

Musical Chairs

An artistic conversation with Richard Hopkins and Leif Bjaland

The year 2008 saw some memorable birthdays in Sarasota's creative community. Florida Studio Theatre celebrated its 35th year; Sarasota Orchestra (the organization formerly known as Florida West Coast Symphony) had 60 candles to blow out on its birthday cake. That orchestra also lent its musical expertise to FST for its current production of Michael Hollinger's *Opus*, a play exploring the inner conflicts (sometimes creative, sometimes not) of a string quartet forced to replace its virtuoso violist only weeks before a major concert at the White House performing Beethoven's fiendishly difficult Opus 131. "We didn't learn to fret, but we did learn to bow," notes Susan Hyon, the actress playing the pinch hitter violist. Of course, there was plenty of fretting in the play itself when the unstable violist returned to reclaim his place in the group—a quartet. With five musicians and only four slots, the action turned into a game of musical chairs. Is it creative abrasion—or infighting? To help clear things up, we hosted an artistic conversation with Leif Bjaland, the artistic director of Sarasota Orchestra, and Richard Hopkins, FST's artistic director and the director of this production. Kate Alexander, FST's associate director, moderated the discussion. And, speaking of birthdays, what better day to get behind the music than Beethoven's 238th birthday? What follows is an excerpt from their conversation on that day. We trust Ludwig would approve.

Tell us a little about *Opus*.

Hopkins: On the surface, it's about a string quartet. On a deeper level, the quartet is a microcosm of all group endeavors. It's about people working together, which makes it universal. How can people achieve something together? How do they get along—or not? We all face these questions—in the theater, in an orchestra, anywhere.

The play is a beautiful illustration of creative abrasion.

Bjaland: Yes. And a string quartet is the ideal example. It's comprised of four hothouse flowers—four, strong-willed, talented individuals who've been nurtured by devoted parents and music teachers to perform at a virtuoso level. They all think they're always right, so naturally, there'll be sparks. Especially with an enigmatic work like Beethoven's Opus 131, which has no clearly "right" approach. It isn't a question of four possible right answers; it's more like 40,000. The intention is often ambiguous; Beethoven was silent on many questions.

And creative abrasion is a way to answer those questions?

Bjaland: It can be.

Creative artists rub up against each other, and in the process create something greater than themselves?

Hopkins: Sure. In any creative collaboration, you can phone it in, or fight to move beyond complacency. In the theater, we usually try to avoid abrasion. But the more gutsy actors and directors will push each other to deeper truths—even if it means a fight. That doesn't mean all abrasion is creative. A spoiled diva digging her heels in, for example. Creative abrasion isn't egotistical—it's honest and fearless. There are times you need to tell your collaborators: "This may hurt; you may not like what I'm saying; but this is the best course." You do it for the sake of the work, not yourself.

So, the question becomes—what's the motive for the squabble?

Bjaland: I would agree. Some fights are legitimate, some aren't.

Hopkins: Knowing the difference is part of an artistic director's job. A group like this string quartet, which has no clearly defined leader, can get into abrasion a whole lot easier.

So, how would a leaderless group eliminate the unproductive fights? Or can it?

Bjaland: An artistic group like a string quartet operates from certain ground rules.

Hopkins: For one thing, the quartet in the play is a democracy on all major decisions. But there are plenty of unwritten rules.

Bjaland: That's what makes this play so interesting. A brand new person, the replacement violist, enters the small society of the string quartet—and she doesn't know the rules. It's like the first time you're going to your fiancée's Christmas party. Everyone's talking about things and people you know nothing about and you feel very much at sea. Then they all start arguing—and you don't know why.

And the new violist doesn't know why. Are we fighting about truth or are we fighting about territory and dominance?

Bjaland: She doesn't know. It becomes like an Edward Albee Christmas.

Truth and ego are very different things.

Hopkins: Right. In the theater, we try to keep the ego out of the process. Of course, you can't. Actors are human beings, not robots. I remember, years ago, I guest-directed a production of *What the Butler Saw*. The rehearsal was running late. One actor was in danger of missing an appointment—I had no idea; he hadn't said anything. Then all of a sudden, he started storming around: "Make me act. Just try. Go on. Let me see you make me act." We straightened it out—but, later on, I realized something profound. You *can't* make an actor act. There are thousands of creative choices. You can't micromanage each one. As a young director, I blocked out every scene in advance. With experience, I developed an intuitive sense of where the actors wanted to go from scene to scene. I learned to work organically with actors. Now, as a director, I don't try to impose my will on the actors. I watch them very carefully to see what they're feeling;

what their instincts are telling them—and then I try to go with it. I try to get inside their skins.

Bjaland: That reminds me of something Herbert von Karajan once said: “Conducting an orchestra is like riding a horse.” The horse is bigger and more powerful than you are. The horse is carrying you; you can’t carry the horse. You can’t force it to jump the fence. But you can give it the confidence to jump—a willingness to be guided in a certain direction. Once an orchestra knows that direction, they fill in the blanks. It sound easy, but it’s not.

What’s the difficulty?

Bjaland: Exerting artistic control, but knowing when to stop. In a piece like Opus 131, there are innumerable choices. You need an overarching vision. But if you try to control each choice, you strangle the vitality.

What’s the hardest choice?

Bjaland: Time. Rehearsal time, performance time, variations in the tempo. The clock is ticking! It’s a reality, not an abstraction. You have to decide *now*, and then make your next decision. That applies to all compositions, but particularly with this composition. It’s such an enigma, which makes it such a good choice for a play like this. There’s a tremendous mixture of common folk music and rarefied invention. The decisions in this piece are so much more complex than those in Beethoven’s earlier work. It’s the equivalent of the advanced levels of Dungeons and Dragons. There are so many possible doors. Once you go through one door, your choices for other doors are changed.

And every work for the stage is also a maze of choices?

Hopkins: Absolutely. That's why a good director can't be a dictator. A play represents tens of thousands of decisions. The best directors know where they're going, not how they'll get there. A good director doesn't treat the actors like puppets. You don't direct the play; you direct the actors in the moment. You don't impose some rigid idea in our minds. You create a direction and free the actors up to make the infinitesimal choices of the moment. It happens in the theater—and in every group endeavor. If you try to impose each answer the machine stops; there's no organic energy.

Do the principles of creating a collaborative artwork also apply to running an artistic organization?

Hopkins: Yes. You start with a grand vision—your concept of the play, or a mission statement. In practice, you make the vision happen by thinking in small moments. You establish parameters and make sure everyone knows what direction to go—but not so rigidly that you strangle people. The small things are the big things. It's impossible for any one person—either a director or an artistic director—to control all the small things. It's what makes directing a play exciting—and makes running an organization a pain.

In practice, what's the most important decision?

Hopkins: Your first decision: finding the right people. Get the right people on the bus; then, decide where the bus is going to go.

Bjaland: I absolutely agree. Find good people and let them do their job. Over time, there'll be a synergy. A culture will grow of people supporting each other in the creation of great work. A culture that lasts.

Hopkins: And, even if it does, as an artistic director, you'll still need to connect with a diverse audience. Gordon Davidson, a theater director in Los Angeles, once hired an anthropologist. The question he posed: why aren't other cultures attending the theater—the Mexican community, the Korean community, and so on? He walked east, west,

north and south. On the fifth day, he came back and made his report. “The good news is, they are attending the theater. The bad news; they’re not attending yours.” If you want to expand your audience base, you need to expand and diversify your programming. The ball’s is squarely in your court.

Bjaland: That’s one reason for our recent name change. It’s a signal that we’re interested in more than just the symphonic canon. We want a larger tent to reach a larger audience. Ultimately, we’re trying to communicate passion, energy, commitment, joy. Why? Because the world needs joy, desperately. It needs opportunities to be excited by the better angels of our nature, not the base aspects of society. We all need more joy.