



**Putt for show.** The baritone Lucas Meachem essays the green at a pop-up mini golf nine-hole at New York's Hudson Hotel (opposite) and debuts the role of Figaro in John Corigliano's *Ghosts of Versailles* at the Los Angeles Opera (bottom).

As Meachem makes his way from whimsical red windmill to oversized watering can in this recreational utopia of faux grass, he shares the equally dreamy story of how he first met Nedelcu, a pianist and vocal coach, at a performance in Minneapolis. "It was a game changer for me. I'm not used to a professional opera coach in my dressing room," he laughs. Today, in trying to keep pace with Meachem's hectic schedule, the duo travels the world together, living out of suitcases and apartments around the globe. This summer has them planted in Europe as he gears up for a tour of *Iolanta* with Anna Netrebko. "It's so wonderful to really get to know these cities as more than a tourist and truly spend time exploring them," he says of his nomadic lifestyle. When I mention my upcoming trip to Budapest, he eagerly jots down the name

of an ice cream shop ("It's probably the best I've ever had") and a restaurant ("definitely the city's best meal") I must visit.

Growing up in Moore County, North Carolina, Meachem knew — from stints in church and in the school choir — that he wanted to sing, "and if I couldn't I would flip burgers." But there would be no spatula-wielding in Meachem's future. After studying music at Appalachian State University he went onto the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester; a fellowship with the San Francisco Opera then jump-started his career.

He has never forgotten his rural Southern roots, however, and the grits- and pork-loving Meachem keeps his past alive and well through his passion for bourbon. "I like Blanton's," he points out, polishing off the last

dregs of his Old Fashioned in between swings. "But it can also be as simple as a double Maker's Mark on the rocks."

Meachem's love of whiskey, an upgrade from those lowbrow days of making beer margaritas as a college student, is particularly satiated when he's in New York, where he frequents a range of establishments from the clubby Bar & Books to Otto Enoteca Pizzeria to the no-frills Brother Jimmy's BBQ. His favorite lair, however, remains a booth inside the dark, speakeasy-esque Dutch Kills in Long Island City, far from the glitz of Lincoln Center.

"I was the frat boy of opera in the past. I was always throwing huge parties," muses Meachem. But just like the broad-shouldered singer's football- and basketball-filled adolescence has morphed into a penchant for attending the Masters Golf Tournament and an interest in boxing ("I bring gloves with me when I travel," he admits), his preferred manner of revelry has also taken a subdued turn. "I'm getting older now and don't feel good the next day if I drink — and I just won't put my voice in jeopardy that way," he says. Now he is much more likely to spend his evenings at convivial dinners with friends such as fellow opera singer Susan Graham before "watching *Game of Thrones* and going to bed."

After the score has been settled — he loses to Nedelcu by three strokes — we abandon the golf course for the adjacent Library Bar, complete with fireplace and pool table. Here, Meachem settles into a leather chair and orders the unfussy house libation with Bulleit bourbon, walnut liqueur and a dash of bitters. "Some of the bars today take it too far," he says, satisfied upon the first sip. "Really, they should just make simple drinks." He much prefers it when dramatic flourishes remain relegated to the stage. ■



ALIA AKKAM

COURTESY OF LOS ANGELES OPERA

AT THE BAR

## Southern Comfort

On singing and spirits with Lucas Meachem

By Alia Akkam

*Gettin' paid is her forte. Each and every day, true player way. I can't get her outta my mind....*

"No Diggity," that catchy nineties song from the R&B group Blackstreet and amped by the presence of Dr. Dre and Queen Pen, is playing loudly. Lucas Meachem, forking over cash in exchange for a pair of golf clubs, hums along.

It's a chilly Friday afternoon in New York, and Meachem, a stylish gray scarf wrapped around his neck, has escaped the maddening

swirl of photo shoots, soirées and rehearsals dominating his calendar to kick off the weekend with a carefree hour of mini golf. In just a few days, the baritone is slated to perform the role of Silvio in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Pagliacci*, but before Leoncavallo's tragi-comic work gets his full attention, he and fiancée Irina Nedelcu have hightailed it to Putt Putt Park, the nine-hole, month-long pop-up luring locals and tourists to this idyllic alfresco setting tucked away in Midtown favorite the Hudson Hotel.