

BOW JEST

One cynical voice explains what constitutes a string quartet, that seemingly genteel institution: "It's made up of one terrific violinist, one not-so-terrific violinist, one former violinist, and somebody who doesn't care about the violin." Your music teacher would have assigned those players to three instruments: first and second violins, the viola (bigger and darker than a violin), and the cello, heartiest of all. Anyone who has ever watched a string quartet can perceive the complex emotional relationships between the players, signaled only with the eyes, often a show by itself. Michael Hollinger's sparkling new dark comedy *Opus*, now at Ithaca's Kitchen Theatre Company, gives us all the red-hot emotions that surge between and behind precise harmonies.

Although still a young man, playwright Hollinger started his career as a violinist (after graduating from Oberlin), and also spent some time with the chronically underappreciated viola. This means he can deliver some choice inside jokes that we'll get to in a minute, but he is also telling us that people in this rarified calling are much like everybody else. When signing up for new employment, they ask about the dental plan. They might argue over how to interpret Beethoven, but they also follow major league baseball.



Sex and violins: Clockwise from top: Brendan Powers, Jesse Bush, Alison Scaramella, Alexander Thomas and Michael Samuel Kaplan in Kitchen Theatre's *Opus*.
ED DITTENHOEFER PHOTO

Except for having to recognize Johann Pachelbel's *Canon* without hearing its title and assuming that it appeals mostly to beginners, everything else in *Opus* is written to amuse and engage any audience members, even those whose tastes run to rap, heavy metal and Nashville. Maybe even to Slim Whitman.

Action begins with a kind of synchronized chorus, in which four players explain who they are and what they do, sometimes finishing each other's sentences. (The original text of *Opus* was written for radio broadcast.) Breaking the rhythm, the tall, flowing-haired viola player Dorian (Brendan Powers) says playing with the group, the fictional Lazara Quartet, is like drinking Drano. Then, poof!: His light goes black, and he disappears. And as the Lazara is about to make a command performance at the White House before 17 million television viewers the remaining three *must* find a replacement, and the top candidate turns out to be a young woman, Grace (Alison Scaramella).

Citing these two moments side-by-side, Dorian's departure and Grace's arrival, point up what makes Hollinger an unusual and disarming talent. Given the gender wars of the last four decades, audiences might expect that a single woman's entry into a closed boys' club might occasion sexist

condescension. But, hey, Virginia Slims tobacco ads covered that trope so well in 1975.

The tension between Grace and the others arises more from generational differences (she's never heard of Peter Frampton) and her careerism. Confident of her prized abilities, Grace is thinking about taking her viola to an audition for the Pittsburgh Symphony, a career path the older three disparage loudly: "Worse professional satisfaction than dentistry. And more suicides!" They accept her immediately as a part of the team, just as they have the black cellist Carl (Alexander Thomas), the most centered and even-tempered player in the bunch.

Because Grace adjusts so well, we almost forget Dorian's departure, especially as we do not see him for about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, tension is growing over how they perform Beethoven's demanding masterpiece, "Opus 131," at the White House, and not because of the president. The year is 2006, the second term of George W. Bush, whom they all dismiss with contempt. Instead, it is the exposure, especially who will be included in the 17 million, like Grammy Award voters.

By this time in the action we can see that the assertive first violin Elliot (Michael Samuel Kaplan), fittingly with his position, sees himself as the first among equals, even though all can vote on decisions and any player can veto. The easygoing second violinist Alan (Jesse Bush) does not stand to-toe with Elliot, even though he is charming and often speaks sentiments belonging to the whole group. As the main storyline unfolds, we begin to see Dorian talking with Elliot in flashbacks. The fullness of his character and the depth of his relationship with Elliot are far more fraught than we had assumed. Without our quite noticing it, finding out why Dorian departed is a mystery story that cannot be solved until all the other tensions have been pulled together.

The Lazara Quartet, according to Hollinger's exposition, takes its name from a (fictional) family of instrument players in Cremona, Italy, about the time of the more famous Stradivarius family. In a detail that cannot fully be explained here, Dorian had acquired two of their precious relics that were intended for use by the quartet, and Elliot wants to deliver them now.

This leads to the explication of at least one in-joke. "Lazara" is a made-up name, whereas the real rival to Stradivarius is Guarneri, which gave its name to the Guarneri Quartet, for more than 40 years (1964-2009) one of the tops in the world. They often performed for the Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music, running now 60 years, and with SRO houses since the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra folded. The Guarneri Quartet was also featured in a documentary film, *High Fidelity* (1989), where they were seen dismissing the works of Fritz Kreisler. In *Opus* Grace recalls a documentary where the Lazara Quartet has the same conversation.

Quite apart from Hollinger's manifest skills as a plotter, secrets which cannot be revealed here, he's a first-rate comedy writer who knows how to exploit the anguish of finessing egos of temperamental artists. In a delicious early scene Elliot learns that Grace is departing for Pittsburgh and so calls the distant second choice, the hapless Richard, and shouts into the phone, "I've got great news," just as Grace rings the doorbell to announce she's had second thoughts. So how does Elliot wriggle out of that? By sweet-talking Grace with his hand over the speaker, and then switching back to Richard to make sure he doesn't lose his second choice. Actor Michael Samuel Kaplan as Elliot and director Rachel Lampert sustain Elliot's comic agony to the max.

A musician and dancer herself, Lampert brings a comfortable authority to some highly tricky material. All five actors mime the actions of musicians with the different compositions, Beethoven, Bach and Bartok, drawing their bows in perfect timing with prerecorded music and swaying with convincing body language. Equally demanding are the rapid changes in tempo and tone in sequences coming out of chronological order. Again and again Lampert paces perfectly timed uproarious comic sequences. When Grace comes two hours early for rehearsal and asks for tea no guy would have, like Red Zinger, Alan responds that he has a bag that he brought home from Amsterdam with a tag saying "tea" on it.

Opus is a brilliant and stylish comedy, an American Noel Coward with more bite. Company regulars like Michael Samuel Kaplan, Jesse Bush, Alison Scaramella and Alexander Thomas (flown back from Berlin) are all in top form, and newcomer Brendan Powers as Dorian offers a wide mad man. Scenic and lighting designer Tyler M. Perry gives us a set that allows for an elegant concert hall and Alan's scruffy apartment. For the difficulty of its staging as well as its sophistication, Michael Hollinger's *Opus* would likely only appear at Ithaca's Kitchen Theatre of any other regional venue.

This production runs through Nov. 11. See Times Table for information.