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MUSIC REVIEW | 'DUST'

Stories of the Streets, Resung Until They Are Right

By **ALLAN KOZINN**
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Robert Ashley's recent operas are about transforming the mundane into the iconic, and whether they work for you probably depends on whether you believe that this alchemy is desirable, or even possible. These are works in which much is said but not a lot happens: Mr. Ashley's characters tell stories. Most are true, or at least they are based on tales that Mr. Ashley has been told, or overheard. But some are fanciful or exaggerated. Others are barely coherent.

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Andrea Mohin/The New York Times
Robert Ashley as a homeless, nameless character in "Dust."

These operas, in other words, are stories about stories. And what could capture modern urban life better than that?

In "Dust," the 1998 work that was revived on Thursday evening at La MaMa E.T.C., as the first in a trilogy of Mr. Ashley's operas, the storytellers are five homeless people sprawled on benches in a littered park. The unnamed character whom Mr. Ashley portrays begins with a lengthy peroration on tale-spinning, in which he advises that "you have to tell a story many times to get it right." And getting it right, he says, can mean adding, deleting and changing details.

Mr. Ashley's companions have little in common, apart from having landed in the same park. A woman who was once a [Shirley Temple](#) look-alike (Jacqueline Humbert) reminisces colorfully and in gospel cadences about a man who spoke about theosophy, had greased-back hair, was a vegetarian and wanted to marry her sister. Another, Lucille (Joan La Barbara), talks about stumbling on two men making love in a park.

The Rug (Thomas Buckner), so named because he sleeps under one, and the Man in the Green Pants (Sam Ashley, who is Mr. Ashley's son) offer sketchier, more burned-out monologues.

These are not arias in the conventional sense: mostly, the characters speak, each holding the spotlight in turn. But if Mr. Ashley devoted scant attention to melody, he was strikingly focused on rhythm. He also couched these pieces in counterpoint, of sorts: each speaker was accompanied, at a softer volume, by the rest of the cast, usually in closely matched rhythms, but with an alternative text. But during the Man in the Green Pants's tale, the four other voices were arrayed in a complex pattern that suggested a full-fledged fugue.

In the second half of the 90-minute work, Mr. Ashley inched closer to conventional lyricism. Melody, as such, was still virtually (if not entirely) absent, but instead of free-verse narratives, the characters have rhymed, rhythmically uniform verses and refrains, each about different aspects of love and loneliness.

Mr. Ashley's instrumental writing, played on electronic keyboards by (Blue) Gene Tyranny, draws on striking effects, including eerie glissandos, crunchy and sometimes tactile percussion sounds. But it does some slumming as well, lapsing into sparkly, bell-like New Age keyboard timbres that seemed at odds with the dark spirit of Mr. Ashley's libretto.

"Dust," along with two other operas by Robert Ashley — "Celestial Excursions" and "Made Out of Concrete" — are running in rotation through Jan. 25 at La MaMa E.T.C. Annex, 74A East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 475-7710, lamama.org.

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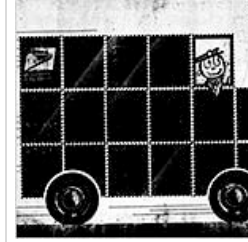
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