Performing Arts Center box office. Mail orders to the Chorus are encouraged; checks payable to PGMC may be sent to PO Box 3223, Portland, Ore. 97208. Better seating is available for the Sunday evening performance.

Julie and Nico

Young Caesar may shock some people by portraying the first emperor of Rome in a gay love affair.

But it won't surprise history buffs. Caesar's dalliance with King Nicomedes was so widely known in its own time that he was referred to in at least one edict as "the queen of Bithynia."

The Roman biographer Suetonius reports that at the triumph held in honor of Caesar's conquest of Gaul, his soldiers chanted, "Caesar conquered Gaul; Nicomedes, Caesar."

These references are cited by Jon Boswell in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homo-*

sexuality. Boswell also quotes Curio the Elder as calling Caesar "Every man's wife and every woman's husband." He must have been as busy in bed as he was on the battlefield.

Boswell even suggests who did what to whom, noting that Caesar was "widely rumored to have been passive" in his relations with Nicomedes. "In contrast, the charge that Augustus had as a boy submitted to Caesar in the same way seems never to have done him much harm."

Here is how Boswell begins his chapter on Rome:

"In a now famous remark, Edward Gibbon observed that 'of the first fifteen emperors, Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct,' meaning heterosexual. If Gibbon was right, the Roman Empire was ruled for almost 200 consecutive years by men whose homosexual interests, if not exclusive, were sufficiently noteworthy to be recorded for posterity."

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