



GOING GAGA

The budding diva Cecelia Hall takes Chicago by storm, one cross-dressing role at a time

BY GRAHAM MEYER

Opera

SOPRANOS MAY GET ALL THE HIGH notes, but mezzo-sopranos have more fun. Case in point: In Chicago Opera Theater's *Teseo*, opening April 21 at the Harris Theater, the up-and-comer Cecelia Hall makes her entrance covered in dirt and blood as the victorious warrior Teseo. Yep, Teseo, founder of Athens, slayer of the Minotaur.

It's the sort of gender-bending role that dots the résumés of most mezzos, whose vocal ranges allow them to play young males. But securing the lead in a COT production represents a particularly shining takeoff for a singer who was raised on a dirt road.

Hall, 27, grew up in rural North Carolina and traveled to Durham each week for piano and voice lessons. After moving to Chicago in 2002 to study at DePaul, she snagged an internship at Lyric. Her first opera gig, the title role in a kid-friendly production of Jules Massenet's *Cendrillon* at Opera in the Ozarks, came during one summer break. She was hooked.

Upon completing graduate degrees at Juilliard, Hall returned to Chicago in 2011 to join the Ryan Opera Center, Lyric's program for young singers, and began to turn heads in earnest. "When she first sang for me, I thought there was some magic little thing about her," says Brian Dickie, who is finishing his final season as COT's general

director. Dickie has spotted an “extrabright spark of individuality” before, citing past examples such as the in-demand soprano Danielle de Niese and the eminent mezzo Frederica von Stade, but it was Hall who earned his nod as one of four nominees for the inaugural Brian Dickie Outstanding Young Singer Award. (The winner is slated to be announced in March, after presstime.)

In *Teseo*, Handel’s dark story of frustrated romance and revenge, the titular hero returns from war to marry his beloved but encounters interference from the king and the sorceress Medea. Because the opera has been staged only a handful of times, the role, originally written for a castrato, leaves plenty of room for interpretation. “It’s a gritty, visceral, sexy, honest story,” Hall says—and just one of several productions in which

she’ll appear during Chicago’s 2012–13 season. Then begins the vagabond existence of a diva.

That life is sure to include wearing pants a few more times, as Handel’s Ariodante (whom Hall played at Juilliard) or as Octavian in Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* (which she calls a dream gig). “If you watch people on the train, you’ll see men have no problem taking up as much space as they want,” Hall says. “Women cross their legs, their shoulders cave in a little, and that’s feminine. To be able to break free of that and take up as much space as I want is really cool.” Make room, Chicago. ●

GO *Teseo* runs April 21, 27, and 29 and May 2; \$25 to \$125. For info, chicagooperatheater.org.

GLASS IS IN SESSION

Classical

Inside the mind of composer Philip Glass

It’s been nearly 60 years since the celebrated experimental composer Philip Glass left his home in Baltimore at age 15 to attend the University of Chicago. “That experience has empowered me my whole life,” he says. This month, in the wake of his 75th birthday, Glass returns to play a sold-out concert of his own solo piano works April 1 at the Art Institute. We picked his brain for memories of his formative years here—and for word on what he’s thinking about right now. —NORA O’DONNELL

IN THE PAST YEAR, I TRAVELED TO . . .



BOOK I'M CARRYING ON THE PLANE

“Lexicon of Musical Injunctive: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven’s Time,” by Nicolas Slonimsky. It’s a collection of bad reviews of Brahms, Schubert, and Beethoven from the 18th and 19th centuries. They’re hilariously funny to read because people hated these guys. People couldn’t believe that Brahms could get away with writing junk and make a career out of it. You hear the same thing about modern composers. It’s very nice to be able to read that.”

Things I learned to do at the U. of C.: “Smoke and drink coffee. That might seem very mild right now, but when you’re 15 and it’s 1952, it makes you very rebellious.”



THREE AMAZING PERFORMANCES I SAW IN CHICAGO

Billie Holiday (left) and **Ben Webster** at the Cotton Club, **Lee Konitz** (center) at the Modern Jazz Room, and **Fritz Reiner** (right) conducting Bartók with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—“back when you could get a ticket for 50 cents.”



GO-TO MEAL

“Mush and beans! I’m a vegetarian, so it’s a very basic dish that you can find anywhere. I’ve learned to become very adaptable. I don’t cultivate obscure tastes that I won’t be able to satisfy.”