

## MUSIC

# Review: Robert Ashley's 'Crash' Opens at Roulette

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER APRIL 16, 2015

Robert Ashley, the brilliant, innovative American composer who died in March last year at 83, created a distinctive operatic aesthetic, a surrealist, meditative style instantly recognizable as his own. Operas of all genres often have surrealist elements, whether the fantastical plot lines of Handel or the satirical quirks of Shostakovich. But Mr. Ashley's engrossing stage works feature ordinary people, taking on a surrealist hue through the imaginative use of voices: singsong patterns of multiple speakers that blend into scores both direct and elusive.

Mr. Ashley often performed in his operas with a handful of regular collaborators, but a new generation is now championing his works, which have experienced a recent renaissance. The Whitney Museum programmed several as part of its Biennial last year, including the premiere of the 90-minute, autobiographical "Crash," which opened on Wednesday evening at Roulette.

In "Crash," Mr. Ashley's last completed work, six performers (Gelsey Bell, Brian McCorkle, Paul Pinto, Dave Ruder, Aliza Simons and Amirtha Kidambi) rotate through the roles of three characters. When not in the spotlight, the performers — sitting in a row like television presenters — intoned a subdued and unintelligible dialogue that evoked a softly murmuring orchestral accompaniment.

The three characters are represented by different styles: a conversational telephone manner; a detached, formal delivery; and a more lyrical singing style. After a proclamation that all humans are governed by cycles of fortune and misfortune, the details of the libretto unfold in dreamy sequence, a narrative that segues uncannily from somber observations about the cycles of life to the difficulties of unruly neighbors, a wry list of short dictators and the problems facing those of short stature. Autobiographical tidbits are woven into the dialogue.

References to childhood violin lessons, peanut allergies, a family farm and failed marriages ebb and flow amid the propulsive vocalizing, the distinctive nuances of each performer (at times imitating Mr. Ashley's faint stammer), adding to the alluring vocal tapestry.

Images of the "vast, beautiful landscapes" specified by Mr. Ashley in a program note were projected above the stage. Philip Makanna's dramatic photos of striking landscapes didn't correspond in any particular way to the narrative but added another surreal element to the unpredictable flow.

"Crash" runs through Saturday at Roulette, 509 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn; 917-267-0363, [roulette.org](http://roulette.org).

A version of this review appears in print on April 17, 2015, on page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Fortunes, Misfortunes and Peanut Allergies.