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## Experimental Work Has Something New and Mesmerizing to Say

### Music Review

By JOSEF WOODARD  
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**I**conoclastic composer Robert Ashley has a fiendish way with words. His experimental operas are densely packed with them, snatched from high and low culture and set into tightly choreographed blends of speech, song, meaning and textural wizardry. Starting with his epic 1980s "televi-

sion opera" project "Perfect Lives," Ashley has been creating hypnotic, James Joyce-like maximalist works, which seem like studies in free association but are more structure-conscious than they let on.

Language appears in a virtuosic flood in the 1994 "Foreign Experiences," a duet version of which was given its West Coast premiere Friday by Ashley colleagues Jacqueline Humbert and Sam Ashley (the composer's son). It took place in the hip Salvation Theater

in Silver Lake, before a full—if tiny—house, as part of a music series called "Vocal Lounge." Sparseness of set and setting added to the compacted intensity here, as the two principals stood onstage, in bare feet and trench coats, and offered a tour de force performance.

Ashley's work—which has been a huge influence on Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray, to name a couple of his better-known fans—has been accorded critical praise, a cult following and commissions in

Europe, but he remains underappreciated, perhaps because his ideas are ahead of, or at least outside of, their time.

As heard in Silver Lake, "Foreign Experiences" unfolds in a 72-minute thicket of language and allusion. It's unforgettable, verging on the mystical. True to the Ashley code, plot is a deliberately evasive thing. This much we know: Don (Sam Ashley) has been drawn into unfamiliar, paranormal realms after taking a course in premoni-

tions. Linda (Humbert) interacts with and advises Don along his confused path toward enlightenment.

Off this loose premise, the composer spins his abstract yarn in thick layers. Along the way are aspects of pulp-fiction patter, film noir-ish intrigue, psychedelic recitative, expletive-adorned rants and aesthetic observations, all part of Ashley's wild theatrical tapestry.

The score is delivered in a constantly shifting style, often with the

singers navigating the composer's tricky verbal rhythms, venturing off into whirlwind solos or interrupting each other.

In the end, "Foreign Experiences" may touch on the foreign experience of language itself. The mesmeric blur of its libretto both celebrates language and questions its basic hold on truth or rational thought.

Ashley's ultimate message may be that the language of music strikes deepest.