

Opera With a Common Touch

PHOTOGRAPHS: AEGIS MCKENNEY STALE

“Opera is the only classical performing art that has a growing attendance.”

—Michael Ching,
director of Opera Memphis

Michael Ching seems nervous. Only hours to go before the Nashville debut of the opera *Different Fields*, and the set isn't ready. “Stage left, can you hear me?” a woman says into a headset. An on-stage guy raises his hand. “Stage right?” Another corresponding wave. Suddenly a light illuminates a goalpost, center stage, in the darkened room. “Yeah, all right,” the headset woman says with approval.

Michael, 38-year-old director of the 41-year-old Opera Memphis, denies he is worried. Yet the quiet, reserved man pacing the aisles of

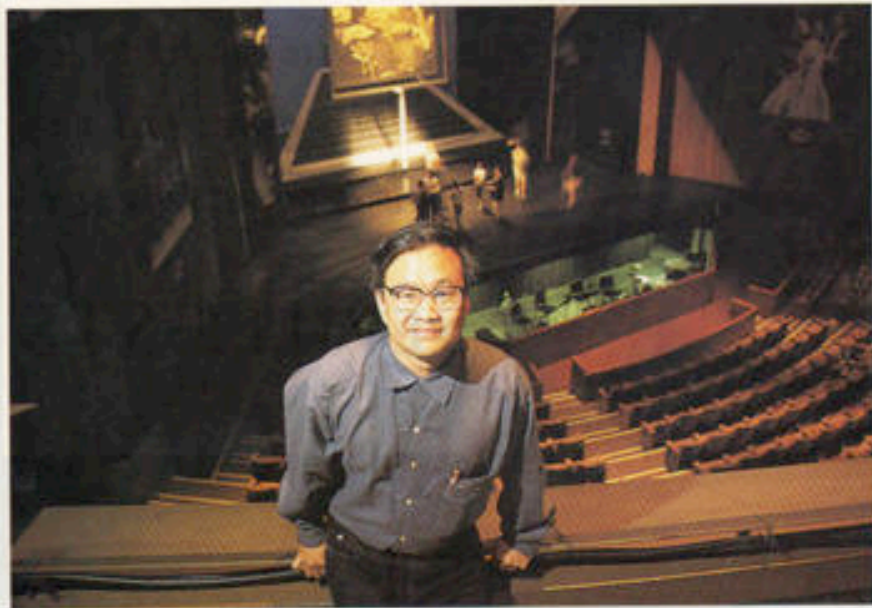
Nashville's Polk Theatre in the Tennessee Performing Arts Center barely resembles the witty, upbeat conversationalist chatting in Memphis a few weeks before. Finally, a reason for the change in his demeanor emerges.

“This isn't my theater,” Michael shrugs. “I can't tell them to cut up the lights.” Out of his hands, too, is preparing the stage for production in mere hours, rather than the long days it typically takes. Back-to-back bicentennial celebrations have translated into tight schedules at this Nashville facility.

But when the blue-jeaned, long-haired country music fans stride in alongside the evening-gowned, bejeweled audience at performance time, all is ready. Michael, who also conducts the orchestra for tonight's performance, seems at ease too.

Different Fields, a 75-minute, one-act opera, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera Guild in New York City, followed by performances in Memphis and Nashville. New Yorkers loved the show so

New forms of opera “can't be gimmicks,” says Michael Ching, director of Opera Memphis. “They need to have marketing appeal, but they also need to be ‘true.’”





Opera Memphis director Michael Ching (left) says he "twisted the arm" of country songwriter Mike Reid to compose the football opera, *Different Fields*. Given the difference in their sizes, that was a feat worthy of Mike's former football prowess.



Athletes, such as the character Aaron James (Joseph Mahowald), have clay feet, as a young fan learns in the opera *Different Fields*. Genuine heroes are ordinary folks—like mom.

much that a return engagement is set for December 14 and 15. Written by ex-professional football player and award-winning country songwriter Mike Reid, the story revolves around Aaron James, a heroic football player who falls from grace in the eyes of a 12-year-old fan.

"There are people who are against this type of opera," Michael says. "One of the ways we silenced the critics was by getting the Met involved." The Met's aim is to attract new audiences to opera. That's also the purpose of the Memphis-based National Center for the Development of American Opera. Through educational outreach and performances such as *Different Fields*, Tennessee's largest and oldest professional opera company now reaches new and diverse audiences.

Michael heads the developing center as well as the opera. Born in Honolulu of Japanese and Chinese parents, the maestro never saw an opera until he attended Duke University. He graduated summa cum laude in music in 1980, then apprenticed at the Houston Grand Opera. Stints in Vir-

ginia and Miami followed. The opportunity in Memphis came in 1993; at 38, Michael is one of opera's youngest directors.

"I'm not a typical classical musician," he says. The composer plays classical piano, but he also enjoys cabaret, folk, and country—and the setting is just as likely to be the Shelby County Adult Offender Center as the Orpheum Theatre. Michael seems fated to teach the masses the joys of highbrow music. He laughs at that assessment: "It's true, not everybody is comfortable commissioning a hit country songwriter to write an opera." His mission? To create works with the same American spirit as *Porgy and Bess* and *West Side Story*. His challenge? To awaken new audiences without alienating the old.

"We can be as innovative as we want to be," declares Michael. "But we try to respect the traditional repertoire. If you see *Carmen* here, she's going to be in a red dress."

The bread and butter of Opera Memphis' financial well-being is the traditional opera patron. Opulent feasts such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, coupled with stellar performances from divas such as Kallen Esperian, feed those already in love with opera.

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Many find opera intimidating, but English supertitles help. The body language of opera conveys the story as well.



John Miles and Elizabeth Huling performing in Opera Memphis' *The Marriage of Figaro*, give the Orpheum Theatre audience a taste of traditional opera.

"We're the only opera in Tennessee that has more than a million dollars in annual budget," Michael says proudly. A mere eight staffers, including Michael, run the operation. "When we're in production, we're wearing three or four hats—and they are piled on top of each other," the boss says with a laugh.

It's an egalitarian group. *Tennessee Living's* first interview was deferred because Michael and his band of seven were cleaning out

the office. ("I don't think they'd appreciate me talking while they toiled," he demurred.) A hard-working staff, willing volunteers, a generous board, and a supportive community all figure into Opera Memphis' success—and the success of the city itself.

"Memphis news doesn't have to be just about Federal Express or Elvis Presley," says Michael. Not that he's elitist about Elvis. This summer, the classically trained mu-

Opera Anyone?
 Michael Ching's *Buoso's Ghost* premieres January 25 and 28, 1997 as a sequel to Puccini's comedy *Gianni Schicchi*. Mozart's *The Magic Flute* closes the season February 28 and March 1, 1997. All performances are at the Orpheum Theatre. Call (901) 678-2706.

sician served as a judge for an Elvis impersonator contest. His willingness to boogie with rock 'n' roll fans or to crank out cryin'-in-your-beer songs adds credibility to his stance on how opera can serve.

"An opera company has a *duty* to reach all audiences," he explains. Through its workshops and performances, Opera Memphis reaches underprivileged people as well as the financially blessed.

"We firmly believe the arts are part of the healing process for a child," asserts Diana Chiles, the child life manager at Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center, where Opera Memphis visits. "A lot of people who make a one-time trip to the hospital think they've really done something. Opera Memphis has a relationship with us that's grown over time."

That ongoing partnership really matters. "One patient, a boy, was in a lot of pain," Diana recalls. "His mother kept saying, 'Do I need to take you back?' because he was crying. He said, 'No, I don't want to miss the opera.'"

The education program heals in many ways, even offering hope to

Theatrical elements such as artfully applied makeup feed the "sensory overload" today's audience craves because of music videos, film, and television.

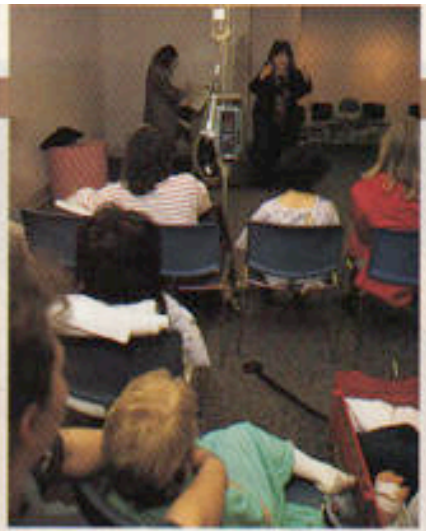


Making Up for the Pain

"We have a workshop called 'Create a Character,'" explains Diane Payne. "It helps the children understand that, through the use of makeup and costuming, the singers become involved in their characters."

Children at Le Bonheur garner a take-away benefit as well. One girl, frequently hospitalized, uses her pain to get attention, explains Diana Chiles. "Opera Memphis dressed her up as this character, and you could see the expression on her face change. She was smiling, laughing, and learning how to be a different person. It gave her a tool to help her with her pain." Diminishing a child's world of hurt? Not bad for musical genre labeled "elitist."

"If you give children something they can put in their heart, then you've given them very good medicine," says Diana Chiles of Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center, where Opera Memphis makes house calls.



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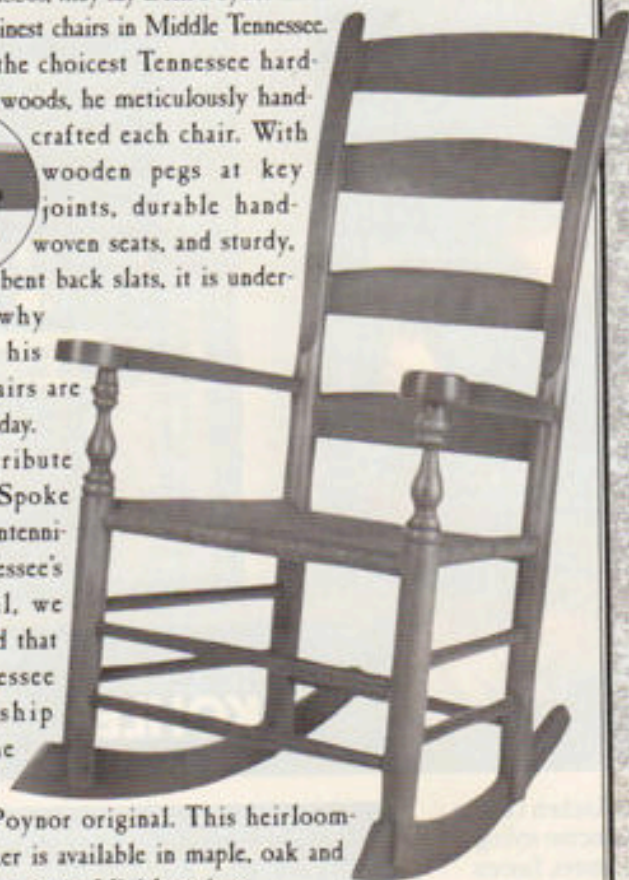
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kids living in tough neighborhoods. "It gives them an alternative," says Diane Payne, education coordinator for Opera Memphis.

Streetwise kids, who are fans of Temptations-style Boyz II Men or "gangsta" rapper Coolio, are inspired by opera visitors. "They ask, 'How long does opera take to study? What kind of money do they make?'" Diane says. "A really critical phrase to them is 'Money is power, power is money.'

"Opera basically deals with avarice, greed, and lust, and that's what we try to tell the kids," she continues. "It's not some lily-white, uptight, elitist music. The only difference is that opera is often in a foreign language."

Michael agrees that opera should be accessible to anyone. "Just because somebody in Gaston Park isn't going to be able to afford a \$40 opera ticket doesn't mean you shouldn't be doing programs that appeal to that audience," he says with passion.

To bring opera to the masses, he plans even more "crazy" ideas. Like working on operas with Bruce Springsteen. Or Quincy Jones. Or Paul Simon.

"The goal is to keep opera vital," says Michael. "There is no excuse for not having vision and ambitious ideas. I think we've proven this year that we can play tennis with the big guys."

And how does the *Different Fields* performance in Nashville turn out? Bravos fill the air as the actors take their congratulatory bows. The lights go up, and a rush of admirers swamps Michael and Mike Reid. The country songwriter-turned-opera-composer queries his fans with an appropriate Nashville greeting: "How'd you like your first 'opry?'" His colleagues chortle and allow it wasn't bad for that highfalutin kind of music.

Michael grins. Praise from the common man is music to his ears.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson