

Modern topics inspire opera

IS CLARK Suprynowicz ahead of his time? With his latest work, "Chrysalis," the Berkeley-based composer may have written the first opera about cosmetic surgery and genetic manipulation. The subject is ripe for exploration, Suprynowicz noted in an early morning interview last week.

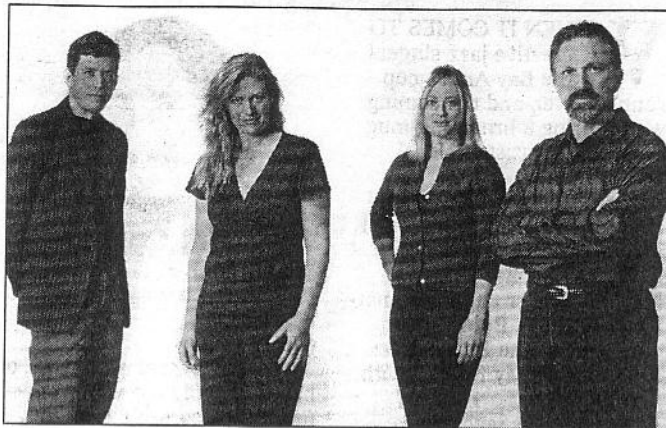
"This is something that's going on in our own day and time," he said. "Composers have always mined contemporary themes for new operas, and this subject is one that's coming more and more into the forefront."

"Chrysalis," which features a libretto by award-winning playwright John O'Keefe, tells the story of Ellen Ermaine, a cosmetics magnate who discovers a new method of transforming the human body. Directed by Mark Streshinsky, the opera makes its world premiere in a Berkeley Opera production Saturday at the Julia Morgan Theatre. The cast features mezzo-soprano Buffy Baggott as Ellen and soprano Marnie Breckenridge as Nelle; Jonathan Khuner conducts the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra in the pit.

The opera is a fantasy, although Suprynowicz says that recent developments — everything from Botox injections to the full-face transplant that made news around the world last year — place it firmly in the realm of possibility. "The generation coming up now is subject to a massive kind of manipulation," he says. "They're being told that if they want to appear wealthy or hip or beautiful, they have to engage in these rituals. It's becoming more and more extreme. For those who can afford it, it's really not science fiction to think that in a few years, you could have any face you wanted."

Suprynowicz has been developing "Chrysalis" over the past two years in collaboration with O'Keefe and Khuner. O'Keefe, the co-founder of the legendary Blake Street Hawkeyes (which launched the careers of numerous actors, including Whoopi Goldberg) and author of contemporary plays such as "Vid," "Shimmer" and "Times Like These," contributed the story line, which he originally attempted to write as a play and never completed. At Khuner's invitation, he and Suprynowicz decided to make it into an opera.

This is the fourth opera for



BERKELEY OPERA

MARK STRESHINSKY, left, directs "Chrysalis," written by Clark Suprynowicz, right, which stars mezzo-soprano Buffy Baggott, second from left, and soprano Marnie Breckenridge.



GEORGIA ROWE
Classical Notes

Suprynowicz, whose earlier works include "Ariadne," "Caliban Dreams" (written with his wife, librettist Amanda Moody) and "Paramus, New Jersey" (a collaboration with playwright/director Rinde Eckert). That's a surprising number for a guy who says he's not really into opera.

"I came to opera late," says Suprynowicz, who grew up in Connecticut, went to college in Massachusetts and came to the West Coast 25 years ago as a jazz bassist. He has spent most of his professional life as a jazz man, performing and recording with artists including John Zorn, Max Roach and Tom Waits. He teaches composition at Berkeley High School and with the Bay Area Jazz Workshop.

He has also written numerous pieces of "new music" — although he says he doesn't really like calling it that. "I personally feel it's not useful to think in terms of genres," he says, "even though we live in a genre-ridden world. When you go to the store to buy a CD, the first thing you have to decide is what bin to go to."

The problem, he says, is that most contemporary opera — and new music in general — simply turns people off. "When people think of new music, it's usually something disjointed

and relentlessly dissonant," he says. "New music has this agenda, to be in some way challenging and original. But it's not challenging, and most of it is just sort of generic. In my mind, the most original thing you can do these days is write music that people actually enjoy."

Unfortunately, he says, a lot of audiences — especially younger ones — share his view. "I've talked to many people who feel the same way," he says. "They don't like opera, and I think that's a great place to start. If you start breaking down their misconceptions — the Bugs Bunny cartoons that show fat ladies breaking chandeliers — they start to see that opera is a story told through songs. And most people are really up for a riveting story and great songs."

Suprynowicz says he kept these things in mind as he was composing the score for "Chrysalis." "I tried to write an opera that people would enjoy, even if they think they don't like opera," he says. "And John has done a great job of telling the story. To us, the great works are the ones that sort of fold it all in — there are parts that are funny, and stuff that's harrowing. I think this piece does that. It's not afraid to be in earnest, and it's not afraid to make a fool of itself. John is a very brave writer that way, and I've tried to do that with the music as well."

"Chrysalis" opens 8 p.m. Saturday at the Julia Morgan Theatre, 2640 College Ave. in Berkeley. Repeat performances are April 26 at 7:30 p.m.; April 28 at 8 p.m.; and April 30 at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$40 general,

See CLASSICAL, Page 9