

Military dogs have earned a special place in our hearts

Mission K9 Rescue co-founder Louisa Kastner welcomes Jodi, a retired bomb detection dog, to Houston.

James Nielsen / Houston Chronicle



Thirteen brave war veterans returned to the U.S. last week. They landed at George Bush-Intercontinental Airport without fanfare or a hero's welcome. Now they're looking, hoping to make Houston home. They're dogs: a few German shepherds, a couple of golden retrievers, a malamute, even a springer spaniel. They're specially trained, hardworking, bomb-sniffing heroes. For the past five years — some longer — these dogs saved U.S. soldiers' lives in

KEN HOFFMAN
Commentary



Kuwait. They're four-legged, tail-wagging, nose-twitching heroes for sure. The dogs flew from Kuwait to

Amsterdam to Houston aboard KLM Airlines. They were picked up by Mission K9 Rescue, a Houston-based organization that trains dogs for the U.S. military. The dogs will be medically and behaviorally evaluated, spayed or neutered, and made available for adoption by regular, ordinary families in Houston. Here's some background info on the dogs. They're between 7 and 11 years old. These are goal-driven pooches with super-sen- **Hoffman continues on D2**

TELEVISION

Seven reasons why NBC's 'This Is Us' is a surprise hit.

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Houston Chronicle Life & Entertainment

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Marie D. De Jesús photos / Houston Chronicle

A FESTIVE SETTING

Celebrate the season with décor that reflects personal design style

By Diane Cowen

Whether December is the month you celebrate the winter solstice, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa or even Boxing Day, designer Robert Leleux urges you to do it with style.

Christmas is what's near and dear to his heart, not just because he inherited his grandmother's eight sets of china and tableware plus a several-generation collection of Christmas ornaments and décor.

Already the author of two memoirs, "The Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy" (2008) and "The Living End" (2012), Leleux shifted his eye to interior design several years ago, editing domino magazine; he is the founder and president of the Southern Style Now Festival.

The Texas native, who's now based in New Orleans, will be in Houston for holiday events including Deck the Tables at the Houston Design Center and Back Row Home's Holiday Southern Style.

The Design Center event opens with a big splash Tuesday and continues with tables decorated for the holidays through Friday. Back Row Home's event brings four seasoned designers, cookbook authors and party experts together for book signings and a discussion of how to throw the best party **Holiday continues on D3**



HOLIDAY TIPS

8 tips for a beautiful winter tablescape

Robert Leleux is one of 10 interior designers who will decorate tables for the annual Deck the Tables event at the Houston Design Center. He calls his entry "The Lion in Winter Table." He collaborated with Back Row Home. Here's how he did it:

2 Metallics: They bring a wintry gleam to the table and always look better mixed. Try silver, gold and gunmetal in different forms on the same table among the flatware and candlesticks.

3 Upcycle: Use things for different purposes. Leleux chose marble vegetable trays for his charger plates, then set stainless-rimmed dinner plates on top for an Old World feel.

4 Textiles: Leleux used a Mexican tablecloth turned inside out because he liked the underside just as much as the top side. He intentionally folded it so there was no overhang, showing off the table's (borrowed from Design House) beautiful natural surface. On top of the cloth, he placed a small antelope hide for an element of surprise.

5 Mix it up: For glassware, don't be afraid to mix high and low. Leleux used 19th-century goblets with contemporary drinking glasses and hand-blown, tortoise-shell tumblers.

6 Centerpiece: Yes, you need one. Leleux used 18th- and 19th-century candlesticks from Italian cathedrals. He intended to use them as a candelabra but loves them simply as objets d'art.

7 Natural photoshop: Use votive candles. They'll shine light upward and make everyone look pretty.

8 Little touches: On each dinner plate, Leleux used small vintage sheets of music paired with cinnamon sticks and tied them up with vintage silk velvet ribbon.

Vintage cathedral candleholders adorn the center of a holiday table created by interior designer Robert Leleux.

REVIEW

Dark and forboding mood puts HGO's 'Wonderful Life' into context

By Wei-Huan Chen

Composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer's "It's a Wonderful Life" is an audacious departure from its beloved source material.

While the 1946 movie was a work of naturalism, the Houston Grand Opera production looks and feels like a dream,

conjured from the mind of an angel, existing in a plane that's somewhere between the real and the otherworldly.

The production stars a sublime Talise Trevinge as Clara, a peppier version of Clarence, the second-class angel from the film who was hoping to earn his wings by saving the suicidal George

Bailey. Here, Clara revisits Bailey's childhood to see how he ended up on the edge of a bridge, then later draws him out of his misery through magic — a biographer-turned-therapist who serves as conduit for the audience.

So the story remains intact. But the opera, at the HGO through Dec. 17, **Opera continues on D2**

'It's a Wonderful Life'

When: 7 p.m. Tuesdays, Thursdays-Fridays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays, through Dec. 17

Where: Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

Tickets: \$28-\$127; 713-228-6737; houstongrandopera.org



William Burden stars as George Bailey and Andrea Carroll as Mary Bailey in the HGO production of "It's a Wonderful Life."

Dave Rossman

STAR

Holiday season is great time to make bold statement

Holiday from page D1

ever.
Here's Leleux's advice:

Q: What Christmas is like at your home?

A: I'm very traditional, and Christmas is a big deal in my house. We have an attic full of ornaments and decorations that we've amassed over several generations.

Q: How would you suggest someone start their holiday décor collections?

A: It's wise, especially for people just starting out, to begin with the décor of their rooms and decorate in keeping with that. I have my grandmother's china — I get it out for the holidays. I think about how things will look with that china, not just napkins and things, but any Christmas ornaments that I'm using in the dining room, I start with the china in mind. Start off with what you have and build from there.

Q: What about the style of the home vs. holiday décor?

A: If you are Mr. and Miss Modern, your ornaments should be in keeping with that. If you have a modern house, you don't want to look like your house is out of the Macy's Christmas parade.

Q: There will always be evergreen trees and Santas, red and green. What other things are you seeing trending now?

A: I see a return to organic pieces. I've seen, lately, like the Martha Stewart style has become embedded in the way people relate to the holidays, with natural pieces like branches of a fir tree, pinecones, acorns or flowers incorporated into your Christmas décor. Beautiful pieces of fruit, oranges and pears take us back to our roots.

Q: It sounds very comforting.

A: All these trends have to do with how we're feeling as a nation. Right now, we need a big hug. We all need a little Christmas right this very minute.

Q: You mentioned your grandmother's china. How fancy is your table?

A: I don't eat at my dining table every day, but I like to set it and leave it set. It seems convivial, celebratory. I caution people not to get hung up on the china pattern or crystal pattern or silver. Go to Goodwill or Salvation Army, and you can find beautiful glassware there. It's wonderful if you have the means to create the grand Ziegfeld display, but the moment you want to create for your family is not spectacle, it's warmth and comfort.

Q: Will you add anything new this holiday season?

A: I went to India recently and bought beautiful textiles, long bolts of hand-printed fabric. My grandmother was my style icon. I have all of her stuff; she was a very traditional Southern lady. I get such a kick now of pairing her traditional Wedgwood china and Tiffany crystal with Indian textiles and finding ways to make very traditional things look unexpected. Fabrics and textiles are very affordable ways of mixing it up.

Q: Some people want to use and see the same thing every year; others want to mix it up. What do you think?

A: I understand people keeping it the same. If it's fun playing with it, enjoy.



San Francisco Chronicle

A bold, palm-leaf table runner and fresh fruit add a burst of color to an otherwise black-and-white tablescape.



Julie Soefer

Stylist Amanda Medsger set a natural holiday tablescape with pieces from Kuhl-Linsomb.



Cecilie Starin

This simple table setting incorporates things you likely already have or can easily find.

Replace the Christmas skirt or maybe the stockings. It can change the look of a room completely.

Q: You mentioned fabric. How would you use it in untraditional ways?

A: I love a fabric garland. I did that, and it's wonderful to wrap a stair rail with it and it's reusable. I love when people wrap presents with fabric. Don't forget that those presents will sit under

a tree for weeks. They double as decorations for your home.

Q: Other advice?

A: Make it personal. The more thought you can put into the presentation, it makes a tangible difference when you feel considered — it's the best present of all.

Also, don't forget the power of lighting. Have a fire and lower the lights. Is there anything more beautiful than sitting in

front of a fire with a beautiful, lit tree?

And the power of fragrance cannot be underestimated. It's a holiday filled with scents. Is there anything better than fir or cinnamon in your scent vocabulary? Buy some wonderful candles or

put cinnamon in a pot of water and boil it on the stove. Wonderful lighting and fragrance can go a long way to being happy with relatives you might be dreading.

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Marie D. De Jesús / Houston Chronicle

Designer Robert Leleux uses his grandmother's china to dress up his dining table at Christmas.

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