

## Song and dance of a drug kingpin

By STEVE BARNES

Staff writer

Although "Rico Songs & Interludes" is compositionally sophisticated and boasts equally smart lyrics, the work captivates mostly because of how much fun it is. Hummable and engaging, the hourlong piece leaves you wanting more.

The cycle of six songs, each preceded and separated by related orchestral interludes, received its premiere Saturday night during two packed back-to-back concerts in the raw space in Troy's Monument Square that next year will become the new home of RCCA: The Arts Center.

"Rico Songs & Interludes" is a concert setting of music and lyrics of what may become a full-length opera/musical titled "The Rise and Fall of Isabella Rico," by composer Neil B. Rolnick and lyricist Larry Beinhart. If there's any fairness in the world, "Rico" will enjoy full bloom, to the delight of lovers of American musical theater.

As performed by the 16-member new-music orchestra the Dogs of Desire, conducted by flashy Albany Symphony Orchestra maestro David Alan Miller, sung by superb vocalists Leslie Ritter and Amy Fradon, and complemented by interpretive choreography the Ellen Sinopoli Dancers, "Rico Songs & Interludes" satisfied with both its potential and its present form.

The six songs track the career path of Rico, a member of a South American drug cartel who rises to power before coming into conflict with a legitimate pharmaceutical conglomerate and a scion of the family that owns the drug company.

They're dealing with serious material -- the need for and nature of addiction, as well as contemporary America's schizophrenic attitude toward drugs -- but Rolnick and Beinhart are so clever, so playfully intellectual, that they're never less than wildly entertaining.

Rolnick has a gift for melody and for fusing sometimes contradictory sounds. He shifts freely from the Celtic-influenced opening interlude to a series of songs and interludes upholstered with voluptuous Latin themes. He plays tricks, too, sneaking in an oboe where you don't expect it, or growing a thicket of challenging rhythms from the tendrils of twin flute and bassoon lines.

And you don't find lyrics as witty as Beinhart's anywhere this side of Sondheim. In the song "Chemistry of Love," the lyrics wonder of love, "Why is it addictive?/from the very first taste?" And then Beinhart offers a zinger: "Is it alkaloid or is it base?"

Singers Fradon's and Ritter's voices intertwined and soared, their harmonies perfect. They handled the lyrics -- including "If excitement is a change of scene/just adjust 5-hydroxytryptamine" -- as comfortably as they did Rolnick's difficult rhythms.

The same can't be said of the Dogs of Desire as an ensemble. Except for individual standouts such as Alan Parshley's great, zooming French horn glisses and Stephen Walt's gorgeous bassoon playing, the orchestra was often tentative, lacking the brash assurance the music and lyrics demand. "Rico Songs & Interludes" will be recorded later this month. By then, after a few more rehearsals, the orchestra ought to be bigously confident and up to the job.