The Philadelphia Inquirer

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Evan Jonigkeit, Conrad Ricamora in the all-male adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet." They play students at a boys' school rehearsing the play.

### An 'R & J' that asks: What's in a gender?

By Toby Zinman FOR THE INQUIRER

don't like conceptual shows," playwright Joe Calarco says of his high-concept, allmale adaptation Shakespeare's R&I. Mauckingbird Theatre's production of Calarco's script is the Philadelphia premiere of a play that had long, successful runs in New York and London (not to mention Lapan and Australia). Cur.

Shakespeare's

R&J

Through Aug. 23.
Adrienne Theatre,
2030 Sansom St.
Tickets: \$15-\$20.
215-923-8909 or
mauckingbird
theatreco.org.

Japan and Australia). Currently in previews, it opens

Wednesday at the Adrienne.

Mauckingbird, which is
dedicated to re-viewing
classic drama through a

classic drama through a 215-923-8909 or gay lens, debuted in January with an all-male production of The Misanthrope, a surprisingly persuasive, as well as entertaining, take on the classic Moliere comedy. But an all-male Romeo and Juliet? The Mauckingbird east is diverse in many ways — Caucasian, Asian See R&J on H6



Van Cliburn's remarkable Moscow performances are now available on DVD, after their release was delayed by the pianist himself.

#### A Van Cliburn anniversary From musician to folk hero

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

f cultural gods tell us more about us than about them-lves Van Cliburn

words of classical pi-ano maven David Dubal, "written one of the most spectacular pages in the history of his instrument." Ver



effect. Shift to a decade later, 1972

(VAI's Vol. II): Kondrashin is visibly older, Cliburn is not,

though bad habits are emerg-

ing, such as vulgar, weighty treatment of the bass notes in the Grieg *Piano Concerto* that

may have been a smoke screen for lack of emotional

conviction. In Brahms' Piano

Concerto No. 2, Cliburn's tone isn't as rich as usual; he bangs a bit and seems expres-

sively constricted. The audi-

ence appears to know:

Though all manner of flowers

are brought out, applause is

Some of my favorite parts of Cliburn performances are confiding moments with love-

ly pianissimo. But here, and

in some of his later record-

ings, emotional restraint is so present that he seems to

be making a definite artistic choice (as opposed to not

having much to give). Life at the top sometimes demands

the unconscious formulation

of boundaries with one's audi-

ence - perhaps emotionally

## Cliburn, 50 years after triumph in Moscow

CLIBURN from H1 No new releases or anthologies have been forthcoming, though that might be the work of Cliburn himself, who historically has been slow about approving rer-eleases of his recordings. Video Artist International was all set to release Van Cliburn in Moscow, a remark-able series of Soviet-era TV videos, in April — the anniversary month of the competition — only to be held up by Cliburn until now.

He was said to be "off traveling," which is hard to fathom considering that some of these video performances, never before seen in the West, can only boost his fal-tering reputation and prompt renewed apprecia-

One clue to his apparent dis-engagement may lie in the charming inertia he dis-cussed in a 1998 interview with the late music critic John Ardoin: "My friends say it's difficult to get me to go anywhere, and once I'm there, it is impossible to get me to leave. They're right, of

Cliburn's evergreen fame has had to be more than he bargained for, if only because it was unprecedented: No pianist before or since has had a ticker-tape parade in New York City. Such fortunes alighted upon what initially seemed to be an all-American boy, born in Louisiana and raised in Texas, who, as time went on, came to look more like a gifted, Deep South eccentric from an early Truman Capote short story. He admits to being the kind of guy who, left to his own devices, never takes down his Christmas dec-

What was meant to be a year's sabbatical in 1978 after two decades at the top became a nine-year-long withdrawal, during which Cliburn adopted a nocturnal lifestyle and a taste for antiques, filling 15 rooms at the New York hotel where he lived — until he moved back to Texas (where he has 15 pianos).

In post-sabbatical concerts (the first public one being with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Mann Center in 1989), Cliburn has in-dulged in quaint practices like reciting poetry, and feels himself on such inti-mate terms with the national anthem (which he plays solo at the piano) that he calls it "The Banner" for short.

Though he continues to play Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 (one of his signature works) in ways that touch enough of the old bases, the tougher Rachmani-noff *Piano Concerto No. 3*, his other signature piece, has been more troublesome: At

**#1 COMEDY IN AMERICA!** 



Cliburn was mesmerizing in 1962 performances of Beethoven's "Concerto No. 5" and Tchaikovsky's "Concerto No. 1

the opening concert of a 1994 cross-country tour, he com-plained of dizzy spells at intermission and, rather than risk-ing Rachmaninoff, played solo encores, as he did for the rest of the tour.

Audiences displayed un-questioning acceptance. Like a handful of musicians who have something close to unconditional fame (Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma), Cliburn has, if nothing else, given the world a template for The Classical Music Event - for which audiences aren't necessarily classical. Presentation is as important as sub-

Nobody makes entrances like Van Cliburn. He moves through the orchestra like a ship plowing the waves, his snip plowing the waves, his almost militaristic posture perfect for tie and tails. Both young (he was, 23 in April 1958) and not-so-young (he just turned a youthful 74), he's handsome and magnetic, and has a poet's way of peering at the heavens while playing. And such presenta-tion, plus his brand-name status, commands more than usual attention from Cliburn's classical-music fringe audiences. So do galapriced tickets.

Still, one reports with relief that this nonmusical overlay isn't present, or needed to understand Cliburn's appeal, on the VAI videos. There's no "Banner" or poetry; in Russia, he was more a musician than an objectified folk hero and, interestingly, seems more in his element. Though Beethoven concertos

JOHN C. REILLY

Cliburn on less-than-interesting good behavior, the 1962 live video of him performing the Piano Concerto No. 5 (VAI's Volume I) is mesmerizing. How could the performance be anything else with conductor Kirill Kondrashin making Beethoven a matter of life and death?

Cliburn sustains a level of tension with a power in re-serve that allows the piano to explode just when you think the pianist has given all he can. He hits his share of wrong notes, but with the eloquence that comes of reaching for something beyond your usual self.

Those who have despaired at ever hearing a fresh, passionate Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 will find one on this video, not just be-cause of the Cliburn/Kondrashin factor. Speaking in Russian to an audience that included Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, Cliburn dedi-cates the performance to the cates the performance to the beloved and recently deceased pianist Alexander Goldenweiser. It is full of things you don't normally hear from Cliburn, like rage. And here, flash becomes substance: Cliburn's wide-screen, high deformanced of the law. high-def command of the key board throws open a huge door to Tchaikovsky's intense inner world - to devastating

guarded performance is one of them. And it's here that Cliburn doesn't fit easily into the big picture of 20th century pianism: With his big-pi-ano sound that demanded large musical canvases, he had the outward manner of a romantic. Yet the inner life of his interpretations was increasingly that of a classi-

> stuck pretty much with the same repertoire and didn't broaden his life with chamber music, which meant he simultaneously risked bore-dom and had to compete with his 23-year-old self. Why he'd submit himself to such a conundrum, especially after his long layoff, is suggested by a 1994 interview: He told me that he firmly believes that once some-thing is classic, well, it's classic. You've hit the mother lode and don't stray from it. Problem is, the passage of time makes such stasis impossible.

Classicist or not, Cliburn

To an event-oriented audience wanting him to relive history with the music that made him famous, Cliburn be-comes a folk hero with a builtin self-destruct device. He couldn't artistically survive his own life. So can you blame him for not making a bigger deal out of the 50th anniversary of his overnight fame? I can't.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns a dstearns@phillynews.com

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### Return to Forever. here and now ...

phia, has compared RTF's re-birth to the reunion of the Eagles. But more pertinent examples come to mind: This month, prog-rock warhorses Jethro Tull (Friday, the Mann) and King Crimson (Aug. 11 and 12, Keswick Theatre) will also play Philly, greeting audiences that no doubt overlap with RTF's.

To fusion's detractors, groups like these invented a kind of '70s pretension and bombast that should remain extinct. Granted, RTF's rococo excesses and mystical-futurist presentation — even the band's name reflects Corea's decades-long immersion in Scientology — can seem dated and hard to swal-

But to write them off is to miss flashes of inspired, individual artistry that have in fact aged quite well.

"Return to Forever" is the title of a 12-minute piece on Corea's 1972 album of the same name. Featuring Corea with Clarke, saxophonist-flut-ist Joe Farrell, drummer-percussionist Airto Moreira, and vocalist Flora Purim, this line-up became the first edition of RTF, which also released Light as a Feather in 1973.
The group had a strong Brazilian influence. Purim's ten-

der singing, in accented En-glish, recalled Astrud Gilberto on Stan Getz's bossa nova outings of the previous de cade. It was no accident that Corea and Clarke spent time in Getz's band, recording several of Corea's RTF-associated tunes on the tenor master's 1972 album Captain Marvel.

Flecktones. Tickets \$29-\$64. Information: 215-893-1999 or www.manncenter.org.

Return to Forever will

appear Tuesday at the Mann Center for the

Performing Arts. With

Bela Fleck and the

If You Go

But with the appearance o Lenny White and guitaris Bill Connors on Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy, RTF took a more epic-sounding, rock-ori ented turn. Soon Di Meola re placed Connors, and the clas placed Collifors, and the class sic RTF quartet brought fort!

No Mystery, Where Have .

Known You Before, and Ro mantic Warrior — selections from which are likely to send the Mann Center crowd into hysterics.

Return to Forever went through one last incarnatior and released two nonessential albums, Musicmagic and Live, before disbanding in

But it was the classic, nowreunited RTF quartet — along with John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra, Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter's Weather Report, Herbie Hancock's Headhunters, and Tony Williams' Lifetime — that came to define the fusion era. Every one of these bandleaders was a former Miles Davis sideman. All had participated, to varying extents, in the trumpeter's invention of a new kind of ensemble funk.

Rhodes electric piano, dis-See RTF on H5





## ... reunited in 'the jazz tour of the summer'

RTF from H4

torted guitar, and flamboyant clothing were the order of the day. Stanley Clarke and Weather Report's Jaco Pastorius introduced entirely new, highly virtuosic approaches to electric bass playing.

Some heard a vital, forwardthinking language. Others heard an appalling sellout, the betrayal of jazz tradition. Peter Watrous, the former New York Times critic, took the latter view in a 1995 piece trashing Wayne Shorter's album High Life and assailing what he called "the Miles Davis curse."

Describing fusion as "a mule idiom, a bastardization of jazz and pop," Watrous slipped in an incisive point: that this music, in part, was a means for jazzers to reconnect with black listeners at a time of changing tastes and widespread social unrest.

nect with black listeners at a time of changing tastes and widespread social unrest.

The result, Watrous argued, was "shockingly ephemeral."
Yet Return to Forever is back (playing, ironically, to heavily white audiences). Boxed-set reissues of Davis' electric music are flooding the market. Recent books on the period include Paul Tingen's Miles Beyond and Philip Freeman's Running the Voodoo Down. (And Concord has just re-

### The Best of Return to Forever

If you're new to Return to Forever, here's where to

■ Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy (1973) — The classic, hair-raising jazz-rock edition of RTF is born. Original guitarist Bill Connors soon left to pursue solo acoustic playing, then dropped off the radar (left the galaxy?) from the late '80s until 2005.

■ Where Have I Known You Before (1974) — Rich textural contrasts, short acoustic piano interludes, and an earthshaking finale in "Song to the Pharaoh Kings" make this not just a great RTF album, but one of Chick Corea's most representative works.

■ Romantic Warrior (1976)

— RTF's defining document, a vast improvement over the preceding No Mystery. All Di Meola's guitar sound reaches maturity, and the crisp, round tone of the recording frames every dazzling solo break and unison passage as never before (or since).

— David R. Adler

leased *The Anthology*, a twodisc RTF retrospective.) On countless new jazz re-

On countless new jazz recordings, even in primarily acoustic environments, it is common to hear Rhodes and other keyboards, rock-inflected guitars, irregular time signatures, and other fusion hallmarks. For many of today's young jazz players, whether or not they consider themselves fusion artists, these inheritances are a given. Beatmakers and DJs who swoon to old Moog synthesizers and involved '70s funk grooves feel the same way.

To some, fusion will always be a synonym for adulteration, and it's fair to say that the light R&B now known as "smooth jazz" is part of the fusion legacy as well. But ar-

guably, so are the genre-defying works of guitarists Vernon Reid and Marc Ribot. "I think a particular music can be part of more than one history," Ribot says in the biographical film Marc Ribot: The Lost String.

Indeed, hybridization is now the norm across genres. Jazz is being bred with hiphop and breakbeats, Balkan and Carnatic music (a style of Indian classical), indie rock, you name it. In most cases it is creative growth, not commercial calculation, driving this process.

By the early 1980s, Corea, Clarke and White were playing pure accoustic jazz with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and tenor great Joe Henderson in a band called Griffith Park. They never burned that bridge. (Hubbard and Henderson were fusion dabblers themselves.)

The classic RTF lineup regathered for a brief tour in 1983, then fizzled for good. Clarke, White and Di Meola have pursued varied solo careers, but none come close to matching Corea's, with 45 Grammy nominations and 14 wins. It was Corea's guest appearance on Di Meola's 2006 effort, Consequence of Chaos,

that led to plans for a reunion.

(Clarke will return to the area on Aug. 19, when he performs in the bass supergroup S.M.V. at the Keswick Theatre, with Marcus Miller, and Victor Wooten of Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, who are opening the RTF show.)

Much like Herbie Hancock, Corea has alternated freely between acoustic and electric formats for decades. His RTF recordings stand up as some of the most visceral, harmonically rich, sonically inventive work of his career. There is talk, but only talk, of keeping the band together. All of RTF's members wrote

All of RTF's members wrote music for the group, and not every bit of it is stellar. But if they break into the sultry, operatic funk of White's "Sorceress," or the fierce keyboard/bass dialogues of Clarke's "Vulcan Worlds," or the oddly explosive rhythms of Corea's "Medieval Overture," this writer might join the throng and get a little hysterical, too.

# **NEIL DIAMOND**

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Return to Forever played the Nice Jazz Festival in southeastern France on July 23. From left are AI Di Meola, Lenny White, Stanley Clarke and Chick Corea. A Corea guest appearance on Di Meola's 2006 album led to plans for this reunion.

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