

The Kitchen

Center for video, music, dance, performance, film, and literature

Winter 2019 Season

The Kitchen presents

Robert Ashley:
Improvement
(Don Leaves Linda)

Thursday – Saturday, February 7 – 9,
and Wednesday – Saturday, February 13 – 16
at 8 p.m.

Improvement is made possible with support from Howard Gilman Foundation, The Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, and Joseph and Joan Cullman Foundation for the Arts; and in part by public funds from New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.



The Kitchen Presents:

Robert Ashley

Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)

1984-1990

Music and Libretto – **Robert Ashley**

Music Direction – **Tom Hamilton**

Stage and Lighting Design – **David Moodey**

Stage Manager – **Annie Arthur**

Scenic Assistant – **Kate Brehm**

Directorial Consultant – **Rosemary Quinn**

Produced by **Mimi Johnson, Performing Artservices, Inc.**

Cast

Linda – **Gelsey Bell**

Don - Mr. Payne - Linda's Companion – **Brian McCorkle**

Junior, Jr. – **Paul Pinto**

Now Eleanor – **Aliza Simons**

The Doctor – **Dave Ruder**

Mr. Payne's Mother – **Amirtha Kidambi**

The Narrator – **Robert Ashley (recorded)**

Narrator II – **Amirtha Kidambi and Aliza Simons**

Scenes 1 – 7. Don leaves Linda at a roadside turnoff vista somewhere in the southwest. He returns the rental car and undergoes questioning at the Airline Ticket Counter. Linda gets a ride to town with the Unimportant Family and is taken to the same Airline Ticket Counter, where she answers the same questions from a different point of view. At home, finally, she pretends that she is someone else.

Scenes 8 – 12. On the flight home Linda meets the amazing Mr. Payne, who remembers everything, and who proposes marriage to her. After the proposal, which she declines, he takes Linda and her son, Junior, Jr., to supper at his mother's house. Junior, Jr. recalls that Mr. Payne tried to teach him golf (left-handed). Linda faces her life-dilemma (symbolically) in an encounter in an all-night delicatessen.

Scenes 13 – 16. Linda moves to the big city and comes up against public opinion in various forms. Everything seems to have a meaning that is hard to decipher. After a typical, big-city party, she and a companion, having a late coffee and discussing nutrition, are threatened by four drunken men. They are saved in the nick of time, but the experience is ominously unpleasant.

Scenes 17 – 23. Linda has almost completely adapted to her new life, but there are still problems of meaning. At a crucial moment she catches a fleeting glimpse of Don (much changed), who seems to recognize her, but “disappears” in front of her eyes. She decides not to think about this experience. Finally, playing bridge with friends, she reads them a letter from Junior, Jr. in his new (mysterious) job and goes over the high points of her life in memory.

— Robert Ashley, 1994

The opera is 90 minutes, in two acts, performed without intermission.

Production Notes

Like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)* is an allegory for an individual's self-realization. The opera takes its imagery from the history of the Jews – beginning with their expulsion from Spain in 1492 and ending 500 years later in the United States.

Improvement (Don Leaves Linda) was first conceived as a recording for Nonesuch Records (1991). Very quickly, Ashley followed with three other operas, making up a quartet or tetralogy under the name *Now Eleanor's Idea*. The original ensemble/cast members were: Jacqueline Humbert (Linda), Thomas Buckner (Don, Mr. Payne, Linda's Companion), Sam Ashley (Junior, Jr.), Joan La Barbara (Now Eleanor and Narrator II), Amy X Neuburg (Mr. Payne's Mother), Adam Klein/Marghreta Cordero (The Doctor), and Robert Ashley (Narrator).

Act II opens with a song on the radio, "Tarzan," with voices recorded by Sam Ashley during a trip to South America and the Caribbean. The singers were from the Venezuelan Sanuma and Ye-kuana tribes, the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Music Director's Note

It would be hard to think of my life the way it is now without my involvement with Robert Ashley and his music, starting in 1990 with *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*.

When I started working on this, the multi-track tapes of singers' voices had already been recorded at Mills College. At that point there were guide tracks that the singers used, but the supporting electronic orchestra was subsequently to be composed and recorded at the Ashley studio in New York. It took about a year of daily work to build that studio, evolve the orchestra, and mix the opera for its subsequent CD release. The assumption at the time was that this piece was not going to be performed live in concert. We had limited technical resources, and for a variety of practical and technical reasons could not preserve the separate orchestral elements necessary to provide a foundation for future live performances. But demand arose for performance opportunities anyway, so the original singers on the recording relearned their parts and sang in perfect sync with the mixed recording, thus creating an interesting "chorusing" effect with often some spontaneous non-

synchronized duos as well.

Twenty-seven years later, I needed to create a new orchestra in order to work with a new group of singers. My initial premise was that the sonic identity and musical motives heard in the original recording should be featured as much as possible. Even though the orchestra itself sounds very sparse at times, these component parts represented much trial and error and decision-making. (1990 studio saying: “Push Record before we change our minds!”) Fortunately I found many of these elements in old multi-track tapes and other work materials. I obtained software versions of the same synthesizers we originally used, so that I was able in most cases to limit my tonal palette to what we had available at the time. The present orchestra consists of both original and reconstructed elements.

Our current group of singers started off already experienced in some of the primary keys to performance; that is, how to read and interpret Ashley’s scores. Most were involved in their own performances of his great television opera *Perfect Lives*, and I worked with all of them when they were the original performers of Ashley’s last and most autobiographical piece, *Crash*. These singers are all highly self directed and have been interested in investigating every crumb of detail found or implied in the score. I am particularly grateful to Paul Pinto for taking the initiative as “choirmaster” when we were sorting out the many intricacies of this piece during rehearsals.

We usually think of musical performance as coming from either interpretive or generative actions: We start with an ideal state as represented in a written score and fulfill that with our own sensibilities, or we start with initial possibilities and limitations and create new ideas through improvisation. In much of this piece, *Improvement* hovers in the dusky area that incorporates both of those activities, yet necessitates exclusion of any of the traditional means to achieving those ends. This becomes an essential and unique challenge for any singer – how to perform a text that at times wants to be chanted on one pitch, at times wants to be embellished on many, and at other times wants to be spoken – an ambiguity that Ashley asks to be resolved differently and personally for each of the solos. It is part of how the characters are defined.

My role as music director is largely based on the experiences accumulated in the creation and performance of all of the Ashley operas made in the last three decades. Everyone involved presently has benefitted from the collective efforts of the artists who first developed these pieces and who are heard in the recordings we made over the years. Their musicality, sense of timing, and interpretive insights greatly influence our present work. I am grateful to Bob Ashley for bringing out the best in all of us.

— Tom Hamilton, January 2019

Producer's Note

While Bob was alive, I never considered myself to be a “producer.” Bob was the producer, just as he was the director, of all of his operas. Beginning with *Perfect Lives* (produced with Carlotta Schoolman and Mary Griffin of the Kitchen) I was involved in fiscal management, fund-raising, booking and tour management. Eventually, I became a sort of music copiest as Bob made the transition from IBM Correcting Selectric to MS Word, and I continued to assist with layout and produce clean copies of the operas. I was costume and staging consultant, and sometimes a dramaturg. Since Bob's death I have finally, in my own mind, become the “producer,” admitting to myself that it is the best description for combining these myriad jobs.

Almost two years ago I spoke to Tom Hamilton about reviving *Improvement*. I love all of the operas comprising the tetralogy *Now Eleanor's Idea*, but wanted not only to begin at the beginning but, more importantly, I felt that we should revise and update the performance materials (the score and recorded orchestra) to a state that could eventually be used and recreated by other voices and other producers. I think we did it.

— Mimi Johnson, January 2019

BIOS:

ROBERT ASHLEY (Music and Libretto), 1930-2014, is particularly 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 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 90s. *Dust*, followed by *Celestial Excursions* and *The Old Man Lives in Concrete* toured from 1999 to 2012. He finished his last two operas in 2013, *Crash* and *Quicksand*. *Crash* was presented as part of the 2014 Whitney Biennial. The Kitchen presented *Quicksand* in early 2016.

TOM HAMILTON (Music Director) has combined the activities of audio production and music composition into an artistic career of over 5 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 recently been involved as Music Director in productions of Ashley’s operas *Crash* and *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, 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 is the recipient of a Prix Ars Electronica award.

DAVID MOODEY (Stage and Lighting Design) has collaborated with Robert Ashley since 1999, most recently designing for the remounting of Ashley’s *That Morning Thing* at The Kitchen and *Crash* at the Whitney Museum of American Art and Roulette, and *Quicksand* at The Kitchen. 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.

ANNIE ARTHUR (Stage Manager) is experienced in all technical aspects of event and theater productions, from writing to lighting. Annie worked on the Whitney Museum productions of Robert Ashley's works in 2014 and on *Quicksand* at The Kitchen in 2016 and at Theatre des Abbesses in Paris in September 2016. She is also the Director and Producer of Annie's Shakespeare Shakedown, an immersive and interactive Shakespeare Company.

ROSEMARY QUINN (Directorial Consultant) lives in New York City's Lower East Side working as an actress, director, teacher, arts administrator and producer. She performed most recently with Theatre for a Two-Headed Calf's Dyke Division in *Room for Cream* at The New Museum. Rosemary worked alongside Mimi Johnson at Performing Artservices for over twenty years, where she met the groundbreaking artists, including Robert Ashley, who significantly inspired her artistic career. Rosemary is the Director of The Experimental Theatre Wing at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where she teaches Acting and Improvisation.

MIMI JOHNSON (Producer) was introduced to the worlds of visual and performing arts during the years she spent in Paris with Dorothea Tanning. She 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.

GELSEY BELL (Linda) is a singer, songwriter, and scholar. Her performance creations have been presented internationally and she has released multiple albums, including the recent *This Is Not a Land of Kings* and Varispeed's adaptation of John Cage's *Empty Words*. She is a core member of thingNY, Varispeed, and the Chutneys. She received a 2017 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists Award and was an artist-in-residence at Roulette in 2015/16. Her works include *Bathroom Songs*, *Scaling*, *Our Defensive Measurements*, *This Takes Place Close By* (with thingNY), *Prisoner's Song* (with Erik Ruin), and the acclaimed adaptation of Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* (with Varispeed). Other performance highlights include Robert Ashley's *Crash*, Dave Malloy's *Natasha, Pierre, & the Great Comet of 1812* (Broadway), *Ghost Quartet*, Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler's *River of Fundament*, Kate Soper's *Here Be Sirens*, and Gregory Whitehead's *On the Shore Dimly Seen*. She has a PhD in Performance Studies from NYU and is the Critical Acts Co-editor for *TDR/The Drama Review* and an Associate Editor for *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*. www.gelseybell.com

AMIRTHA KIDAMBI (Mr. Payne's Mother) is invested in the creation and performance of subversive music, from free improvisation and avant-jazz, to experimental bands and new music. She is the creative force behind the ensemble Elder Ones, whose album, *Holy Science*, was released on Northern Spy in 2016 to critical praise from the New York Times, Pitchfork and WIRE magazine. As an Artist-in-Residence at Roulette, Kidambi created and premiered a solo improvisation and a work for improvising vocal quintet in 2018. Kidambi is active in an improvising duo with Lea Bertucci, and is a key collaborator in Mary Halvorson's quintet Code Girl, and in multiple projects with Darius Jones. She is a regular collaborator with William Parker and is a longtime member of Charlie Looker's band Seaven Teares. Amirtha worked with Robert Ashley in *That Morning Thing*, and the premieres of *WWW III (Just the Highlights)* and *Crash*. As an improviser, she has played with New York musical luminaries Matana Roberts, Tyshawn Sorey, Maria Grand, Brandon Lopez, Ingrid Laubrock, Ava Mendoza, Fay Victor, Trevor Dunn, Ben Vida, Tyondai Braxton, Shahzad Ismaily and Muhal Richard Abrams. Kidambi has performed and presented her music in venues ranging from Carnegie Hall to various DIY/punk spaces.

BRIAN MCCORKLE (Don - Mr. Payne - Linda's Companion) is a composer, digital artist, and performer. In addition to "decompositional" software/electronic instruments and solo performances, McCorkle is a core member of Varispeed Collective and Co-Director of the Panoply Performance Laboratory (PPL) with Esther Neff. PPL makes large-scale "operas-of-operations" and has just opened a space for biocultural experimentation in St. Louis, MO called MARSH. brianmccorkle.work

PAUL PINTO (Junior, Jr.) creates, performs, and produces experimental music and opera-theater that fuses the musicality of American speech, poetry, classical music, extended vocal techniques, and electronic sound art. He is a founding member of the acclaimed collectives Varispeed and thingNY and has presented his music across the U.S. and internationally. As a vocalist, Paul works on a diverse array of new projects including performing the lead role in Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, originating the role of "Balaga" in the Broadway musical *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, and often interpreting the work of Robert Ashley. Other notable projects include the albums *Empty Words* with Varispeed, *Patriots* with Jeffrey Young, *minis/Trajectories* with thingNY, the opera *Thomas Paine in Violence* with Joan La Barbara, and the recent premiere of *15 Photos*, developed as a work for dance and voice. Coming up: *15 Photos* in Mexico City and commissions for Iktus Percussion, Cameron Leach, Quince, Popebama, The Rhythm Method, and The Nouveau Classical Project. www.pfpinto.com

DAVE RUDER (The Doctor) is a Brooklyn-based multi-instrumentalist, vocalist, composer, etc. Much of Dave's work is done collaboratively via the collective Varispeed, experimental ensemble thingNY, and repetitive band Thee Reps. Dave founded and runs the label Gold Bolus Recordings, where you can find a number of his solo albums. This May, thingNY will premiere a new sextet of Dave's called *You Must Read a Lot of Jung*. www.daveruder.com

ALIZA SIMONS (Now Eleanor) works as a performer, multi-instrumentalist and ceramic artist. A founding member of acclaimed composer-performer collective Varispeed, she performed Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* with the group in Pittsburgh, Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Catskills, and Jersey City. In addition to *Improvement* and *Perfect Lives*, she had the honor of performing in Ashley's *Crash*, *That Morning Thing*, *Trios (White on White)*, and *World War III (Just the Highlights)*. She also designs and creates a line of tabletop ceramics under the name Henry Street Studio.