

'O Pioneers!' opera converts prose to lyric

BY JOSH NICHOLS
Staff writer

Nineteenth century immigrants who came to the Great Plains to make new lives struggled against poverty, disease and an ignorance of the land and weather conditions they came to settle.

Renowned Nebraska author Willa Cather tapped into the struggles and feelings of those who so desperately worked to settle the vast plains of the Midwest.

For the first time, one of her full-length stories will be delivered not in writing but in the form of an opera.

Tyler White, University of Nebraska-Lincoln director of orchestral activities, has written his first opera based on Cather's first novel set in Nebraska.

Commissioned by the UNL School of Music, "O Pioneers!" will premiere Friday at 8 p.m. in Kimball Recital Hall.

The story is about the Bergsons, a Swedish immigrant family who came to America to start a new life on the Great Plains.

The story focuses on Alexandra Bergson, who becomes head of the family after her father dies. She develops a love for the beauty and vastness of the Nebraska plains.

White, an Atlanta native, developed a similar love for the region when he moved to Manhattan, Kan., as a child.

He left the Midwest when he attended college at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

"It hit me most strongly when I left for college. There was a physical sense of coming back," he said in a press release. "I think Cather was keenly aware of this."

White chose to base his opera on the Cather novel because of the sense he shared with Cather and because "O Pioneers!" could easily be adapted to the stage.

The play took him three years to write.

During his first year at UNL in 1994, White and William Shomos, director of opera at UNL, discussed doing some new works and decided that doing a Cather opera "seemed natural."

Theater Preview The Facts

What: "O Pioneers!"
Where: Kimball Hall
When: Friday and Sunday
Cost: \$7 for students
The Skinny: First ever opera performance of famous Nebraskan author's novel.

White said Cather's work is easy to understand.

"After I read my first Cather novel, 'Death Comes to the Archbishop,' I wondered, 'Why doesn't everyone write like this?'" White said.

"It's so simple and easy. I tried to write music that sounds so simple and easy and yet like nothing you've heard before."

Converting a novel to a stage presentation presents challenges because parts of the book must be cut out.

"Converting any novel requires cutting and sifting," he said.

"You have to develop a sense of what can be cut and what must be left in. You have to decide whether verbal descriptions in the novel will be presented visually or musically or omitted."

Shomos said the opera presents Cather's novel well.

"We have the same main characters, and the stories Cather was telling are told in the opera," he said. "It captures the essence of the novel's words with music."

The cast of "O Pioneers!" consists of graduate and undergraduate UNL music students.

Karen Hughes, a vocal performance graduate student who plays Alexandra, has read the novel and agreed that the story is presented well.

"The opera is very true to the novel. That is what makes it so beautiful," she said.

"My character is the backbone of the family who takes over the land they own," she said. "Everyone else gives up, but she makes it prosper."

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DEB LEE/DN

'The Insider' and the new face of journalism Integrity and corporate concerns collide

BY SAMUEL MCKEOWN
Senior staff writer

Not 10 minutes into Michael Mann's "The Insider," CBS "60 Minutes" reporter/icon Mike Wallace (Christopher Plummer) launches into a tirade at the notion that someone might control one of his interviews.

His target of one specific person, in this case an Arab gunman protecting his leader, turns to everyone in the room. Wallace storms off by himself. The gunman recinds his demands.

And quietly, carefully, the "60 Minutes" producer Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino) approaches Wallace to see if he's "warmed up."

"I've got my heart going now," Wallace responds. His big show of journalistic integrity was just that — a show.

The moment sets the perfect tone for the "The Insider" — an unflinching look at modern journalism. After that, do we know when Wallace is lying or telling the truth? When, in another tirade, he accuses a corporate drone of strong-arming him, is he, in fact, strong-arming her? When he cries, are his tears real? And if Mike Wallace is an icon in this business, what does that say about the ethics of everybody else?

These are the questions this movie asks. It doesn't try to answer them. As a film, it doesn't have to.

What it must do is create a compelling narrative to surround those questions, and Mann triumphs,

choosing to focus on the trials of Jeffrey Wiegand (Russell Crowe), a tobacco whistle-blower whose interview with "60 Minutes" was delayed for more than three months because of CBS's corporate concerns.

Wiegand, under pressure from Big Tobacco not to talk, loses everything in the process — his wife (Diane Venora), money, reputation and freedom. To top it off, CBS hangs him out to dry.

And since the "The Insider" is based on fact, there isn't any secret as to how the film ends. The details of exactly what Wiegand knew about the tobacco industry are pretty inconsequential in the movie.

More provocative is Mann's two-fold approach that shows Wiegand's slow spiral into tragedy and Bergman's fight to keep the interview intact.

Of the two stories, the first is more compelling. Wiegand, a brash, sometimes compulsive personality, is played body and soul by Crowe as a determined, principled man who refuses to be pushed around.

Both Wiegand the character and Crowe the actor hold their own in numerous scenes with Pacino's Bergman.

The best scenes of the film concern Wiegand's internal conflict over breaking his tobacco company's confidentiality agreement by testifying in the state of Mississippi's landmark lawsuit.

The film's second half shifts to a behind-the-scenes look at the CBS deci-

Film Review The Facts

Title: "The Insider"
Director: Michael Mann
Rating: R (adult language, situations and a veiled jab at the Nebraska football team)
Stars: Al Pacino, Russell Crowe, Christopher Plummer, Philip Baker Hall, Diane Venora
Grade: A
Five Words: "The Insider" definitely deep-throated

sion, complete with balking executive producer Don Hewitt (Philip Baker Hall), lawyers and the shifty Wallace. (In recent weeks, both Wallace and Hewitt have denounced the movie.) Bergman's battle for the interview, which turns into a crusade, gets a little tired by the end. It gets a little old watching person after person talk on a cellular phone.

Mann, a master technician, jams the camera up in everybody's face, as Oliver Stone used to, creating an effect of intimacy rare in a movie this big.

The director of "Heat" and "Manhunter" is also a glutton for detail — watch for jabs at Kenneth Starr and the Nebraska football team. Mann's cinematographer, Dante Spinotti, has always been superb; the visuals are crisp and have a full-bodied atmosphere to them.

The rest of the supporting cast,



RUSSELL CROWE and Al Pacino star in "The Insider." The film explores the consequences of a "60 Minutes" interview with tobacco industry informer Jeffrey Wigand.

especially Plummer, is excellent. A scene stealer includes Bruce McGill as Wiegand's lawyer in the Mississippi courthouse.

Pacino adds to the atmosphere with his mere presence. As in most of his performances, his work in "The Insider" includes a few scenes when he yells THIS LOUD, because it's "only the biggest health care reform issue in U.S. history!"

Understand that the above scene, along with many others, are only to be taken quasi-seriously. Mann's film offers up the notion of journalism as self-fulfilling prophecy — it's news if the news media says it is, and the media takes a weightier stand on

things than most of the public might. Toward the end of "The Insider," both Wallace and Bergman step outside their crusading mode and momentarily come to terms with who and what they are.

"The Insider" provides no concrete solutions. Sort of like a know-it-all mole deep inside, this movie reveals the truth previously unknown. "All the President's Men" got most of its thrill in how it utilized the anonymous insider "Deep Throat." This time, we know exactly who Deep Throat is, and how, unlike the 1970s, he doesn't call the shots anymore. That's how much journalism has changed.