

# ROULETTE

Roulette Intermedium and Performing Artservices  
present

## Foreign Experiences

an opera by Robert Ashley



**May 9 – 11, 2024**

Roulette Intermedium  
509 Atlantic Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY  
[www.roulette.org](http://www.roulette.org)



# Foreign Experiences

Music and libretto  
**Robert Ashley**

Musical direction, sound design and live mix  
**Tom Hamilton**

Performers  
**Gelsey Bell**  
**Kayleigh Butcher**  
**Bonnie Lander**  
**Brian McCorkle**  
**Paul Pinto**  
**Dave Ruder**  
**Aliza Simons**

Lighting and stage design\*  
**David Moodey**

Producer  
**Mimi Johnson**

Press Representative  
**Janet Stapleton**

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\*after Jacqueline Humbert's stage design  
for the 1994 production



## SYNOPSIS

### **Act I – The Flying Serpent**

Don gets a job at a small college in California. Once there, against all expectations, everything goes wrong. He loses his family and friends, he loses his car, he fears that he will lose his mind. He attributes these misfortunes (or connects them) to the ghost who shares his sordid apartment with him; it follows him home when he is afraid to work late in the studio. To make things worse, he gets an assignment to a secret mission connected to government research. It begins with an ominous crowd scene.

### **Act II – The Jaguar**

In flashback, Linda takes Don to meet his mission guide. Linda and Don argue. Linda thinks the plan is foolish; Don thinks he has no choice. The guide has a nasty disposition; he drives the pick-up truck recklessly, listens to the car radio too loud and talks wildly about his adversary, Clint.

### **Act III – The Coyote**

Don discovers that his mission is to learn about premonitions — how to recognize them when they come and how to learn to act on them. He recalls the most memorable premonitions of his life. He learns that to welcome premonitions he has to stop talking to himself. To accomplish this goal he has to learn to swear. As a result of his most important premonition he has found the cure for a terrible disease that affects many people. He explains the cure in a new style of speaking.

### **Act IV – Eagle Tearing Hearts Out of Chests**

Finally, after a tortuous journey, Don gets to meet the wise man, who is to give him the priceless information. In the antechamber Don is given a lecture on current economic policy by an unidentified speaker. Don has come to think that maybe Linda was right. Then he finds the message he has come for; he is instructed in the relationship between agriculture, geometry and banks.

— Robert Ashley, August 1994

## PROGRAM NOTE

There is a peculiar, eerie, indescribable loneliness in all of California. It permeates everything. Maybe it's just the water. Maybe there are other places of the same sort in other places on Earth. But California could be special, the place where the early European-American settlers, upon arriving — if they got there, realized they would never get back. California is the end of the Earth. That feeling is passed on from generation to generation without anyone recognizing that it is part of them. And it is passed on to the most recent arrivals. Even today in the precious palaces of Malibu, in the vast developments between Los Angeles and San Diego, in the spreading domestic comfort of the San Francisco Bay area it's there. It poisons our movies and TV shows. It generates the most violent and interesting mystery novels. Even now jet travel doesn't cure it. It comes down on you hard when you get off the plane and step outside the terminal. It drives some people mad.

Don Jr. has come to California with his family — Linda and Jr. Jr. — and his friend, "N," to take a job at a small college. They have moved from the Midwest of fractured identities to the world of no identities.

On arrival, the four of them go, on a Sunday afternoon, to visit the campus to see what is in store for them, and they discover that the campus, and especially the building where Don Jr. is to work, is haunted by some evil force from the past.

A ghost, documented in campus history, roams the area that includes the building where Don Jr. is to work and the "Faculty Village" that lies directly behind that building. The ghost is frequently encountered on the road to what was once the Main Gate — closed now ("because it was too dangerous") and now referred to as the "Back Gate."

During the months that follow the ghost becomes more and more of a presence and more fearsome, and Don Jr. becomes more and more irrational. Don Jr. has gone mad.

His family has disintegrated. He lives alone in a small, cheap apartment near the campus where he cooks rice and vegetables in a single saucepan, drinks vodka and reads books on esoteric subjects.

He has terrible problems with his teeth, a genetic disease. The constant work on his teeth means that he is always in pain and that before one part of him has healed another part has been invaded by the dentist. He imagines that this violation of the skin has made him vulnerable to the presence of the ghost.

In his madness and isolation Don Jr. has concocted an elaborate plot to explain to himself the situation he is in. This is all in Don Jr.'s imagination. In reality (Don Jr. would love to discuss that word with anyone) we never leave the sordid apartment. Don Jr. has many adventures, all in his imagination. He remembers important and unbelievable premonitions. He remembers events and people whose lives he should have seen in premonition. He confuses his past with the present. The adventures in the past and in the present lead to amazing adventures in the future. He learns a lot of things about himself and about the world. Maybe madness of a certain sort is not so bad.

He imagines that he has been called to some secret purpose other than the work at the college and that this purpose will be revealed by a message that he is to find in the "personals" of the local newspaper. Finally, he finds what he is sure is the message meant for him. It is a simple statement, "Higher than eagles he wanted to learn to fly," along with a phone number. He calls the number.

The message from the phone number tells him that he is to go to the place of a secret, government sponsored project, somewhere near the Mexican border. The purpose of the project is to learn to act on premonitions, to take premonitions as instructions. In order to achieve this state of mind he is told to learn to curse. Cursing overcomes emotions embedded in language and clears the mind to recognize premonitions as they appear. Don Jr. learns to curse. He curses in almost every statement.

In his imagination Don Jr., along with his wife Linda, goes to the secret government facility. He meets important government people and is congratulated on his acceptance of the dangerous job he is about to undertake. He is instructed to meet a guide, who will take him to a powerful man who will teach him about premonitions.

In a motel, before the meeting with the guide, Don Jr. and Linda have some serious disagreement about the wisdom of this undertaking. Linda thinks that the project is foolish, but Don Jr. is obsessed.

He meets the guide, an “Indian,” and is taken on a wild ride through the Mexican desert, with the guide taunting and insulting him about his ignorance. The guide recounts incidents of his own brushes with the law.

The guide leaves him in some remote place, where he is to be picked up by other guides in order to arrive at his rendezvous with “the man” who is to be his final introduction to the wisdom of premonitions. Twelve times he is left alone to be picked up sometime later. During this long and lonely travel Don Jr. begins to remember premonitions he has had in the past. He loses his ability to distinguish the past from the present, though he believes that eventually he will be taken to the place of “the present.”

Finally, he is taken to his destined meeting. The place is crowded and noisy. Before meeting “the man” he gets two lectures from persons in the crowd. Strangely, the lectures are not about premonitions. They are lessons about the economics of oppression and the deceitful language of the oppressors.

Through all of the noise (“These fuckers talk all at the same time . . .”) he gets the first lecture (“Probably none of them could get indicted for price fixing that old-fashioned way . . .”). This lecture is about the way the game is played between those who have and those who don’t.

Then another voice takes over for the second lecture. This is about the way the game of politics is played. (“Have you ever thought about why your uncle who was so smart about everything and who was so admired in town and was a great success at being a human being wasn’t President? Naw shit no.”)

Don Jr. realizes that he is not going to learn about premonitions. He is in the presence of revolutionaries. They couldn’t care less about premonitions. He is learning about politics and economics from the people who don’t have anything. (“I am dumbstruck. I came all this way for this?”)

Finally, he gets to “the man.” (“This is what I came for.”) “The man” is not well educated and defiant like the “Commandante” of the Chiapas. He’s not logical and persuasive like the legendary Che Guevara. He’s not ironical like Castaneda’s Don Juan. He’s a screamer and the subject of his lecture is nothing less than the history of commercial civilization. He wants to go back to communally owned land. His adversaries are the banks and what they represent in the way of dividing things up.

This is all happening in the sordid apartment in the middle of the night. ("Middle aged man lives alone in a shit apartment. Across the courtyard a woman with an artificial larynx. Down below the neighbor has a bar self-standing. And he plays disco records until late hours. Donna Summer and Al Green without the words. Just strong beats.")

Too many broken dreams. Too much vodka. Too many esoteric books. Too much loneliness. Too much California. We will never find out what happens to Don Jr. It seems doubtful that he will ever become a revolutionary, since it's all in his imagination anyway. Maybe he will go into writing screenplays.

— Robert Ashley, 2006

*Foreign Experiences* is part of Robert Ashley's monumental opera tetralogy, *Now Eleanor's Idea*, which also includes *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, *eL/Aficionado* and the stand-alone opera, *Now Eleanor's Idea*. The tetralogy was premiered in July 1994 at the Festival d'Avignon and was performed in November of 1994 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Next Wave" Festival. The original ensemble/cast members were: Sam Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert, Thomas Buckner, Joan La Barbara, Amy X Neuburg, Marghreta Cordero, and Robert Ashley.

## About the Cast and Collaborators

**Robert Ashley** (1930 – 2014) is known for his work in new forms of opera. In Ann Arbor in the 1960s, Ashley organized the ONCE Festival and directed the legendary ONCE Group, with whom he developed his first operas. Throughout the 1970s, he directed the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College and toured with the Sonic Arts Union. He produced and directed *Music with Roots in the Aether*, a 14-hour television opera/documentary about the work and ideas of seven American composers. His opera for television *Perfect Lives* is widely considered to be the precursor of "music-television." Stage versions of *Perfect Lives*, *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, *Foreign Experiences*, *eL/Aficionado* and *Now Eleanor's Idea* toured throughout the US and Canada, Europe and Asia during the 1980s and 1990s. *Dust*, followed by *Celestial Excursions* and *The Old Man Lives in Concrete* toured from 1999 to 2012. He finished his last two operas (*Crash* and *Quicksand*) in 2013. *Crash* was presented as part of the 2014 Whitney Biennial; *Quicksand* was presented by The Kitchen in early 2016. [www.robertashley.org](http://www.robertashley.org)



**Gelsey Bell** (she/they) is a Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary performance creator, composer, and vocalist. She is a core member of thingNY, Varispeed, and the Chutneys. Her recent works include *m̤un̤iŋ* [morning//mourning], *Cairns*, *shuffleyamamba: Yamamba as a Bear*, created with Yasuko Yokoshi, and *Skylighght*, created with Erin Rogers and soon to be released as an album. She also recently released the album *Heads Together*. She has performed many works by Robert Ashley including *Crash*, *Improvement*, and Varispeed's arrangement of *Perfect Lives*. Other performance highlights include Dave Malloy's *Natasha, Pierre, & the Great Comet of 1812* (Broadway) and *Ghost Quartet*, Darius Jones's *Samesoul Maker*, Alaina Ferris's *Lydian Gale Parr*, and other works by John King, Paul Pinto, Brent Michael Davids, Kate Soper, Tomomi Adachi, and Raven Chacon.  
[www.gelseybell.com](http://www.gelseybell.com)

Described as a singer with "commanding interpretive depth" (*New York Times*) as well as having a "pure vocal talent" (*Opera Wire Magazine*), **Kayleigh Butcher** (mezzo soprano) has gained critical and audience acclaim as a soloist and contemporary chamber musician. Kayleigh is a founding member of Quince Ensemble, an all-treble, *a cappella* vocal quartet that explores experimental vocal techniques and improvisation. She is also a founding member of Shepherdess with Hajnal Pivnick, an NYC-based violin and voice duo. And lastly, she is a member of LUVLervLUV, a musical, performance art trio with fellow Bob Ashley-stans, Paul Pinto and Bonnie Lander. Kayleigh received her Bachelor of Music from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory, where she studied with Dr. Anne DeLaunay and Dr. Denise Knowlton. She was a graduate teaching assistant to Dr. Jane Schoonmaker Rodgers at Bowling Green State University, where she earned her Master of Music. She currently resides in Brooklyn with her dog, Simon.  
[www.kayleighbutcher.com](http://www.kayleighbutcher.com)

**Tom Hamilton** has combined the activities of audio production and music composition into an artistic career of over five decades. Since 1990, Hamilton has been a member of the composer Robert Ashley's touring opera ensemble, performing sound processing and mixing in both recordings and concerts. He has served as Music Director in productions of Ashley's operas *Crash*, *Improvement*, and *eL/Aficionado*, and composed and produced the music for productions of Ashley's *Quicksand* and *A Last Futile Stab at Fun*. His audio production is found on over 100 recordings of prominent contemporary musicians. Hamilton's music references the 1970s

era of analog electronics, and contrasts structure with improvisation and textural electronics with acoustic instruments. He employs “aural scores” to connect performers to a changing context of electronic sound, prompting the use of “present-time listening” by both performer and listener. Hamilton is a Fellow of the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, and his work has been awarded in the Prix Ars Electronica.

[www.lovely.com/artists/a-hamilton.html](http://www.lovely.com/artists/a-hamilton.html)

**Mimi Johnson** is founder and director of two renowned and long-lived cultural service organizations, Performing Artservices (1972) and Lovely Music (1978). She was married to Robert Ashley and continues to produce his work. Johnson serves on the boards of directors of the Destina Foundation, the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, Roulette and Object Collection.

**Bonnie Lander** is a Baltimore based soprano specializing in improvised and avant-garde music. With a “stratospheric legato” and a “signature ability to embody a seemingly endless supply of vocal timbres and personalities” she combines virtuosic operatic technique with intuitive, expressive, improvised performance. Lander currently performs in collaboration with The Charm City Trebles vocal quartet, improvised voice and percussion duo Dovetail, performer/composer ensemble LuvLoveLuv, with Performing Artservices, and with many improvising musicians from across the US and the international community. Bonnie is a member of the High Zero Foundation in Baltimore, assisting with the curation of the annual High Zero Festival of Experimental Improvised Music and year-round improvised music series at the Red Room. She received her Doctorate of Contemporary Vocal Performance at UC San Diego and her Master of Music in Vocal Performance from the Peabody Institute.

[www.bonnielanders.com](http://www.bonnielanders.com)

**Brian McCorkle** is a composer, performer, and digital artist, as well as former co-Director of the opera company and venue Panoply Performance Laboratory, and a founding member of Varispeed. McCorkle performs regularly as a multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, flouting genre while drawing from decades of experience as a professional musician in a wide variety of contexts. Other recent Roulette performances include Jeffrey Schanzer’s *The Past is Present II* and Varispeed’s collaboration with Peggy Weil, *The Blurring Test*. Post-pandemic McCorkle has worked with Anaïs Maviel, Gelsey Bell, Thea Little, Aliza Simons, Nina Isabelle, and Alexis

Bhagat. McCorkle is also the Audio Supervisor for Ballet Hispánico and a Senior Programmer/Analyst with SUNY Research Foundation's Professional Development Program.

[www.brianmccorkle.work](http://www.brianmccorkle.work)

**David Moody** has collaborated with Robert Ashley since 1999, most recently designing for the remounting of Ashley's *eL/Aficionado* at Roulette. He is the principal designer and production manager for Molissa Fenley and Robert Ashley. His design for Fenley's *State of Darkness* earned him a Bessie award for lighting design. He designed for Peter Boal's three seasons at the Joyce Theater, New York, and in 2017 for a production of John Henry Redwood's play *The Old Settler*, directed by Michele Shay at the Billie Holiday Theater in Brooklyn. He has also designed lights and sets for over a dozen shows at NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing since 2000. He currently holds an International Alliance of Theatrical State Employees Local One position with Jazz at Lincoln Center as one of the heads of the Appel room.

[www.davidmoodey.com](http://www.davidmoodey.com)

**Paul Pinto** is a composer, performer, opera-sermonizer, and multi-disciplinary dabbler who makes music, new media, micro-theaters and durational performance by himself and with his friends. Some of those friends include the collectives thingNY, Varispeed, and LOVELOVELOVE. Some favorite projects include *Patriots* with Jeffrey Young, Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* with Varispeed, Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, and the cyclorama video installation *Whiteness* with Kameron Neal. He sang and danced on Broadway in Dave Malloy's *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, and wrote and performed in the electronic opera *Thomas Paine in Violence* starring Joan LaBarbara. Recent commissions and partnerships include HERE Arts, Perelman Arts Center, Prototype Festival, Big Ears Festival, Colgate University, The Fisher Center, the Look + Listen Festival, American Opera Projects, Opera America, Culturehub, LaMaMa, Quince Ensemble, WNET ALLARTS, Media Art Xchange, The Exponential Festival, The Rhythm Method, Yarn/Wire, Gelsey Bell and Kristin Marting. He's a child of immigrants, born and raised in Richmond Hill, Queens, and now calls Jersey City his home, because that's where his wife, child, dog and vegetable garden are.

[www.pfpinto.com](http://www.pfpinto.com)

**Dave Ruder** (he/they) is a musician based in Brooklyn. Dave's work lives at the intersection of the very ephemeral, the very stupid, the very articulate, the very repetitive, and the very subtle. Dave has performed as a vocalist

and on a range of instruments, though he is currently very limited in what he can play due to long standing conditions exacerbated by Covid. Much of Dave's work is done collaboratively as a member of the groups Varispeed, thingNY, and Thee Reps. Dave has released numerous solo albums in different styles on Gold Bolus Recordings, a label he founded and has managed since 2014.

[www.daveruder.com](http://www.daveruder.com)

A founding member of acclaimed composer-performer collective Varispeed, **Aliza Simons** (she/they) has performed Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* with the group in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Catskills, Jersey City, Pittsburgh and Knoxville. Together with Varispeed and Amirtha Kidambi, she will perform Ashley's *Crash* at the Louth Contemporary Music Festival in Ireland this June. Other musical projects include Why Lie? (with Dave Ruder), Luckyyy Cloud (with Brian McCorkle) and Cave Wave (with Ian Munro). She designs and creates a line of tabletop ceramics under the name Henry Street Studio and recently fabricated a series of translucent ceramic instruments for Gelsey Bell's opera *mc.anij* [*morning/mourning*] (2023).

[www.henrystreetstudio.com](http://www.henrystreetstudio.com)

**About Roulette:** Founded in 1978 by a group of artists in a Tribeca loft in NYC, Roulette has grown into an internationally recognized performing arts venue and presenter of experimental music, dance, and intermedia featuring some of today's most prolific artists and their extraordinary emerging counterparts. Roulette presents 120+ annual performances alongside an additional 150 community/rental events, serving up to 70,000 annual visitors in a 12,000-square-foot venue in Downtown Brooklyn. In addition to its robust in-person and virtual live programming, Roulette presents a monthly podcast, weekly and monthly radio shows, and weekly TV segments on Manhattan and Brooklyn public access. Roulette's mission is to support artists creating new and adventurous art in all disciplines by providing them with a venue and resources to realize their creative visions, and to build an audience interested in the evolution of experimental art.

Visit [www.roulette.org](http://www.roulette.org)

