

# Figaro! Figaro! Bounces Back With Zest

by Stephen E. McPherson,  
Special Correspondent

Opera no longer is sequestered within the domain of the culturally elite or the serious student of classical music. The Portland Opera Players demonstrates this fact quite convincingly in their current revival of "FIGARO! FIGARO!" The re-writing of Rossini's popular "Barber of Seville" is now enjoying a tremendous success at the Eastside Performance Center located at 531 S.E. 14th here in Portland. The curtain goes up on

Friday and Saturday night performances at 8 p.m. until January 21. Matinee offerings are on Sundays beginning at 2 p.m. until January 22.

Even though this production was staged to expose the uninitiated to the world of opera, the well-honed opera buff is going to come away with an added chuckle. As if the original opera were not funny enough, Michael Berkson and Philip Kelsey have injected some extra dimensions into the libretto and score which prove to be a delightful spoof of an already

comedic opera. At the same time, the musical purity of Rossini's original masterpiece is carefully preserved.

The story line roughly approximates situations created in the original. All of the "Barber of Seville" characters are in place with their usual personality traits. The libretto is in English and is supplemented by a spoken dialogue. This particular nuance might dismay the purest since this is the very criterion which separates an opera from an operetta. One must remember, however, that the Port-

land Opera Players never pretended to be an opera company and this particular work was not written to enthrall the seasoned opera goer.

This review is complicated by the fact that a different individual assumes a particular role on any given night. At the time this reviewer witnessed "FIGARO! FIGARO!", the title role was played and sung by Steven Aiken. He was at all times in full control of his vocal instrument and at the same time displayed an acting ability which could sell anyone the Brooklyn Bridge. Elizabeth Lawson as Rosina rendered a virtuosity that one would like to see on the main stage. Her character portrayal belied the sweet innocence her guardianship suggested.

The role of Dr. Bartolo was interpreted by local music teacher, Roland Harris, who was previously profiled in the PORTLAND OBSERVER. It is a pity that librettist Berkson gave him so many speaking lines before he unleashed the robust beauty of his bass-baritone voice. Mr. Harris is



Roland Harris

Christopher Cheek in his interpretation of a love sick suitor was more than adequate as Don Basilio. At times, however, one wondered if the Kelsey and Berkson team had commingled his lyrics with Rosina's coloratura arias. Laurance Fee was in excellent voice as Count Almaviva. His Boris Karloff makeup and characterization of a fiendish count augmented a tremendous touch of humor. Bit parts played by Kathleen Hanson and Michael Berkson added extra chuckles to the evening.

The piano duo of David McDade and Philip Kelsey was superb throughout the evening.

The final arbiter in any such demonstration is the consuming public. Judging from the giggles, laughs applause and curtain calls, one cannot help but conclude that "FIGARO! FIGARO!" is a resounding success.

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## Broadway Bound

by Garland Lee Thompson

### THE FIVE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA TO APPEAR IN TOWN

The stars of the Broadway musical production, "Gospel At Colonis," The Five Blind boys of Alabama, will perform an evening of gospel music at the Portland Foursquare Church, 1302 S.E. Ankeny. The schedule date of this 1989 new year gospel musical treat is Friday, January 20th, 1989, 8 p.m. This widely known spiritual singing group has sung throughout the South and East Coast for many years before I saw them in "Gospel At Colonis," featured with veteran actor Morgan Freeman, with whom they toured the show to several cities before coming to Broadway. Just try to think if Ray Charles has four brothers." If you like gospel, you will love this "vintage class act." Write on and "let the church say amen."

### IT WAS "CHECKMATE" FOR NEW BLACK BROADWAY PRODUCER

This was a sad affair in which no one wins. The latest Black Broadway play, "Checkmates," by Ron Milner, starring Ruby Dee, Paul Winfield, Denzel Washington and Marsha Jackson, just recently closed. I saw the show last month and reviewed it for you here in BROADWAY BOUND REPORT. Now here's the latest "T" on this Woodie King Jr. directed show that I liked very much.

It seems that one of the producers, Michael Harris, who is originally from Louisiana, and moved to Los Angeles at the age of 18 years to begin a business career. His interest in the theatre was sparked at the Inner City Cultural Center of LA, which has spawned a number of hit shows (I did eleven productions there myself, 1966-70). Harris then became involved in "Checkmates," which was a joint venture between the Inner City Cultural Center and Marla Gibbs' Crossroads Theatre of Los Angeles. It was at this time that Michael Harris (now 26 years old) formed "Y Not Productions" with Hayward Collins. Young Harris is reported to have bankrolled half of the \$700,000 budget for the show. This was his Broadway debut.

It is a dream story for a young Black man that "crashed" when it is reported in the press of his arrest and drug conviction recently in California. It sent shock waves through the Broadway District Theatre community. "Drug money stories" and pickets appeared at the 46th Street Theatre. His name was quickly removed from the marquee and the Broadway Playbill programs with his name were trashed. They are collector's items now. I have one, since I caught this very funny and unique show in December and hung out backstage with Ruby, Paul and Woodie. The show is now closed.

The Michael Harris scandal story; the rise and fall of a new Black entrepreneur, perhaps may be more interesting and heartbreaking than "a sack full of Wall Street, Hollywood movies" of the play he "bankrolled" to become one of Broadway's youngest and newest producers.

The playwright, Ron Milner, might consider changing one of his characters in the play to mirror and chronicle this ever-so-young and Black tragic figure, who went for "the American

Dream," only to find "Paradise Lost." The least we writers can do is to tell the story for the public to understand.

Write on and "Gung Hay Fat Choy," which is Happy New Year in Chinese. It is the Chinese year of the Snake. It

is also a nine Universal year, "a pay-off time" of self introspection of the wise and intense, to re-evaluate, like "the Michael Harris of our world," in our struggle to survive and achieve happiness in today world. Write on and good luck, Michael.



Paul Winfield (left) and Ruby Dee (right) in 'Checkmates'. The play recently closed on Broadway

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