

Tuesday, April 15, 2003

Robert Ashley takes off.

"DO YOU believe in life after love?" asked Cher in her 1999 dance hit "Believe," the track that made Cher, then 53, the oldest female ever to have a chart-topping song. Robert Ashley, a pillar of the avant-garde community for over half a century, may be able to offer some insight into this mystery of life after youthful love.

His last opera, 1998's *Dust*, wove together the language of several different marginalized characters, many of whom were dealing with the aging process, which in our youth-obsessed society often means a process by which people slowly become invisible. A woman who *used* to be beautiful, someone who *used* to be a stand-in for Shirley Temple, an old man who is lost since the death of his brother. It is the last character, sung by baritone Thomas Buckner, who laments, "I want to fall in love just one more time. I want the world of magic one more time. Look forward to tomorrow one more time..."

Perhaps this is what life after love is. When there is no longer a future. When life is reduced to waiting. Waiting for family members to visit, waiting for friends to die. We corral our old people into nursing homes, visiting on holidays and talking to them out of obligation, but rarely listening. Ashley's newest opera, *Celestial Excursions*, listens.

As a young man, Ashley worked at the University of Michigan's Speech Research Laboratories, studying psychoacoustics and cultural speech patterns. Since then, his highly conceptual, multimedia stage works have been driven primarily by his obsession with listening to, analyzing, and recreating the linguistic and vocal patterns he hears around him. This fascination with language formation also informs *Celestial Excursions*, and the voices of the elderly are his main focus.

In many ways, this newest work is a thematic continuation of what he was doing in *Dust*, focusing on a group he calls "the most marginalized of the marginalized." But as with most of his works, the music is unpredictable. Only Ashley can use the same core ensemble (himself, his son Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara), and a similar creative procedure (scores that loosely indicate lyrics, beats and chord progressions) for each work and manage to turn out something completely unanticipated by audiences each time. Ashley's operas tend to suspend clearly articulated vocal lines in stark electronic soundscapes (with the occasional acoustic instrument mixed in).

But there are also moments in which simple lines and rhythms begin to multiply and cross each other, creating maximalist knots from minimal strings. In *Dust*, the last four songs were just that—songs pulled out of Ashley's memory of the days when he lived in Detroit and was trying to get Motown to pick up some of his songs. (As a composer, he claims he learned more about music from Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys than Puccini and Wagner.)

Celestial Excursions is a carefully constructed jumble of memories, thoughts, nostalgia, regret and fear. And while "carefully constructed jumble" may seem like an oxymoron, it isn't. We are not dealing with linearity or simplicity here. We are dealing with an artist who wants to boil down characters to their truth, but who realizes that truth is often muddled in emotional memory and often compromised by oversimplification. But Ashley is able to strike the balance: Even at its most complex moments, the emotional drive of the piece is at the forefront. Between the sleek design of the stage and the music that blends ambient electronica, nostalgic wafts of Motown and vocal lines that skip along in a small range of melodies similar to hip-hop, *Celestial Excursions* seems anything but geriatric.

In fact, I can't imagine that the very people that Ashley is trying to serve, the elderly, would be at all impressed with the plot-defying, eccentric smorgasbord of words and music that Ashley has assembled to represent their experience. I could just see my grandmother getting angry at the fact that she doesn't understand it and dismissing it immediately. Then again, my grandmother is really the only person

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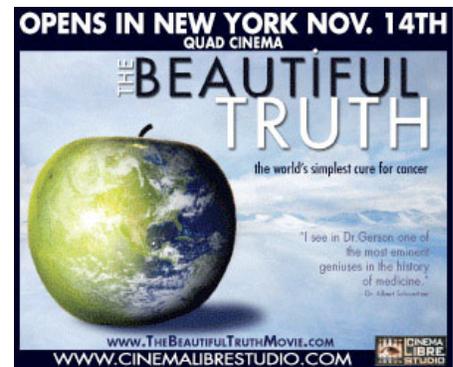
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over 70 that I know, and I don't see her all that often. Perhaps this is just one of many misconceptions about old people that have arisen from the isolation of young American people from their elders. After all, Ashley is 73, and he is a hundred times hipper than I am. And who's to say that my grandmother has no curiosity left? Only Ashley can successfully reconcile these contradictions, which could easily undermine the clarity of artistic goals. And only Ashley could make me think so much even *before* I'd seen the show.

There is something unnerving about Ashley's ability to produce clarity from confusion. As in chemistry, when you combine two cloudy liquids that react to yield a translucent one. Although one would be wise to avoid any analogy that associates Ashley's work with "experimentation." He, like many other artists who have been lumped in this category, is adamantly opposed to the use of this word in relation to art. Experimentation suggests a random element; everything Ashley does, whether or not it comes across this way, is completely intentional. He envisions it all, directing like God, bequeathing tapes of what he wants the vocal lines to sound like to his singers and then trusting that they will add their own creative spin to it. But even the latest press materials from The Kitchen refer to him as "the godfather of experimental opera." "Experimental" is an easy out for the person who says, "It's really neat, but I don't really understand it." In fact, "experimental" seems to be an audience-centric word. It's much more of an experiment to go hear something that you've never heard before than it is to create it. Artists have vision; audiences go in blind. But the best art, like Ashley's operas, shares the vision.

Even when Ashley's stream-of-consciousness words are swirling frenetically, one hears clearly that they were carefully harvested. Yes, the plot seems to slip in and out of focus as the mind tries to figure it all out, grabbing on to one phrase and becoming so deeply involved that the next five minutes are spent deciphering them, but it doesn't matter. Go and see it again. In a world in which composers often complain that their pieces don't have a life after the premiere, Ashley must be applauded for making us want to go again, to understand better and more deeply. People never seem to get tired of seeing or hearing the greatest works of art. After last month's world premiere in Berlin, word is that this could be Ashley's best work to date.

Celestial Excursions, Wed.-Sat., April 9-12 & Wed.-Sat., April 16-19, at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 212-255-5793, ext 11.

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