

Mr. Hollinger's *Opus*

Five performing artists face the music

In playwright Michael Hollinger's *Opus*, beautiful music arises from the Lazara String Quartet, the hardest working band in the symphony business. That's onstage. Backstage, there are plenty of discordant notes. Like the Beatles, these high-strung musicians don't always get along.

Opus is a play about artists and the creative process. It's not the first, and it won't be the last. Artists fascinate people—though people have a hard time defining them. Depending on the person you ask, artists are visionary shamans, society-changing revolutionaries, self-actualized butterflies or glorified entertainers. Playwrights have tackled all these variations and many more. *Opus* offers a rare definition: artists are people who make art for a living. Art is a job—it's just that simple.

Hollinger doesn't buy into romantic notions of the tortured soul, creating in solitude. These performing artists create together, out in the open. They're collaborating on a big project. They're clocked in. Anybody who's ever worked in a pod of people will recognize themselves—and feel a sense of déjà vu from the group dynamic. Whether your slot is in a fire station, restaurant or a space shuttle, a job is still a job.

Paradoxically, the play's familiar territory is its biggest surprise. *Opus* explores the inner working of a string quartet—one of the nation's best. It pulls back the curtain and takes us behind the scenes. What we discover in that hidden world are people very much like ourselves and our coworkers.

Hollinger quartet is a molecule of four humans in a working environment. Until recently, it's been comprised of high-energy male egos. The molecule's been stable, more or less, until Dorian, the wonder boy first violist, quit and split. Grace replaces him, perturbing the molecular bonds. It's not a boy's club anymore. Grace is the new kid on the block, walking into long-settled relationships, habits and expectations. Sexual competition, and just plain competition, enters the mix. Grace endures a trial by fire that Pam would understand.

Things get hot for everybody. The group is busy sweating out a rehearsal of Beethoven's Opus 131, a notoriously difficult composition. To increase the level of difficulty, they have only days to prepare for a big concert—at the White House, on national television, no less. It's the musical equivalent of a dangerous high-wire act. Just when it looks like they'll pull it off, Dorian appears. The quartet is suddenly confronted

with a game of musical chairs. Four chairs for five musicians. Something has to give. The show must go on—or does it?

As Hollinger sees it, the show is important, but it's not the whole show. His *Opus* is a many layered symphony. There's the struggle between ego and teamwork, between going through the motions and going for the gold, between perfectionism and basic good manners—and of course, the eternal struggle between competitive professionals for dominance. At some level, these fights are going on in every workplace. The nitty-gritty issues *Opus* raises can be found there, too.

According to Hollinger, it's time to face the music. Like it or not, most of our life is work. Most of us spend more time with our work families than we do with our actual families. If we're lucky, we can do an excellent job and be excellent human beings at the same time. Hollinger (a former symphony violinist) has no illusions about how hard that is. Like Beethoven's *Opus 131*, it's tough job to pull off.

As Dorian said, "At its best...when everything's working right, when everyone's open to it, it's..."

Well, let's not spoil the joke. To paraphrase, when everything's working right, it's a very good feeling. That's no guarantee people can always work together. In Hollinger's eyes, the effort alone is worth it.

Life is not a rehearsal.