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OPERA REVIEW

Telling Stories to Survive The Absence of a Future

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The genuine raconteurs of this world often occupy the lower orders of society. It is the vagrants, street people, laborers and menials who practice the gift of anecdote with such superior grace, for telling things well is for them an act of survival. Listen to Robert Ashley, the central voice in his new opera, "Dust," at the Kitchen on Wednesday night:

"The story becomes a kind of friend," he narrates, "to make you feel good about yourself, which is the main thing. To keep away the hurt. To keep away feeling bad, which is hard." Loss is relentless in all our lives, but especially for those whose futures promise little chance to recoup. Stories become shelters, keeping out the cold when everything else has been taken away.

Some stories are more factual than others, but that is no matter. "Add a little something here and there, maybe not even true," Mr. Ashley says in his softly scratchy, fluid voice, "to give it a little local color. So that you can remember it."

"Dust," a five-voice performance piece with television images and gently synthesized musical accompaniment, communes with the habitués of a small urban park. First Mr. Ashley tells us about his friends. Then they speak for themselves. One friend yells at cars, another "at nobody in particular." Still another was Shirley Temple's stand-in, though "it's hard to see the Shirley Temple in her now."

Another has lost his legs "in some war" and sings with such fervor that he slips often from his wheelchair, to which he is restored with difficulty. Another friend is envied for his waterproof rug; under it he sleeps easily

in bad weather.

As a composer, Mr. Ashley is a superior writer. He has the gift of simple language that springs forward with a wonderful rhythmic grace. The pauses are deftly calculated. Sometimes words bleed into musical tones, but most of the music is in simple pop-chord harmonies moving through basic cadences. Said in a better way, the true music in "Dust" is in the language and its delivery.

Mr. Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner and Sam Ashley operate from behind plastic shields made either transparent or opaque by lighting effects. One large complex of television screens stands overhead and five smaller ones flash color designs and subliminal messages from the detritus of modern life. All are designed by Yukihiro Yoshihara.

Although the last part of "Dust" sinks into somewhat soggy banality, the first 45 minutes of this uninterrupted hour-and-three-quarter piece are utterly captivating. The observation is acute yet low-keyed. The ironies are gentle. There are no cries of rage for lives unjustly left unfulfilled. In their place are stories, wonderfully told, stories that provide order and redemption in shattered lives.

Ms. La Barbara's delivery was as vivid as Mr. Ashley's was subtle and insinuating. All were good, but especially these two. Blue Gene Tyranny and Tom Hamilton were the musicians and sound processors. Yasunori Kakegawa and Nobuyoshi Umeki managed the visual elements. "Dust" at the Kitchen repeats today at 4 and 8 P.M.