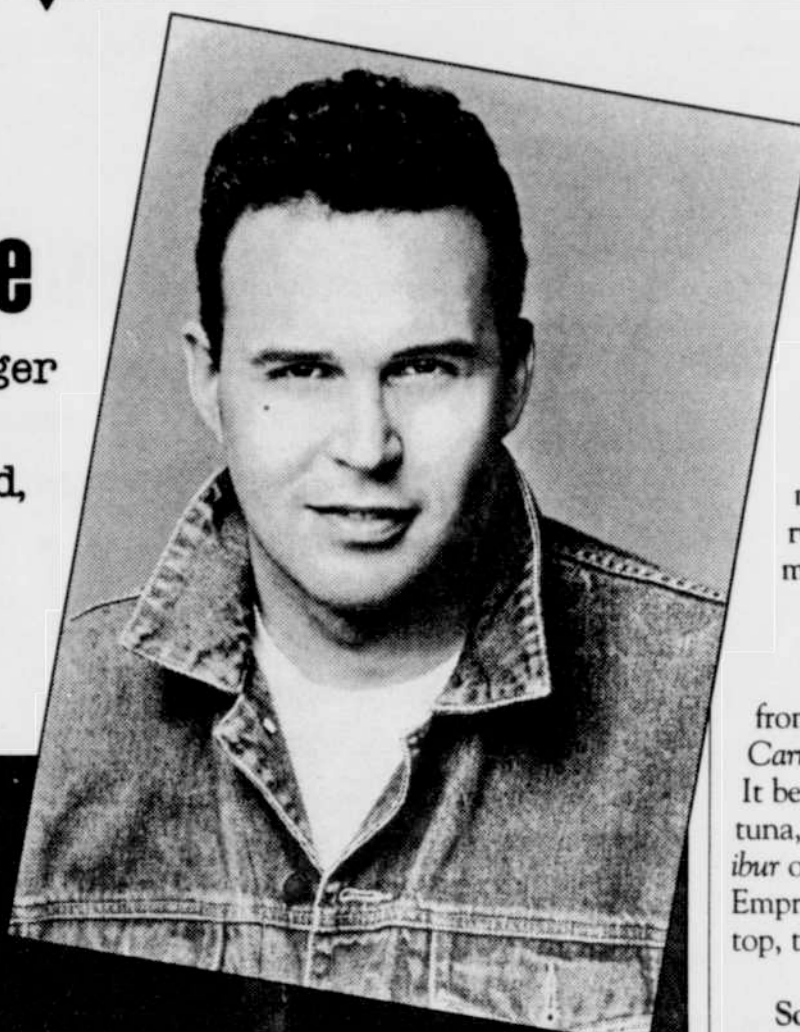


OPERA

Banter with a baritone

A former professional singer
informally interviews
his still-professional friend,
the good gay baritone
Grant Youngblood

BY MARC ACITO



A Portland Opera presentation
of *Pagliacci*

PHOTO BY DUANE MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHY



I first met baritone Grant Youngblood back in the days when I still trod the boards as a professional opera singer. Grant filled the Hult Center in Eugene with his rich, chocolatey voice in the leading baritone role in Puccini's *Tosca*, and me...well, I played his evil tenor sidekick. I got to sing such memorable vocal gems as "Yes, sir," and "Right away, sir"—which is why, I suppose, I eventually gave up opera and now own a sign shop.

Grant, on the other hand, is still singing the paint off the walls with opera companies around the country, most notably San Francisco Opera, Houston Grand Opera and New York City Opera. He has performed with the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas, appeared with the Opera Orchestra of New York at Carnegie Hall, and this spring makes his European concert debut performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Bucharest Philharmonic.

Last year, in Portland Opera's production of *Faust*, he performed grand larceny when he absolutely stole the show with his sensual interpretation of Valentin's aria. For those of you who missed that show, you'll get a chance to hear Youngblood again when he returns to the Civic Auditorium this month to perform roles in Portland Opera's presentation of the one-act opera *Pagliacci* paired with a staged version of the choral work *Carmina Burana*.

I reunited with Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome recently to talk about his experiences as an openly gay performer.

As somebody who travels all over the country, you get the opportunity to experience gay life in a variety of different settings. Have you noticed anything in particular about gay life across the country?

You can find "gay community" just about anywhere. Some places it's more visible than others.

Like that bar in Eugene where it was just you, me and the stage manager.

That's one reason why I wear these rainbow freedom rings around my neck wherever I go. If I'm traveling to smaller towns where there aren't a whole lot of out gay people and someone in a grocery store says, "Those are pretty, what are they?" I can explain to them just so they can say they've seen a real live gay person, as opposed to the stereotypes they hear from Falwell and the far right.

Good for you. You're a one-man consciousness-raising effort.

I try.

Yet opera itself is a surprisingly conservative profession. Have you encountered discrimination?

Certain companies would rather I not talk about it. They're afraid of losing their subscriber base or their donors. My agent has said that she has heard people refer to me as "that gay baritone" as opposed to, ya know, "that good baritone."

That's interesting. I tend to describe someone as a "gay artist" if his work is gay-themed, but in your case I don't think it's appropriate because you don't do expressly gay material.

Alas, no. There are no explicitly gay operas in the standard repertory.

Why do you suppose opera has such a big gay following, then?

Well, I guess partly because of the larger-than-life situations and emotions.

It is a bit over the top.

Not just a bit. I don't know, maybe gay men like seeing people in even worse shape than they are.

And strangely enough, with all of the cross-dressing of women in "trouser roles" and all of these hot love scenes between women, you'd think that opera would have a big lesbian following.

But it doesn't. City Opera recently did a world premiere of a lesbian-themed opera called *Patience and Sarah*, perhaps in hopes of attracting a lesbian audience. I don't know if it worked. It really would be nice to see more dykes up front cheering instead of backstage building scenery.

Do you suppose lesbians don't go because opera is considered elitist?

There's probably some of that perception still, although I don't know why. Supertitles [the simultaneous translation of the lyrics and dialogue projected above the stage] have helped a lot in making opera accessible to the average citizen. My coach says that they've really saved opera in this country.

I found, in my experience, that openly gay artists were marginalized in opera, always in supporting roles or backstage jobs but rarely in principal roles.

Generally it's an open secret, but no one talks about it. It's different among younger singers coming up—they've already come out before they even start, so they don't make a point of hiding it. Among countertenors [male sopranos] nowadays it's practically expected.

I guess that's because of the androgynous quality of a man singing in a woman's range. As for you, though, the baritone usually plays the villain, and fairly macho villains at that. Now, I know you well enough to

assume that you can't throw or catch a ball... I'm a better pitcher than a catcher.

We'll get to your sex life later.

So, is it strange or is it empowering to play the big, macho heavy all the time?

I think one of the reasons I got into singing opera was because I thought it was so cool to be someone else onstage for a while—to be someone powerful or handsome or charming...

But you are handsome and charming.

I didn't have that feeling about myself when I was starting out fifteen some-odd years ago.

How old are you, by the way?

I was 31 when my head shot was taken. Let's leave it at that.

Would you describe singing itself as a sexual experience?

Definitely. I think particularly when everything comes together, when you're singing a great duet with a great partner, there's definitely a sexual aspect. I don't know if I've ever gotten a real woody onstage yet, though. Operatic singing is about as natural as ballet dancing, you realize.

Does that mean operatic singing is an unnatural sexual act?

Only when it's done right.

You mentioned singing with a great partner, but that partner is always a woman. Is that strange for you?

I suppose on one level it is, but I'm not really operating on that level when I'm performing. *Pagliacci*, for instance, has one of the hottest love duets in the whole rep and we end up in a good clinch, sucking face and all that, but I love Stella Zembalis, she's a great colleague and a really hot babe, so I figure if I ever

was going to be straight, I'd go for Stella. You could say there's a vicarious thrill there. But I still wish someone had written a hot duet like that for tenor and baritone. I don't think any exists. God knows I've looked.

I hear that Portland Opera's staging of *Carmina Burana* is pretty sexy, too.

Well, you know, it's a choral setting of medieval French, German and Latin poetry written by some randy, drunken semi-monks.

Semi-monks?

Let's just say these guys were different from the Trappists making jelly in Iowa today. *Carmina Burana* is all about the cycle of life. It begins with the famous choral piece "O fortuna," which you've heard if you've seen *Excalibur* or *The Omen*. But it's really all about the Empress of Fortune—one day you might be on top, the next day you might be at the bottom.

So it has a built-in appeal for a gay male audience.

Hey, shut up, it's a masterpiece of 20th century music.

Whatever. Now, how many months a year are you on the road?

Anywhere between six and nine.

That's must be hard on your relationship with your partner.

E-mail helps a lot.

And cyberporn.

You said it, not me. We try to stay connected. We make phone dates. We used to run up hellacious phone bills until I got a computer. He'll come here to see this production.

You're a full-blooded Native American. Which tribe?

I'm Lumbee. They're a tribe of Indians indigenous to North Carolina.

There's a certain irony in a Native American performing this quintessentially European art form. How has it affected your career?

Well, I'm making my European concert debut, singing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Romania, because the Bucharest Philharmonic wanted a Native American baritone to round out a quartet of international soloists.

Are there any other Native American opera singers?

I'm sure there must be, but I haven't run into them. And I know of one company in the U.S. that has flat-out said that they hire me because they get federal money for hiring a Native American.

No!

Yes!

Hey, a job's a job. Now, most importantly, with *Carmina Burana*'s medieval setting, you'll be wearing tights, right?

Very possibly. The dancers certainly will. Bring your opera glasses.

Will you be dressing to the left or right?

Ah, you'll have to buy a ticket to find out.

Portland Opera presents PAGLIACCI and CARMINA BURANA Feb. 12 through 19. For ticket prices and show times, call (503) 241-1802.

MARC ACITO is the creator of the comic strip "The Boys Next Door." He and his partner own Fastsigns in Tigard.