

For genders & genres

Playing is the thing

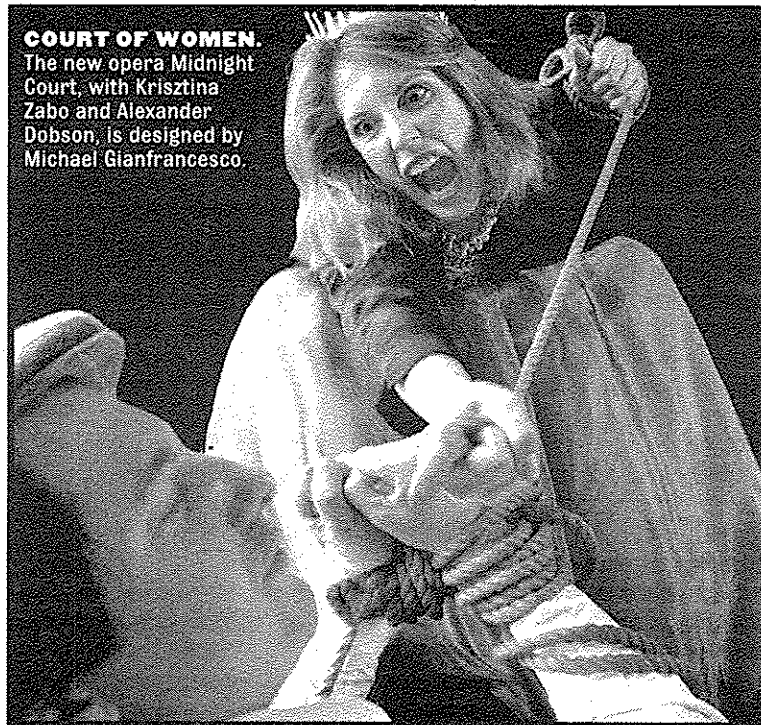
ON STAGE

Lydia Perovic

a MAN IS SUMMONED to a court of women, maidens voice grievances against men's commitment issues, possibility of the ideal marriage is pondered, clerical celibacy is rebuffed... another episode of Sex And The City? Anything but: It's the latest Queen Of Puddings Music Theatre production, the *Midnight Court*, based on a poem written in the 18th century, early days in the war between sexes as well as women's claim to sexual pleasure.

Paul Bentley (*Handmaid's Tale*) turned Brian Merriman's epic poem into the libretto and young Montreal composer Ana Sokolovic composed the music. The premiere, with Krisztina Zabo and Alexander Dobson, is set for Sat, Jun 11 at the Harbourfront Centre Theatre, and the ensemble is already invited to perform in London, at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in June 2006.

Both Torontonians and Londoners will see Michael Gianfrancesco's sets and costumes. An opera based on an 18th-century poem seems like a stretch for a designer who used to be con-



COURT OF WOMEN.

The new opera *Midnight Court*, with Krisztina Zabo and Alexander Dobson, is designed by Michael Gianfrancesco.

nected to the Ghost Group, formed in 2000 to bring formal theatre closer to street and youth cultures. The troupe does not exist any more, but the gay designer's democratic streak has remained, now mixed with genuine enjoyment as he moves through the canon.

"Best sets don't stand out," says Gianfrancesco, "but belong to the play seamlessly." For The Univer-

sity Of Western Ontario's *Candide*, Gianfrancesco made a communist-era El Dorado, surrounded by uniformly dressed people and mountains made out of stacks of chairs. In Studio 180's *Laramie Project*, the most ascetic and subdued of all of Gianfrancesco's sets, the absence of stuff on the stage actually meant more substance to the play — and earned him a Dora nomination. For Handel's *Alcina*

at the U of T, the kingdom transforms from an enchanted to a disenchanted state through lighting only. Sometimes it is a simple matter of putting things back where they belong — as in Theatre New Brunswick's *Anne*, for which he made trees out of paper clippings. And for the Stratford production of Marivaux's *Triumph Of Love*, where both the philosopher and his sister are convinced that the same person is about to become their wife/husband, Gianfrancesco's costumes had to show that "clothes doth gender make."

His favourite period seems to be the 18th century, not least because of the variety of cross-dressing ploys, both in the theatre and opera. "Handel is among my favourites," says Gianfrancesco. "Although I generally tend to like all those genre fence-sitters, works that are equal part opera and music theatre."

The *Midnight Court* is one of those combinations that Gianfrancesco so much enjoys. "I've always admired the Queen Of Puddings productions, and for the *Midnight Court* I had the music available beforehand. And that is all a designer needs: music. Just trust it, and it will create the set for you."

So now we know his secret: He paints by ear, no queerer nor nobler gift.

MIDNIGHT COURT.

\$49.50. 8pm.

Sat, Jun 11, 14, 16 & 18.

Harbourfront Centre Theatre.

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