



LaChiusa, Michael John (b. 1962)

by Greg Varner

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In 2004, Michael John LaChiusa was described in an article in *The Washington Post* as "the most prolific composer in New York during the past 10 or so years." He does not object to the characterization. "I do write a lot," he says. "I enjoy it."

Along with Ricky Ian Gordon and a handful of other composers, LaChiusa has been identified as an heir to Stephen Sondheim's brilliant legacy in the American musical theater. LaChiusa frequently creates works that demand intellectual involvement on the part of the audience; and, like Sondheim's, his works for the musical theater are often described as "operatic."

LaChiusa was born July 24, 1962, in Stockwell, New York, where he first began writing songs at the urging of his fourth-grade teacher. While still in his teens, LaChiusa made his way to New York City with the ambition to compose for the theater.

He came to early notice in 1993 with *First Lady Suite*, a look at the hidden lives of presidential wives Jackie Kennedy, Mamie Eisenhower, and Eleanor Roosevelt, whose lesbian lover, Lorena Hickock, figures prominently in the piece. (A revival production of 2002 was recorded for a CD released in 2003.)

In 1994, LaChiusa solidified his reputation as a brilliant young composer with *Hello Again*, a musical suggested by Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* and produced at Lincoln Center with a first-rate cast including John Cameron Mitchell, Donna Murphy, Judy Blazer, and Michele Pawk. In this wise and beautiful work about love and sex, couples--some gay, some straight--come together in a series of vignettes, one for each decade of the twentieth century. "I'm very intrigued by sexuality," LaChiusa says. "I'm a Catholic boy, so obviously I'm obsessed with sex. I find the politics of sex fascinating."

LaChiusa's next project, inspired by a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, for which he and his co-writers, Graciela Daniele and Jim Lewis, won a Tony nomination for best book of a musical in 1996.

During the 1999-2000 theater season, LaChiusa was represented on Broadway by two productions, *Marie Christine* and *The Wild Party*.

Marie Christine, starring Audra McDonald, is an updating of the Medea myth set in nineteenth-century Louisiana and Chicago. (McDonald has recorded several works by LaChiusa, and chose "Way Back to Paradise," from *Marie Christine*, as the title of her debut CD.)

The Wild Party, based on a classic poem of the Jazz Age by Joseph Moncure March, presents a racially- and sexually-mixed group at a party spinning out of control. Guests at the party include a lesbian stripper, an "ambisexual" playboy, and a pair of gay, black songwriters.

LaChiusa won two Tony nominations (for the book and for music and lyrics) for *Marie Christine*; he also won

two Tony nominations for *The Wild Party* (for music and lyrics, and, with co-writer George C. Wolfe, for the book). Lesbian performer Lea DeLaria recorded two numbers from *The Wild Party* for her CD *Play It Cool* (2001), a jazz-inflected collection of tunes drawn from the musical theater.

Some of LaChiusa's other works include *Little Fish*, adapted from two short stories by Deborah Eisenberg; *Lovers & Friends: Chataqua Variations*, produced at Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he was 1998-1999 Composer-in-Residence; and *The Highest Yellow*, a musical about Van Gogh and his doctor, given its world premiere in 2004 at Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia.

The Highest Yellow had a long gestation; LaChiusa worked on it in bursts over a ten-year period. Writing in *The Washington Post*, theater critic Peter Marks called the show "in part an attempt to find an urgent musical vocabulary for ecstasy."

LaChiusa often flavors his work with a suggestion of the music of the appropriate period. In *The Highest Yellow*, for instance, he uses a bit of French music of Van Gogh's era. *The Highest Yellow* also contains a lyric that could be taken as emblematic of the composer's work as a whole: "You need the dark to make the light lighter."

LaChiusa says he can not choose a favorite among his works. "I love all my children," he explains, adding, "It's always the new one I most focus on."

The composer describes himself as a "gay man, happily single." He lives in New York City, where he teaches as an adjunct professor at New York University.

He says he has high expectations of his students, explaining: "Girl/world--that doesn't make it in my book. You can make a million dollars with that rhyme if you want, I don't care. But in [my] classroom, you show up with a rhyme like that, you are so on my shit list."

In its emotional and intellectual reach--along with the sheer amount of music (including recitative) in them--LaChiusa's works, perhaps especially *Marie Christine*, are frequently described as operatic. Though LaChiusa has argued that he writes musicals rather than operas, other writers, such as Terry Teachout, have attributed this disclaimer to his fear of being branded an elitist. But however they are defined, as operas or musicals, LaChiusa's works are memorable, involving, and affecting.

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