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Robert Ashley: *Dust*. Libretto by the composer. Production by Yukihiro Yoshihara. With Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, and Robert Ashley. The Kitchen, April 14. (Amer. premiere)

Robert Ashley is one of America's busiest opera composers. He's been at it for decades, composing and producing his works, always focusing on technology and new ideas, with video footage and synthesized sounds incorporated into his rock-informed performances. Encountering his latest work, *Dust* at the Kitchen, I found it hard to imagine why he seems to have been so blithely ignored here in New York, where his appearances are rare indeed. He seems to have done well anyhow, and is widely known in Europe, as well as elsewhere in the U. S.

Dust had its premiere in Japan and is a collaboration with Yukihiro Yoshihara, a well-known Japanese video artist. The libretto, by Mr. Ashley, presents a group of homeless people whose songs are the stories of their lives. And the stories are heartbreaking. Told in a style that is both direct and poetic, these stories emphasize the "irreversibilities" (Ashley's word) of the characters' lives. But they are also meant to suggest similar limitations in our own lives. For example, "Just One More Time," is the story of a man who realizes "I'm running out of time." He's getting old (and so, reader, are you and I), and he wants to fall in love, and to experience life's little pleasures one last time. The characters are all white, which might seem an odd representation of urban homelessness, but the stories are so realistic and haunting that everyone can relate to them personally.

Ashley's electronic score, played from synthesizers and controlled by one person ("Blue" Gene Tyranny) at a keyboard and another (Tom Hamilton) at a mixing board, uses state of the art technology but draws from a sound palette that would seem to date from the 60's and 70's. Much of the score

consists of pulsing strings, sounding quite a bit like something from the Electric Light Orchestra, but with more of a layered effect. The equipment is impressive, with wonderful sound quality and surround sound. The vocals are delivered in something that I would call a "rock and roll *sprechsgesang*" Ashley's voice, for example, brings to mind that of Willie Nelson. The best song of the evening was entitled "Don't Get Your Hopes Up." Sung by Jacqueline Humbert, it was especially moving and affecting, and I can still hum it right now. The cast, all Ashley regulars, was excellent all around.

The production, designed by Mr. Yoshihara, was simple and elegant yet technologically impressive. The singers, all dressed in simple baggy tan clothing, stood behind individual glass screens, each of which could be made completely transparent or opaque, or in between, by a "glass controller," a technique which allowed them to fade in and out, directing our attention. Sometimes they went in and out of focus, as homeless people might do. Above each singer was a television monitor, and a giant projection monitor was above them all. The video imagery, often a bit abstract, related to the stories, but sometimes distracted from them. There was occasional text, often flashing key words from the stories for emphasis. All of this was done with such grace and sophistication that it added a level of dignity to the evening.

Ashley's music might not be the deepest or most inventive, but it works in the theater, greatly enhancing a very fine libretto. This was one of those evenings where every element (score, libretto, production, and performance) worked impressively, and the combined effect was deeply moving. It has been a while since I have spent an evening with my attention so completely riveted to the stage. The Kitchen takes risks, and sometimes fails. Its successes, like this one, are bigger and better than everybody else's. James L. Paulk

