

Lou Harrison, musician, philosopher, gay liberationist

Nature produces us as roughly 10 percent of the population in every generation, and we are absolutely non-assimilable. Religions can get changed, money can get redistributed, race can get diffused in bloodlines, but being gay is renewed by nature in every generation.

BY RICHARD BROWN

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus will present the first full-scale production of *Young Caesar*, an opera by Lou Harrison, on Saturday and Sunday evenings, April 9 and 10, in the Intermediate Theatre of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts. The composer will be present for the performances.

Young Caesar is an unabashedly gay opera. Its composer is an unabashedly gay man.

Lou Harrison is one of America's leading composers. His works are performed worldwide, and his influence on other composers is far-reaching. This year alone, there will be seven or eight new recordings of his music on the Nonesuch, New World and New Albion labels.

He was born in Portland in 1917 and lived here until he was nine years old. He lives now in Aptos, Calif.

"From very deep inside myself," he said, "it is wonderful to come back to the place where I was born and to a life fully open, with warm fellowship. And I had no idea that PGMC's production of *Young Caesar* was going to be as brilliant as it is. It's going to be terrific."

It was Harrison's lover of many years, Bill Colvig, who first suggested that he compose an opera on a gay subject.

"I immediately thought of the episode in *Caesar's* life with the king of Bithynia," Harrison said. That was nearly 20 years ago. He wrote the first version for a puppet theater production with an orchestra of only five members playing a wide assortment of instruments; it was performed at the Cabrillo Festival and in Pasadena in 1971.

"It got the most widely differing reviews of any work I've ever done. Some reviewers thought it was absolutely marvelous. And some were outraged — how dare I?"

It was the subject matter — a gay love affair between Julius Caesar and the king of Bithynia — that caused the outrage.

"Most of the reviewers didn't know about that part of Caesar's life, and they were horrified. They all hurried back to their encyclopedias to look it up."

Straightforward gay stories are practically unknown in standard opera literature.

"When it has been done," Harrison said, "as in Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*, the gay subject is more alluded to than actualized. Robert Gordon [the librettist] and I didn't stop at alluding to it — we wrote it out."

"The king is the dominant character in the second act. In the end, he is left alone on the dock when Caesar sails away. I suppose *Lorca* would have called it a tragi-comedy. The story is fun, and it's a true part of history. But if you think about the poor king, after all, he gave up his whole kingdom. Apparently he loved Caesar very much. There is an interesting fact about that that's not mentioned in the opera. Caesar became so attached to the court of Bithynia that he returned several times as legal defense to friends that he had made there. Aside from that trip up the Nile with Cleopatra, I suppose it was about the only time Caesar took time out."

The story is gay, but is there such a thing as gay music?

"I really doubt it," Harrison said. "We all have a range of emotions and can express them. We can be ferocious, we can have angst, we can be delightful and frivolous. The works of gay composers throughout history are integrated into the major literature. Everybody knew about

Tchaikovsky. And Lully, for example, was apparently outrageous — yet his music is part of French tradition.

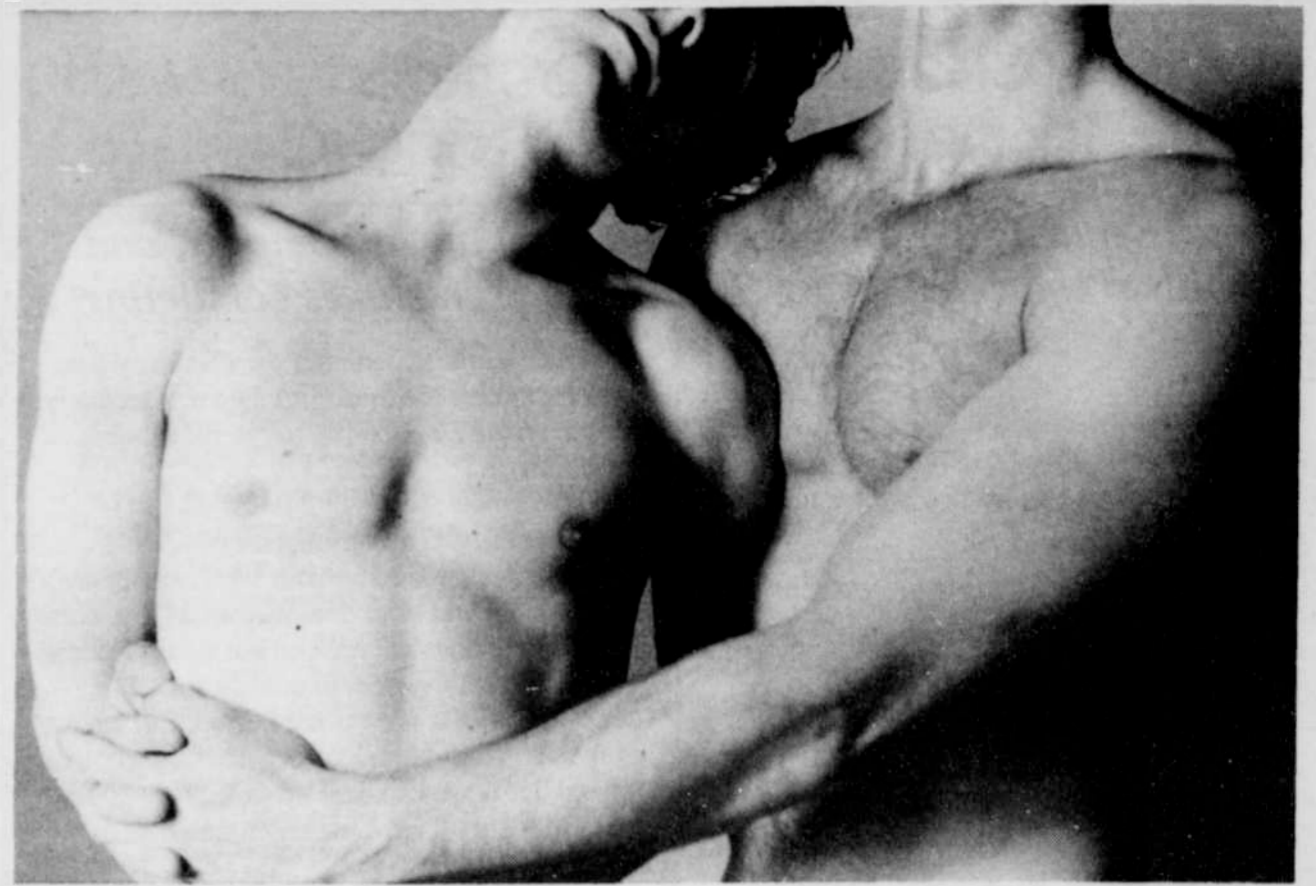
"I know that some gay people are eager to have an entire culture behind a wall, isolated. I don't feel that way. Nature produces us as roughly 10 percent of the population in every generation, and we are absolutely non-assimilable. By that I mean, religions can get changed, money can get redistributed, race can get diffused in bloodlines, but being gay is renewed by nature in every generation."

Does that mean that rights for gay people will have to be won anew in every generation?

"Let me put it this way: Straight people would like to think that they have it all made. But of course we are a born caution to them. Even if they know that justice must be done to nature's works, still there's a little oh-I-wish-they'd-go-away feeling on the part of a lot of them. We must make it clear to — how can I put it non-offensively? — the *dumber* of the straight people that we exist and we are a primary caution, and we're also not so bad as society members.

As a member of the early gay rights organization Society for Individual Rights (SIR) in San Francisco, Harrison was a pioneer in the gay rights movement.

"SIR was a good organization. We had a sort of support group. And we had lots of fun. There was a dance every weekend. I remember teaching Ned Rorem how to Charleston one evening. I took many friends there. Virgil Thomson visited, and Nicolas Nabokov — a great number of people came from the East, *awe-struck* at all this developing in San Francisco. The main thrust was that we invited politicians — some of whom are still in the public eye — to come and talk to us, and we confronted them:



What are you going to do about gay rights, and about changing the laws? That was the basis of SIR — to be political and direct.

"People who were up for election got invited, and in San Francisco it was becoming evident that there was voting power. So it mattered to the politicians. This was many years before Stonewall. And there was no violence. We went about it in a forum rather than a riot."

A man of wide-ranging intellect, Harrison has pursued many interests in his 70 years. He speaks and has taught Esperanto; he is an accomplished painter and calligrapher as well as a poet. He has mastered not only the traditional musical forms of the West but also those of the Orient, particularly Korea, China and Indonesia. He has composed a large body of music for the gamelan and for combinations of Western and Eastern instruments.

Earlier in his career he composed serial music, but many years ago he began to simplify his music and return to tonality. He is considered a forerunner of the minimalist composers, such as Philip Glass and Steven Reich.

"In some sense, I see myself as an instigator of that," he said. "The dates show that some of my works precede the minimalists, and also the return to tonality. I am thought of now by some people as a sort of historical figure. But I'm not

a minimalist. I'm a simplicitist. I like simple music."

What he likes most is melody. He has been called the greatest melodist of his generation. Last fall, when the Philadelphia Orchestra played his Third Symphony, he was asked to address the audience.

"I explained to them," he said, "that what I do is make up tunes."

Right. And what Rembrandt did was make lines.

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New Albion Records announced the release on compact disc and cassette of a collection of three works by Lou Harrison. The title work, "La Koro Suro," is for 100 voices and American Gamelan. The American Gamelan is a percussion orchestra, built by longtime Harrison associate, William Colvig, and inspired by the Indonesian percussion orchestras generically known as *gamelan*. The famous Buddhist text, "The Heart Sutra," is set to song in nine movements in an Esperanto translation. The second work, "Varied Trio," in five movements, is scored for violin, piano and percussion. The third piece, in seven movements, is the Suite for Violin and American Gamelan.

Women's theater motivated by social change

Portland Women's Theater Company is looking for scripts that reflect today's issues: health, child care, alcoholism, problems of professional women today

BY SANDRA DE HELEN

Women's theater is alive and well in Portland! Family Circus Theater, although not strictly women's theater, is back in action and currently is running *Have a Heart*, a play about women's issues, and the Portland Women's Theatre Company is firmly ensconced in its space in the Hollywood district, producing *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*.

Deborah Heasley Rodney, one of the original members and current director of Family Circus Theater, said that the company's objectives are to reconnect with its previous audience, generate a new audience, eventually to do touring theater, and to provide good entertainment with a social conscience.

Family Circus is dedicated to finding and maintaining that balance between art and politics which sometimes eludes alternative theater companies. Its actors are trained and experienced, and the company strives to create material that advocates social change and is inspirational and affirming, rather than oppressive.

The Portland Women's Theatre Company is a larger and looser group. There are currently 25

to 30 women in the company, compared to Family Circus's four women and one man; a member is defined as someone who has worked in any capacity on a production. The company is committed to performing plays about women, but other objectives and goals are still evolving. The current production is a classic lesbian play by Jane Chambers about love, death and alternative family.

Portland Women's Theatre, now that it has its own theater space, hopes to set a full season, including children's theater, for 1988-1989.

Both companies are committed to non-oppressive theater. Cherise Millhouse said that PWTC wants to present "a positive image of women, to avoid stereotyping, and to avoid typecasting." Kathay Duff, the director, said the company "still wants to have fun, that is still a goal." It's easy to see why, when producing theater is nearly a full-time job and, as Faith McDevitt pointed out, "nearly every woman here has a career. It used to be that we had jobs, and our real life started when we got to rehearsal. Now we have women who are lawyers, counselors at drug rehab centers, in the medical field, like that."

PWTC is looking for scripts that reflect

today's issues: health, child care, alcoholism, problems of professional women today, plays about younger women and their particular concerns.

"People want to go to the theater to be entertained," Rodney said, "but they also want to be inspired, to be motivated, to have hope. They have to get up and go out and change the world, and the problems are serious social problems."

Both companies are looking for community support. PWTC has a newly formed fund-raising committee. Family Circus wants to stay small so it can keep costs down, and it wants to tour. It can bring a play into a classroom or put it on a proscenium.

Local traditional theater companies also are struggling for funds, but the difference is that their community is larger, their costs are higher and some of them pay their performers and workers.

Alternative theater companies strive to bring us theater that is particularly meaningful, actively seek our feedback, and provide an evening's entertainment at a reasonable price. They must seek and receive additional support from the alternative community if they are to survive.

Have a Heart is playing at Columbia Theater on Tuesday nights through April 12. *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* will play at PWTC on Friday and Saturday nights from April 15 through June 4. See Out About Town for details.