

# Hey everyone, let's go to The Op

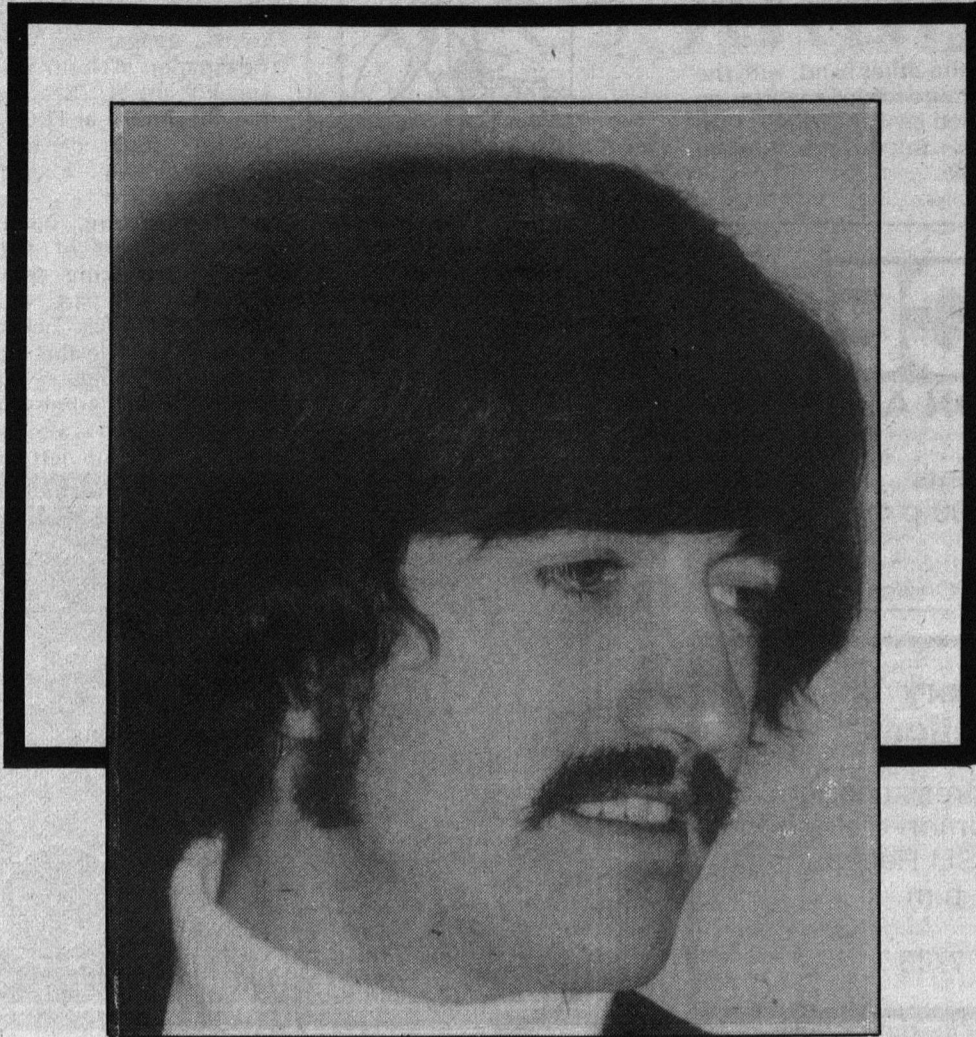
by Sally-Ann Mowat

The world of operatic production is a strange one — frenetic, yet unaware of time, somewhat incestuous, full of both genuine talent and inflated egos, exhibiting very little common sense. I "holidayed" there this summer, in the guise of marketing assistant to the Edmonton Opera — and was early intrigued by George Cotton's apparent refusal to fit the mold.

Cotton is Assistant Artistic Director at Edmonton Opera, and also its Production Manager. That makes him fairly prominent in his field. Somehow, he just doesn't fit my preconceived ideas about what he *should* be like. He's not exclusive enough. He listens to Thelonius Monk (avante garde jazz) and Dave Brubeck, chamber music, pop, rock, and country. His response to my astonishment was simple: "We all have to specialize....but you have to have an awareness of *all* the components."

For Cotton, this attitude extends beyond musical categories. He believes that during the past quarter century, opera has seen a movement toward the "consummate singing actor", that mere vocal talent is no longer enough. If opera is to remain alive as a medium, its performers must incorporate the method actor, the comic, and the dancer, as well as the singer.

George Cotton is thirty-four. Critics are already describing his stage direction as fresh, innovative, and full of action. He has learned a lot under Edmonton Opera's "main man", Artistic Director Irving Guttman, but he cannot remember a time when his eventual involvement in operatic production did not seem inevitable. His family isn't involved in music or theatre; neither was Cotton himself pushed to enter the field. Nonetheless, he started singing aged four, and when the family bought their first piano, "it was like getting a Ferrari." Cotton was eight at the time. He appeared in Bizet's "Carmen" at the age of nine; it was the first production by the first



George Cotton: Music as a positive narcotic

professional opera company west of Toronto, the Vancouver Opera Association. And it was directed by Irving Guttman. Cotton still remembers the "awe and admiration"

with which he watched Guttman pull the production together.

George Cotton received his B.Mus. from UBC and came to the U of A to do

graduate studies. He abandoned the program when his responsibilities at Edmonton Opera began to demand most of his time, and he hasn't looked back. He assumed control of the opera company's school tours, expanded their function to include performances for adults in rural communities, and can accept much of the credit for Edmonton Opera On Tour's current status as the largest opera touring group in Canada.

Within the city and around it, Edmonton Opera's assistant artistic director is primarily associated with operetta. Many big names in operatic production tolerate Gilbert and Sullivan as an inferior form, but good introduction to, "grand opera"; Cotton feels differently. Light opera "stretches" a director, he feels. It offers both scope and challenge.

Despite his enthusiasm for and recognized talent in this medium, George Cotton's voice is rapidly becoming more audible in Main Stage circles. He has been involved in nearly seventy large productions and his commitments as a freelance stage director are increasing. This year he will guest as assistant director for the New Jersey State Opera's production of "Aida" — a real plum for his career. Cotton feels that "all music is life", and he wants to make opera's image more palatable than it has been in the past.

For George Cotton, music is "a positive narcotic." Whatever my reservations, this last is a statement I agree with. I'm intrigued. I think we're going to hear more about this man.

Edmonton Opera's four-production season opens this Saturday, with student (half-price) season tickets available for Thursday night performances. Gilbert and Sullivan's "Gondoliers" will be presented in SUB Theatre this December; Puccini's "La Boheme" comes to the Jubilee in March. George Cotton will direct them both.

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