

Art of Gold

Opera appeals to queer crowd

In most major cities of the world, gay men flock to the opera house. But, strangely, not in the City of Roses. Portland Opera wants to change that and has the perfect opportunity in *Albert Herring*, which will be presented in its intimate studio space.

Gay composer **Benjamin Britten** lived openly at a time when homosexuality was criminalized in England (as recently as 1967). The 1947 opera concerns the lack of morals in a small English countryside village. Because none of the village girls are deemed pure enough to be May Queen, Albert is reluctantly recruited to be the first May King.

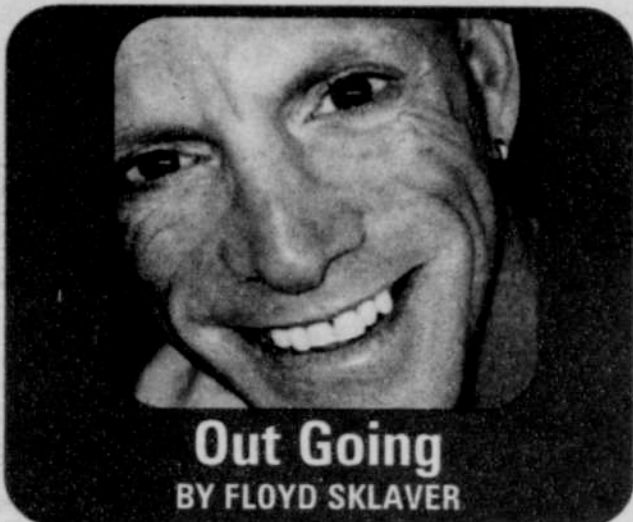
Portland Opera is offering the queer community reduced-price tickets (\$50 each) to the March 26 performance. There will be a wine and cheese reception beforehand, as well as a talk by conductor **Rob Ainsley** about *Albert Herring*, Britten and his lover, **Peter Pears**. In anticipation, I sat down for a brief chat with Rob.

Floyd Sklaver: Why did Portland Opera choose *Albert Herring*?

Rob Ainsley: We wanted to present something complete... something as the composer intended it, [so] you need something with a small orchestra.... We also often use the studio shows to kind of prepare audiences for new works we might use in mainstage, and we're going to present Britten's *Turn of the Screw* next season.

FS: What's *Albert Herring* about?

RA: Britten's operas explore several themes consistently: One of them is the abuse of power, and another is how society and the constraints of society treat an oddball of an outsider. That's obviously linked to the fact that, you know, Britten was a big queen at a time in



Out Going
BY FLOYD SKLAVER

Britain when it wasn't really so OK to be openly gay—not yet, anyway, [although] his partnership with Peter Pears was common knowledge to the public.

FS: Do you think there's a gay subtext to the opera?

RA: There is in almost all of Britten's works, actually. I mean, his penchant for pretty pubescent boys was well spoken about... *Albert Herring* certainly has this boy who's a virgin who's never been with a woman, who kind of has an overbearing mother, who's never had a drink, just sits in the shop and does his work. Certainly that subtext is there.

FS: How did Britten cope with the laws against homosexuality?

RA: Well, he was the future of British opera, and as long as you weren't caught "cottaging" or something like that....

FS: "Cottaging"?

RA: I think George Michael was caught doing that at one point.

FS: Tell me about Peter Pears.

RA: I can safely say that for no other major composer has an interpersonal relationship influenced their art so greatly. Most of the major roles in his operas were written specifically for Peter Pears, including *Albert Herring*.

FS: How did Pears influence Britten?

RA: Well, they were together for 40 years and were both great artists. Peter Pears was a very good tenor and lieder singer in particular, and Britten one of the most talented all-around musicians... I think he's the British equivalent of Leonard Bernstein. So when you

get two artists who live together, who are both so talented and inspired and, what's the word, inquisitive, they kind of inspire each other and work off of each other.

FS: Can you describe in layman's terms the major characteristics of Britten's music?

RA: Most importantly, accessible and fresh, always fresh. He could assimilate all the musical languages of the day. So there's a jazzy bit at the end, there are folk songs, each of the individual characters has his own kind of genre that he sings. For instance, Lady Billows, the old dragon, essentially a drag queen, is part Elgar flag-waving patriotism, jingoism, Rule Britannia, and part a kind of Handel Baroque opera—so pompous.

FS: Why does opera have such a big gay following?

RA: Well, the gay community likes idols, people they can just adore and admire, and they like people in big, frilly gowns, and they like people singing. And I think we have a great admiration for talent. I think there's a little hope in all of us that wants to be fabulous.

FS: Did you want to be fabulous when you were young?

RA: Oh, I knew I was going to be. **10**

PORTLAND OPERA presents *Albert Herring* March 14 to 30 at Hampton Opera Center, 211 S.E. Caruthers St. Tickets are \$75 from 503-241-1802; discounted tickets for the March 26 performance are available through Feb. 20.

FLOYD SKLAVER wants to know about your event. E-mail him at floydsklaver@comcast.net.



Gay composer Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring* has plenty of queer subtext.

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