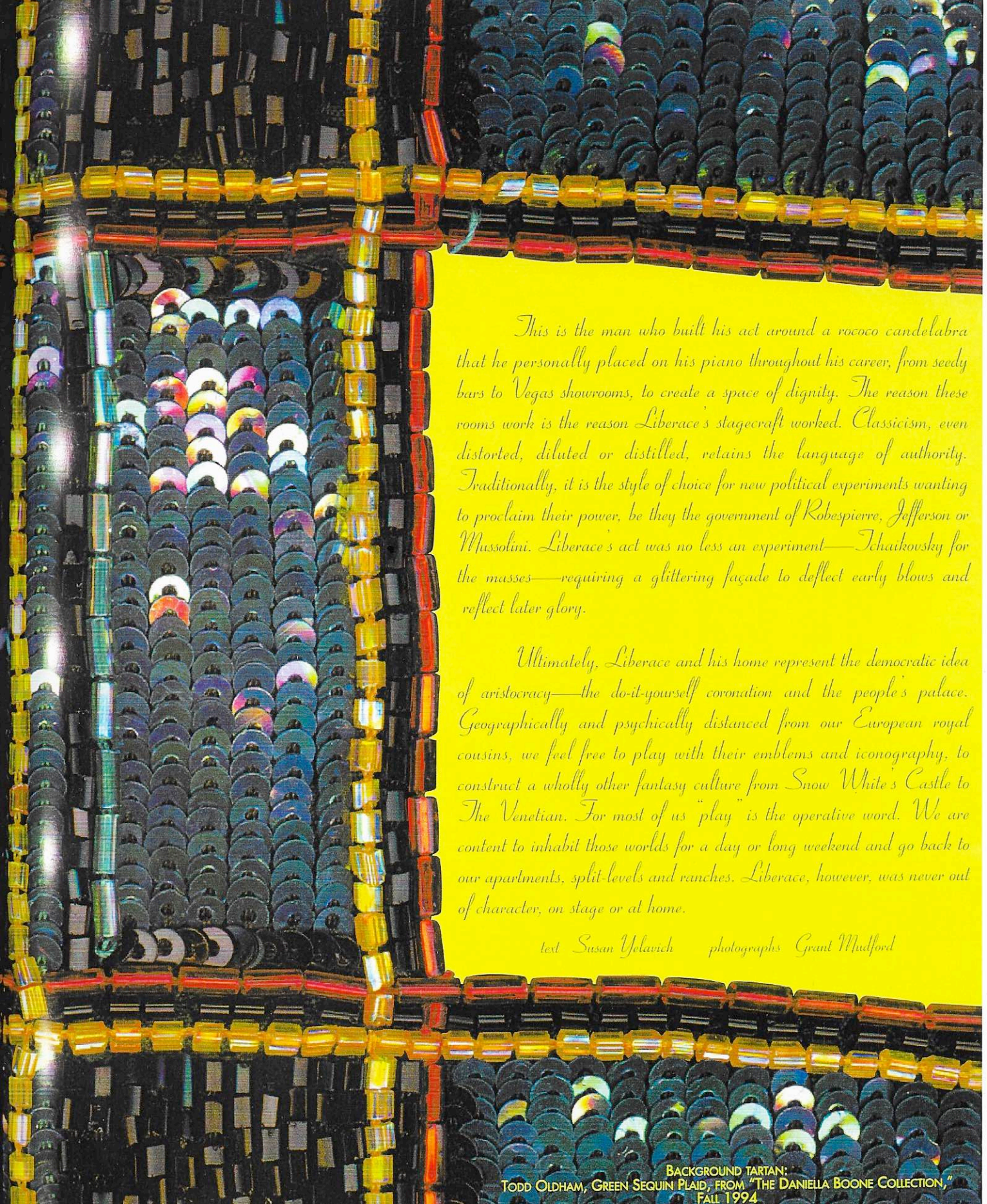


### *Liberace's Taste*

*Sitting between the genres of still life and self-portraiture, these photographs of Liberace's home in Las Vegas prompt two intertwined responses: compositional analysis and character analysis. These are rooms filled with objects groaning with issues of design provenance, carefully chosen to mirror their subject wherever he turned.*

*What can we construe from the evidence? We see an ice palace in the desert, as themed as Louis XIV's Versailles or Steve Wynn's Bellagio. A protocol of white—which, remember, is the presence of all color—formed a retaining wall around the personality of its flamboyant celebrity resident. Just as insecure urbanites dress in black, Liberace chose a palette of white, with all its associations of class, confidence, heavenly purity and arctic death. This is the quintessential performance of interior as stage set and now, death mask. (Liberace's face is frozen into the celestial ceiling of the bathroom.) The monochromatic palette and meticulous order mute the outrageousness of the mirrored piano in the living room, the giraffes in the solarium and the cartoonish version of the Sistine Chapel in the bedroom. His home is the apotheosis of décor as persona and persona as décor—impregnable to intrusions from the garish, mismatched world of his fans, but, of course, deeply vulnerable to their scrutiny.*



*This is the man who built his act around a rococo candelabra that he personally placed on his piano throughout his career, from seedy bars to Vegas showrooms, to create a space of dignity. The reason these rooms work is the reason Liberace's stagecraft worked. Classicism, even distorted, diluted or distilled, retains the language of authority. Traditionally, it is the style of choice for new political experiments wanting to proclaim their power, be they the government of Robespierre, Jefferson or Mussolini. Liberace's act was no less an experiment—Tchaikovsky for the masses—requiring a glittering façade to deflect early blows and reflect later glory.*

*Ultimately, Liberace and his home represent the democratic idea of aristocracy—the do-it-yourself coronation and the people's palace. Geographically and psychically distanced from our European royal cousins, we feel free to play with their emblems and iconography, to construct a wholly other fantasy culture from Snow White's Castle to The Venetian. For most of us "play" is the operative word. We are content to inhabit those worlds for a day or long weekend and go back to our apartments, split-levels and ranches. Liberace, however, was never out of character, on stage or at home.*

*text Susan Yelavich      photographs Grant Mulford*