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An Opera Full of Secrets From a Master of the Opaque

By STEVE SMITH

THE gambler's game is one of steely nerves, patience and sometimes sleight of hand. Watch a gambler at the card table, and you might never notice anything out of the ordinary, apart from freakish runs of good fortune. But let a card sharp explain his work, and a different game is revealed.

Robert Ashley, the influential progenitor of a distinctive mode of electronic chamber opera based on American vernacular speech, has known two professional gamblers during his long, eventful life, and both turn up in "Concrete," his latest work, which opens at La MaMa E.T.C. Annex on Wednesday evening.

Seated in the kitchen of his TriBeCa rehearsal studio, which occupies an entire floor of the converted warehouse where he and his partner, Mimi Johnson, have lived since 1979, Mr. Ashley, 76, recounted how a friend had once revealed a sordid past.

"Now he's a retired Pan Am pilot," Mr. Ashley said. "But when I knew him, he was a card sharp. He took me over to his house and said: 'I'm going to tell you a secret. If something happens to me, I want you to get my wife out of town as soon as possible.' He shuffled a deck, and I cut it, and he dealt me four aces." While Mr. Ashley watched, his friend demonstrated the tricks of his trade: invisibly notched cards, switched decks, complicit partners.

"Every ordinary person has secrets about themselves, and some of them are very dramatic secrets," Mr. Ashley said. "I got interested in the idea of bringing those secrets out: just taking an ordinary person and — if they'd let me — say: 'When this person was young, he was a smuggler. When this person was young, he was a card sharp.' It fascinated me that I knew these people. They're not in prison. They're all comfortably retired. But they used to be criminals."

Four old acquaintances have found their way into "Concrete," all seemingly ordinary people with something risky and perhaps sinister hidden below the surface. Each has become the subject of an extended solo narrative to be delivered by one of Mr. Ashley's vocalists: Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Sam Ashley and Thomas Buckner, all longtime members of his ensemble. The set design by David Moodey, who has worked with Mr. Ashley since 1999, suggests an otherworldly casino. The performers busy themselves with oversize playing cards when not stepping forward to deliver a solo, the only real stage action in the piece.

Mr. Ashley's vocalists do not literally portray his friends. Instead they simply relate his stories in the droll, mannered, sometimes hypnotic and always musical speech patterns that characterize his idiom and distinguish it from conventional operatic modes. In five "discussions" that surround the solo sections, the four performers engage in chattering debate on seemingly mundane topics: Why are buildings level if the surface of the planet is curved? Why do so many games — poker being a notable exception — move in a counterclockwise direction?

The discussions — more like chaotic cross-examinations, in which the performers verbally nudge one another aside to finish a thought — are actually the internal dialogues of the first person encountered in the opera's opening section, "The Old Man Sits in Concrete." "Is that a title?" one of the four voices asks. "It's my name," another responds.

In earlier operas like "Perfect Lives" (1978-80), "Atalanta (Acts of God)" (1982) and "Now Eleanor's Idea" (1993), Mr. Ashley and the members of his ensemble portrayed distinct characters: Don, Linda, Eleanor, Junior Jr. and so on. Those figures lingered from one work to the next, floating through opaque, hallucinatory plots that alluded to sweeping concepts drawn from world history, religion and metaphysics.

Beginning with "Dust" (1998), Mr. Ashley turned his attention toward the thoughts and concerns of ordinary people, focusing in partic-

ular on those at the margins of society. "Dust" featured the rambling observations and reminiscences of homeless people — unnamed but real, Mr. Ashley said. He followed with "Celestial Excursions" (2003), which was based on conversations he had had with elderly people in Arizona.

While "Concrete" might seem to be about criminals who got away with their misdeeds, that perception is a bit of sleight of hand on Mr. Ashley's part. The subject of the opera is the old man of its introduction. The solo sections are his reminiscences. The discussions depict mundane contemplations that flicker through the restless mind of an aging creative artist whose imagination is unfettered by the demands of full-time employment.

Even without the specificity of the libretto's references — to Michigan, where Mr. Ashley was born and his compositional career began, and to California and Rome, the sites of noteworthy events in his career — the realization that the old man who sits in concrete is Mr. Ashley is unavoidable. If he does not emphasize the autobiographical dimensions of "Concrete," neither does he deny them. In describing the basic workings of his libretto he frequently switches between third person and first.

"The old man doesn't have a day job," Mr. Ashley said. "He's retired, and he just sits there and thinks and reads mystery novels. He looks out the window and thinks, 'Why are the buildings so aligned?' Or, 'Why does everything I watch on television, with rare exceptions, go counterclockwise?' Those kinds of things are what the old man is thinking about, and he's in a dialogue with himself about whether he's making any sense."

To a casual observer the extent to which autobiography plays a role in "Concrete" may seem a departure for Mr. Ashley. But Ms. La Barbara, a versatile new-music specialist who first performed Mr. Ashley's music in 1974 and became a regular member of his troupe in 1990, described the work as a refinement of an approach that has run throughout his operas.

"When you look at Bob's stories and go back a bit to the 'Now Eleanor' pieces, a lot of people found them totally incomprehensible, talking

"Concrete" is the latest opera by Robert Ashley, below. It will be sung by his longtime associates Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Sam Ashley and Thomas Buckner, seen with Mr. Ashley, far left above, performing his opera "Celestial Excursions" in 2003.



Joanne Savio

In setting the stories of four old friends and their misdeeds to music, Robert Ashley also reveals a little about himself.

about Giordano Bruno and the Inquisition and all this stuff," Ms. La Barbara said. "But essentially the stories are all from Bob's life, and he's telling them and retelling them. He's kept them more closed and hidden in the past, and I think he's basically taking off more and more of the veils, revealing more as the stories are coming more to the present. The old man who lives in concrete is Bob. And yet what he's done is take himself out of the piece."

In more ways than one. While Mr. Ashley took on vocal roles in most of his earlier operas, he abstains in "Concrete," controlling the electronic accompaniment offstage with the assistance of the sound designer Tom Hamilton, another longtime collaborator. In addition Mr. Ashley provides the singers with an unusually high degree of autonomy this time.

"In the past we had in-ear headphones, and we were getting a line count and beats," Ms. La Barbara said. "The click tracks, the beats, were on a pitch, and we were assigned a pitch terrain, a territory. It was a way of spreading the voices out, and making a nice kind of texture and spaciousness."

For "Concrete," Mr. Ashley has abolished most of those technical strictures. "For the past 15 years I've been doing meter: come in on a certain beat, there's a certain tempo, you have a certain pitch," he said. "Everything's like a

homework assignment. And I wanted to get away from that. I actually wanted to make an opera that was pure storytelling in song."

Mr. Ashley's wish to abdicate control arose partly out of boredom with his usual method, he said. But this liberation also demonstrates his faith in his ensemble, which he likened to the singular collections of idiosyncratic voices united by jazz bandleaders like Duke Ellington and Miles Davis.

So strong is Mr. Ashley's trust in his interpreters that he is taking a calculated risk of his own in "Concrete." Using a computer program designed for real-time sound design in a performance setting, he will adapt the opera's electronic orchestration anew every night.

"The singers are entirely free," he said. "The orchestra that I'm making along with them gives them pitches that they can focus on, in the same technique that I've been using for many years." What is different, he explained, is that the performers won't know what those pitches are until the evening of the performance.

"I'm trying to match what the singers are doing in terms of the mood for each day," he said. "If the mood on Thursday is exuberant, then the music should try to track that. If the mood on Friday is somber or meditative, the orchestra should try to track that. That's what I'm practicing every day."