

ArtScene

From Carnegie to 'Candide'

Light Opera role tempts Brian Cheney back to a Tulsa stage



"You have no boundaries, once you allow your voice just to come out," said Brian Cheney of his lead role. "It's what makes Candide as a character so pure." STEPHEN PINGRY/Tulsa World

BY JAMES D. WATTS JR.
World Scene Writer

For Brian Cheney, having the title role in Light Opera Oklahoma's production of "Candide" is a slightly bittersweet experience.

It's a role that Cheney has always wanted to do, and the main reason why the tenor has returned for his second season with LOOK.

"I have a wife and two daughters, ages 7 and 5, and working with this company means I'm going to be away from them for two months," Cheney said. "And it's always tough to be away for so long a time, so there's got to be a good reason to do it.

"And that's what 'Candide' is for me," he said. "Eric (Gibson, LOOK artistic director) and I started talking about this show before we finished last season's productions. When Eric said he was serious about doing 'Candide,' I said I was in, and I'd do whatever else he wanted me to do for the season."

But the real reason why playing Candide is at once positive and poignant is that it is the last role Cheney worked on with his mentor, the late Jerry Hadley.

Cheney has been forging an acclaimed operatic and concert career of his own. In March, he made his debut at Carnegie Hall in New York City, performing a wide-ranging program accompanied by Tulsa native Cathy Venable on piano (the duo performed in Tulsa a few weeks prior to the Carnegie Hall date).

Hadley had been one of America's most prominent tenors, singing leading roles for both New York City Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. He sang the title role in John Harbison's "The Great Gatsby," and was Leonard Bernstein's choice for the role of "Candide" in a recording of this work that won a 1991 Grammy Award. Hadley committed suicide in July 2007.

"We worked on this role right before I came to Tulsa last June," Cheney said. "And Mr. Hadley had worked with Bernstein on the role, and shared with me a lot of extraordinary things — he would say, 'This is what Lenny wanted because of XYZ, this was the reason he wrote this song in this way, and this was how he wanted it to sound.'

"It was really humbling in a way — being given this kind of gift," he said.

As a work of music, "Candide" has been popular since it first debuted in 1956. The score is considered one of Leonard Bernstein's greatest creations — some critics rank it as superior to "West Side Story." The rambunctious Overture is a staple of the orchestral pops repertoire, and songs such as "Glitter and Be Gay" and "Make Our Garden Grow" have become standards.

The problem was the show's book, based on Voltaire's satirical tale of a wide-eyed optimist's adventures in a cynical world. Lillian Hellman wrote the original, and in subsequent years and revisions, writers as diverse as the novelist James Agee, the poet Richard Wilbur, the playwright Hugh Wheeler and the composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim had a go at the thing.

Candide

WHEN:
8 p.m. Saturday

WHERE:
Williams Theater, Tulsa Performing Arts Center, Second Street and Cincinnati Avenue.

TICKETS:
\$25-\$29, 596-7111 or www.tulsaworld.com/mytix

LOOK will be using the version created in 1973, the so-called "Chelsea" version, named for the theater where it debuted. The book is by Wheeler, who streamlined the show into a single act that more closely follows Voltaire's original story.

"One of the great things about this version is that it gives the audience a clearer focus," Cheney said. "Candide is the one normal person moving through this rather crazy world, and in this version, you can follow that journey more easily."

It's a journey that takes the innocent Candide from comfortable surroundings in a noble home to being kidnapped by Bulgarians, in trouble with the Portuguese Inquisition, falsely accused of murder in Paris, pursued by pirates in North America, finding gold in South America and ending up penniless in Constantinople.

In addition to Cheney, the cast includes Diana McVey as Cunegunde, the girl of Candide's dreams; James Rollins as her brother Maximilian; April Golliver as Paquette; Andrea Leap as the Old Lady; and Patrick Jacobs in roles of the narrator Voltaire and the philosopher Pangloss, whose adage about "all things are for the best in the best of all possible worlds" guides Candide through his increasingly zany adventures.

"It just zips along," Cheney said. "It's crazy and hilarious."

It also, Cheney said, gives performers the chance to do something a little unusual.

"One thing Mr. Hadley said Bernstein always stressed was that you can't sing this music with an obvious operatic thrust, or in a musical theater style," he said. "Bernstein wanted people to sing his music in their own voices, without any sort of artifice."

"It's a little frightening at first, but it ends up being liberating," Cheney said. "You have no boundaries, once you allow your voice just to come out. It's what makes Candide as a character so pure."

And makes Candide very different from Cheney's other major role this season — that of Frederick, the apprentice in "The Pirates of Penzance."

"I guess you could say both characters are innocents, but stylistically these two roles couldn't be more different," Cheney said. "Gilbert and Sullivan is all about artifice, which is why I'm glad there's only one day this season where I'm doing these roles in a single day."

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Aimee Mann's idea of eccentric covers the waterfront

BY JENNIFER CHANCELLOR
World Scene Writer

What courses through Aimee Mann's career is more than the "one-hit wonder" of former band "Til Tuesday's '80s hit, "Voices Carry."

Much, much more. "I've always been fascinated with eccentric personalities," said the Los Angeles singer-songwriter in a recent telephone interview.

From the punch-drunk characters who haunt the twilight world of a dusty inner-city boxing gym to a one-time financial big shot who's taken a tumble, Mann paints Spartan, vivid portraits of people who seem to always get the tiniest sliver of American pie.

Her songs are soulful, empathetic and somehow ultimately hopeful and optimistic, especially with her latest album, "@#%&! Smilers." The album has a rich sense of spontaneity — because she recorded each of the 13 tracks in only one or two takes. She also recorded them all live in the studio, minimizing the urge to over-dub parts, she said.

"Multitracking can be interesting, but you don't need to do it," she said. "If everyone's recording each part separately then it's all patched together, then nobody's listening to each other in the moment."

"Working as an entire unit is

concert

AIMEE MANN, WITH OPENER DAVID FORD

When:
Doors open at 7 p.m.

Where:
Cain's Ballroom, 423 N. Main St.

Tickets:
\$27 in advance (Reasor's, Starship Records, Cain's); (866) 443-8849; www.tulsaworld.com/gettix. Show is all ages.

Online:
www.tulsaworld.com/AimeeMann

magical."

And each album is an exploration of new aural territories. "I don't want to do anything the same way twice," she said.

For example, her last full album, "The Forgotten Arm," was a concept album that told a track-by-track tale of a boxer. With "Smilers," she decided to take a looser approach, opening her vision to the everyday experiences around her. Her songwriting — and music playing — has also evolved, she said.

For her last album, she left her comfortable guitar to discover a new "voice" by writing on piano. Before that, she worked with Jon Brion on the Grammy-award nominated "Magnolia" movie soundtrack. In 1999, she founded her own record label, SuperEgo.

For her latest album, she replaced electric guitars with distorted Wurlitzers, Clavinets, analog synthesizers, string and horn arrangements.

"I didn't miss the electric guitar at all," she said. "All that other music takes up the space. It's a completely different palate."

And her plainspoken, poetic lyrics are about addicts, Anne Sexton, relationships, insecurity and refuge.

"When I write about them — the narcissists, performers, eccentrics, know-it-alls — it helps me recognize some truths about the world and about myself."

Even the album title gets to the heart of Mann's philosophy on life.

"I read somewhere that the one thing people respond to most is a



Aimee Mann performs at Cain's Ballroom on Monday. Courtesy

smiling cartoon face, and we all work with that one person who smiles all the time," she laughed. "They always tell people to 'Smile!'"

Yet Mann goes deeper that those

glossy, pearly whites to decipher the deceptively powerful truths hidden behind those platitudes.

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