

Burroughs for music lovers

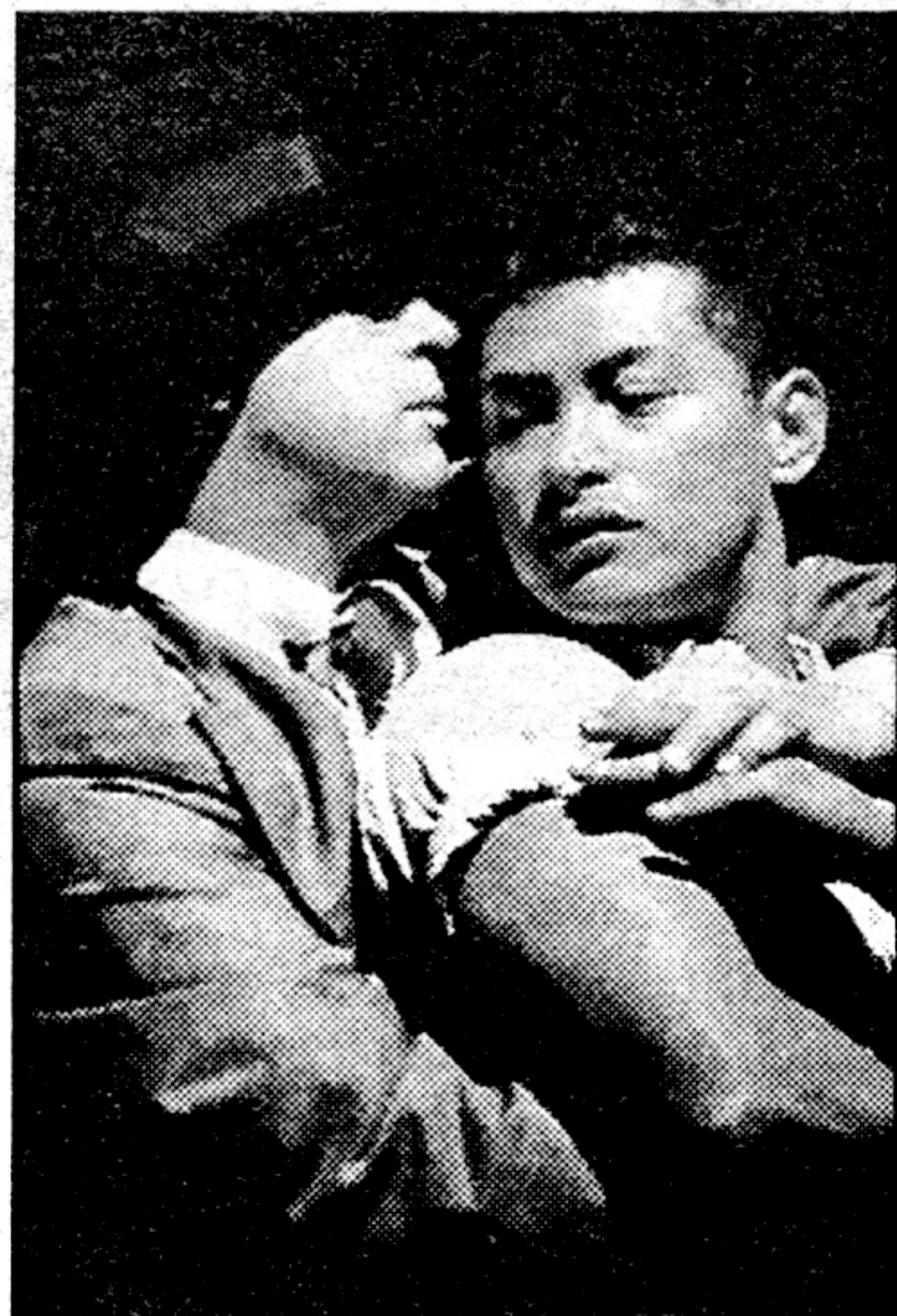
'Queer' at ODC Theater

by Mark Mardon

Brilliance characterized every facet of Erling Wold's *Queer* on opening night (April 11) at ODC Theater in the Mission. From conception through execution, the chamber opera based on the William Burroughs novel more than did justice to Burroughs' spirit. It rekindled that spirit vividly for the audience, a sophisticated crowd that paid rapt attention to every nuance of inflection and expression from orchestra and actors alike.

Truly the night belonged to composer Wold, whose latest work follows previous chamber operas *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* (1993-94) and *Sub Pontio Pilato* (1995-98) and a host of recordings, chamber pieces, and New Music-style electronic experiments. The concept of turning a classic of queer literature into a post-postmodern chamber piece, complete with on-stage orchestra and what amounts to a singing William Burroughs, dares to be taken seriously. In lesser hands, it could have turned Burroughs' dry humor and desperate longings into farce. But the combined talents of Wold, stage director Jim Cave, dramaturgist John Morace, conductor Deirdre McClure, choreographer Cid Pearlman, lighting designer Clyde Sheets, and costume designer Hank Ford, together with a stellar cast, orchestra, and crew, skillfully brought life to Wold's idea, turning *Queer* into an exceptionally well-rehearsed, well-executed, inspiring work of high art.

Wold's composition for trumpet, guitar, piano, synthesizer, violin and contrabass, flawlessly executed by an orchestra including Wold on guitar, creates an atmospheric, classically-based sound-



Queer: Burroughs' spirit rekindled

scape reminiscent of works by Philip Glass, David Del Tredici, and Ned Rorem; aptly, the *Village Voice* once described Wold as "the Eric Satie of Berkeley surrealist/minimalist electro-artrock." Here, minimalism and melody go hand in hand, with lovely passages, including suggestions of Mexican mariachi music, offset by sections more mood-setting than melodic. The various passages cohere into a gorgeous tapestry, as intricate as any woven textile.

Trauma a joy

Part of *Queer's* appeal is its marriage of modern music with a text dear to the hearts of queer literati. It would have been easy to parody Burroughs using his own words. Fortunately, the caustically funny Burroughs temperament came across dazzlingly in the characterization of William Lee, Burroughs' alter ego, by Trauma Flintstone, who turned in a bravura performance. Flintstone was a joy to experience as Lee, singing passages and tearing across the stage in hot pursuit of his love object. At times, he soared in touch-

ing, elegant arias — usually just after he'd downed a drink or two, or tried to get his hands down Allerton's pants and been rejected yet again.

Not only did Flintstone exhibit rich vocal qualities and a prodigious feat of memory — he sang practically the entire libretto, expertly pieced together from the text of the novel — he convincingly personified the novel's protagonist. He did this not by imitating Burroughs' style, but by channeling the writer's corrosive spirit with seeming effortlessness. Flintstone is a natural for the part, with lanky body, balding head, growly voice, and an apparently innate ability to tell fanciful yarns, illustrated with expansive hand gestures and quirky facial tics.

Flintstone brought natural charm to the role, an easiness in body language, a measured pace, and motivation. His comfortable stage presence allowed him real interactions with his fellow actor/singers. Hints of music-theater training emerged in his vocal style, suggesting a potential for affectation and exaggeration, yet Flintstone nailed the operatic form, grounding his performance in the meaning of the text, rather than letting fly simply for the sake of melody.

Shane Kramer ably carried off the challenge of serving as Lee's mostly unresponsive love object, Eugene Allerton, a young man of sullen good looks and aloof (not to mention alcoholic and heroin-addicted) behavior. At first, Kramer seemed an odd choice for the part, being perhaps older and more rugged in appearance than the novel suggests Allerton to be. Rather than a corrupt, pretty kid, Kramer embodied the character of a jaded young tough, sullen in the way Brad Davis was as the

sailor/sex object in *Querelle*. Yet Kramer pulled it off well, keeping himself aloof but never wooden. His sexuality was palpable, and you could understand why Lee obsessed over him.

Lending weight and powerful vocals to various character parts was Ken Berry, his acting and singing abilities indispensable to the overall tone and success of the piece. This is Berry's second production with Wold, after playing the father in Wold's *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*.

Dance play

Dancers doubling as characters — the lovely Stacey Em Jackson, Zenón Barrón, and Norberto Martínez — popped in and out of the scenes gracefully, artfully merging dance and drama. At one moment, they served as foils to Lee's lusty imagination; the next, they were creating evocative tableaux on the deep, beautifully-lit stage. The set, with benches, tables, and bar at the front of the stage, and an alluring bed toward the rear, allowed much space for the dancers, and choreographer Cid Pearlman made great use of the openings. Barrón and Martínez paired off frequently in sensuous danceplay that formed a backdrop to Lee and Allerton's goings-on. Especially in the show's second act, together with Jackson, they infused the production with a sexy perfume of teasing, come-hither looks and slow-motion seductions.

Queer, the chamber opera, conveys the story of a queer American bum South of the Border in the 1940s as artfully as *Queer*, the novel. One might have expected a musical version of the book to incorporate grunge rock, jazz, blues, or tango — but a chamber opera? It works, and that's all the encouragement anyone should need to check out an instant classic. ▼



Shane Kramer as Allerton, Trauma Flintstone as Lee in *Queer* at ODC