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# Voice(s) of America Robert Ashley at La MaMa

by Fred Cisterna

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In the course of transforming the tones and rhythms of American speech into vocal music, the composer and inventor Harry Partch created work that radically broke from the classical European models that his peers drew from. Partch came up with a whole new approach to achieve this goal, one that utilized microtones and drew inspiration from ancient Greek culture, Chinese music, and other exotic sources. Another great American composer, Robert Ashley, also developed a way to turn the sound of American talk into vocal pieces and operas. But Ashley doesn't look to foreign cultures or ancient lands for inspiration; instead, he's plugged into the pop culture that surrounds him: television, Motown, country music.

Ashley's works aren't operas in any conventional sense. The vocal performances mostly consist of sculpted, pitch-sensitive speech rather than conventional singing; ordinary (and sometimes not so ordinary) subject matter is honored over the melodramatic; and ambient electronics and keyboards, rather than a pit orchestra, provide musical accompaniment.

In mid-January, three recent Ashley operas—*Dust* (1998), *Celestial Excursions* (2003), and *Made out of Concrete* (2007/09)—were performed at the La MaMa E.T.C. in the East Village. All of the works had been performed in New York previously, but the La MaMa run featured newly designed productions.



The orchestra: Tom Hamilton, Robert Ashley. Photo by Stephanie Berger.

The 78-year-old Ashley, like a lot of New Music composers of the last half-century, performs in his own works. (Along with writing both libretto and music, he also directs his productions.) That's a good thing, because despite the fact that he works with a superb group of vocal collaborators—Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner, and Sam Ashley (his son)—Ashley's way of talk-singing is both low-key and dazzling. His Midwestern drawl is terribly American, and his charismatic presence and deadpan humor are never less than riveting.

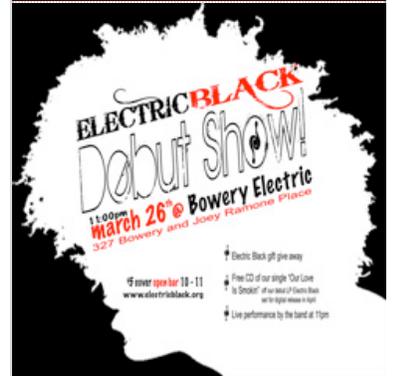
The five performers in *Dust* portray homeless people who are all master raconteurs, sitting on benches that rest on platforms of varying heights. Trash is strewn about the set, along with road cones, garbage cans, and other detritus. In the background a silhouette of a city skyline, at either dawn or dusk, glows. It is not a specific place so much as a reference to a place, an any-city. (David Moodey did the lighting and stage design.) The



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play's vivid details come in the form of words.

Ashley uses the opening "aria" to introduce the people we see and some we don't. He also talks about getting the story right something his texts consistently do. Ashley the performer does little more than lean a little this way or that, or use a hand gesture to emphasize the rhythm of a phrase, but his body language pulls the viewer into the tale.

The intro segues into a story by a one-time Shirley Temple lookalike (Humbert). She is all eyes and puppet-like head movements as she recalls a tough guy who was into Theosophy, a farm kid, and a wild encounter from her youth. Next up is The Man in Green Pants (Sam Ashley), a sad sack who tells us about a priest, a Mexican restaurant, and other things. Lucille (Joan La Barbara) follows with a reminiscence of watching two men have sex in a park, and then The Rug (Thomas Buckner) relates an Army story.

As each character tells their tale, the other performers intone texts that serve as backup vocals, creating a deliciously rich vocal texture that at times can recall the Latin Mass, a gospel service, a campfire sing-along.

The electronic orchestration, created by Ashley, Tom Hamilton (who also does live mixing and sound processing), and "Blue" Gene Tyranny (who plays keyboards), adds even more depth to the already dense vocal layers. Ashley's operas are a thoroughly immersive experience for the audience: We are hypnotized by the narratives and their rhythms as we bathe in the ornately ambient music.

*Dust* shifts gears in its second half, slowing down as actual songs replace the dizzying yarn-spinning. The material has a carefully structured, deliberate quality; the pieces are like pop songs, but there is a sense of distance from that form, too; A phrase repeats again and again in a way that it never would in a radio hit; a keyboard twinkle seems to walk the line between being pop music and a send-up of same. Oddly, even though the songs are vaguely generic, they still manage to be touching at times.

If you described *Dust's* scenario in a nutshell, it might sound like something out of Samuel Beckett's oeuvre, but that would be off the mark. Beckett's figures are crystallizations of humanity; they are poetic, Anyman abstractions. Ashley, on the other hand, digs into the specific details of each of his characters: You sense their personalities and their very individual worlds. And unlike Beckett's grim-but-funny scenarios, there's an uplifting, almost gospel-like sense of joy that imbues Ashley's work. These American voices—crazy, sad, confused—always have a sense of hope.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Fred Cisterna writes a spoken-word column for Signal to Noise magazine.