

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Resurrecting a name from the literary past

A child growing up in Bloomfield Hills, Robert Louis Stevenson III would search his backyard for buried treasure.

Apparently, it was in his blood — not to mention dictated by his ancestry — to look for a hidden fortune.

To get in an adventurous mood, he'd take along the classic, "Treasure Island," written in 1883 by his great-great-cousin bearing the same name.

And the prolific author of such classics as "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," and "Kidnapped," along with many other novels, poems and essays.

While the modern-day Stevenson is an accomplished deep-sea diver and rock climber, his most consuming challenge for the last 25 years has been to find the breakthrough path to becoming a published novelist.

For Stevenson, history has repeated itself.

In a case of perseverance and undaunted dedication being rewarded, another Stevenson has, once again, found a buried treasure.

This weekend, Stevenson will return to the area with his 200-page treasure, "Torchlight," for a book signing at Borders Books in Birmingham.

The trail, however, has been seldom clear or easy. Stevenson's name has been more of a burden than a blessing. Imagine the imposing challenge of an up-and-coming playwright named Bill Shakespeare.

Kindred spirits

"For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a writer," said Stevenson, who lives in Greenwich, Conn., with his wife and two children.

But writing wasn't paying the bills. He drew his paycheck from bartending. His thrills didn't come from critical literary reviews, but from diving explorations of wrecks such as the U.S.S. San Diego and the most treacherous of all, the Andrea Doria.

In 1991, while diving in the Andrea Doria off the coast of Nantucket, Mass., Stevenson got lost in the maze of stairwells connecting the ship's 10 decks. He surfaced with no air left in his tanks, and suffering the dizzying effects of nitrogen narcosis.

Searching for treasure under the sea nearly cost him his life. While his distant relative would've loved the drama, Stevenson realized it was time to set aside his real-life adventures.

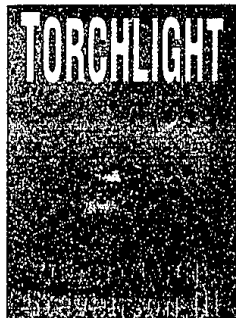
He recommitted himself to his on-land ambition.

In the tradition of his distant cousin, Stevenson has conjured an engagingly told adventure that critics have compared with the literary work of the 19th-century writer whose work shaped the genre.

Recapturing idealism

At 45, more than 20 years after he attended the prestigious University of

Please see CONVERSATIONS, D2



Adventurer: Author Robert Louis Stevenson III



FROM A GLIMMER TO THE SPOTLIGHT

Chuck Forbes: catalyst of revived theater district

By FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

From his vantage point on the ninth floor of the Palms Building along Woodward Avenue in Detroit, Chuck Forbes of Troy looks out to what he says will soon be an urban prairie. The 100-acre site that stretches from Woodward eastward to the I-75 freeway has been one of the most contested parcels of land in the city's recent development history.

Unlike 20 years ago when Forbes began his real estate ventures in the downtown district, the sight of demolished buildings and vacant land on the site no longer symbolizes economic despair.

These days, leveling the landscape is being done in the name of progress. With a crack of the bat and toss of a coin, the prairie won't be barren for long.

In mid-October, the official ground-breaking was held for the new Detroit Tigers baseball stadium. And with a next-door football stadium and three new casinos planned for the adjacent areas, the anticipated influx of capital and people should transform the formerly run-down district into a glittering international destination.

There was a time not long ago when nearly the only one interested in the properties was Forbes, a humble yet tenacious idealist with a plan.

No formalities

From the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, Forbes bought, refurbished and rented 40 properties in the six-block district around Grand Circus Park. His most impressive — and public — purchases were the Palms Building and attached State Theater, the Gem Theatre and the Elwood Bar and Grill.

Often unreported is that in the early 1980s Forbes purchased the Fox Theatre and began restoration efforts. Mike Ilitch bought the historic building — which Forbes had transferred to the city — and completed the \$9 million renovation in 1990.

Today, the fiercely independent, family-run Forbes Management Corp. finds itself in a game of political gamesmanship alongside business giants such as Ford and Ilitch.

Please see THEATER, D2



Vantage point: Dave Thomas, manager of the Elwood Bar and Grill (left to right), Chuck Forbes, founder, Alyn Thomas, office manager, and Jim Forbes, newly named president of Forbes Management.



Gem Theatre Facts

- Originally called, "The Little Theatre," built in 1928. Designed by renowned architect George Mason. Total cost: \$25,000.
- Names of theater since early 1930s: Rivoli, Dury Lane, Cinema, Vanguard Playhouse.
- The Vanguard was a residential theatre company founded by actor George C. Scott in 1964.
- Purchased for \$5,000 by Chuck Forbes in 1979.
- Restored and reopened with "All-Night Strid," December 1991.
- Seating capacity: 450 including cabaret and traditional theatre seating.
- Saved from the wrecking ball.
- Moving preparations began in May, and should be completed by January.
- The Gem/20th Century Club was moved 1,850 feet from its original site to its new home on Madison Avenue across from Music Hall.
- The move of the 2,750-ton building is a world record for the heaviest building moved on wheels.
- Currently, preparations are being made to place the building on its new foundation. The "final push" (about 300-400 feet) is scheduled for this week. Visitors are welcome at the site.
- The Gem and 20th Century Club are scheduled to reopen in Spring 1998.
- Elwood Bar and Grill is also currently being prepared to be moved to the Gem Theatre's new site.



Urula Oppens: The acclaimed pianist has been a champion of contemporary composers.

Beethoven strikes key with pianist

By HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Classical pianist Urula Oppens tells a story that her musician mother invited a friend over to practice Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" just before Oppens was born as a positive prenatal influence.

But it was a later encounter with Beethoven's monumental sonata that had a bigger impact.

"I do know that when I was a 15-year-old girl I heard Edward Auer, who was two years older than me, practicing the 'Hammerklavier' and it was wonderful. For many years I thought I'd never be able to play it," she said.

"Then 15 years ago I decided that was what I wanted most to do."

Friday night Urula Oppens will begin a three-year odyssey at the University of Michigan's Rackham Auditorium, performing all 32 Beethoven piano sonatas, contrasted with related works by modern composers. On Sunday, the American String Quartet will begin a similar three-year series of the Beethoven string quartets and modern works. The two series will be tied together under the title "Beethoven the Contemporary."

"It was basically my idea, an idea to some extent encouraged by my management and friends. They encouraged me to do what I most wanted to do," Oppens said in the telephone interview from her office at Northwestern University.

The idea behind the concerts was to reclaim Beethoven as a

Beethoven the Contemporary

What: Urula Oppens performs Beethoven's Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 22, and Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 106, and Elliott Carter's Piano Sonata.

When: 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 14.

Where: Rackham Auditorium, 915 E. Washington, Ann Arbor.

What: The American String Quartet performs Beethoven's Quartet in B-flat, Op. 18, No. 6 and Quartet in a minor, Op. 132 and Glazunov's Quartet No. 2.

When: 8 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 16.

Where: Rackham Auditorium.

Tickets: \$30, \$28, \$24 and \$16. Call the box office, (313) 764-2538.

Please see PIANIST, D2

MUSIC EDUCATION

DSO concert features harpist with angelic touch

By FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

For a relatively young musician who'll soon perform with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, harpist Allegra Lilly of Bloomfield Hills appears unflappable.

Lilly talks eloquently about the new piece she's working on, a composition by the prominent 20th-century composer for the harp, Carlos Salzedo.

And then, the phone rings.

Almost on Parkinson cue, the accomplished, award-winning musician slips into her other persona: a 12-year-old girl with a penchant for talking about boys, arguing with her older sister and listening to Third Eye Blind — a pop music group, not a deceitful classical ensemble.

She wants desperately to know who's on the phone. But she heads her mother's advice and continues with the "formal" interview.

Moods change faster than the escalating glissando in Salzedo's raging "Song in the Night." And suddenly, it's quite apparent that perhaps Lilly's greatest talent is her uncanny ability to travel readily among worlds, both musical and generational.

In performances on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, thousands of Oakland County students will come along on Lilly's ethereal flight along her newly restored Empress Harp when she performs Debussy's *Danse sacree et profane* as a soloist with the DSO at Orchestra Hall.

Lilly will join performers from Dance Detroit, and the Detroit Symphony Civic Orchestra in the DSO's opening Educational Concert Series presentation, "On Your Toes." The DSO has arranged for metro area schools to attend the concerts, which are not open to the general public.

The multimedia show has been designed as an introduction to ballet music for young listeners, said Daisy Newman, DSO director of education. A local visual artist, Darryl Swift, will be on hand to create impressionistic drawings inspired by the music and dancers.

"We live in a visual age where kids are bombarded with images, so we have

Please see DSO, D2



Ethereal sound: Harpist Allegra Lilly of Bloomfield Hills performs a piece by Debussy in the DSO's ballet music program for young students.