

MUSIC REVIEW

When a Composer Turns Opera Upside Down

By BERNARD HOLLAND

Robert Ashley's "Now Eleanor's Idea" is opera seen in a mirror. Its musical stagecraft operates backward.

Here's one nice role reversal that runs through these four one-act pieces at the Brooklyn Academy of Music: Projected surtitles in the opera house ordinarily tell audiences what singers onstage are saying. In Mr. Ashley's scheme of things, surtitles appear as chapter headings or topics, often mysterious. The performers fill you in on what they mean.

The upside-downness continues. Opera likes to swallow words; music rules. In "Improvement," "Foreign Experiences," "El Aficionado" and "Now Eleanor's Idea" (the name of the part and the whole), which were divided into double bills on Wednesday and Thursday nights, music is mostly monotone, supported by wisps and washes of electronic sound. There is more variety in the third of these pieces, as Thomas Buckner's syrupy baritone floats simple melody atop scale patterns.

Four to seven performers stand or sit immobile before microphones on Jacqueline Humbert's delicate, simple and pearly looking sets. Mostly, they intone their stories and conversations in the manner of the Episcopal clergy at some 11 o'clock service. White and its permutations predominate. Pop-up cactus, rocks, stray columns, alabasterlike amphoras and a stretch of two-lane highway surround them.

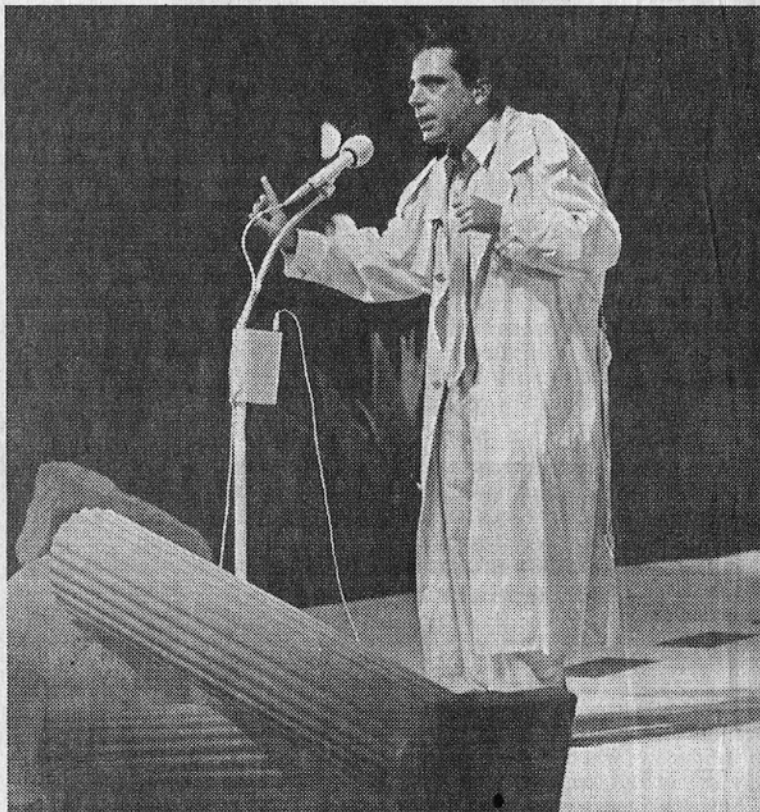
Love, death, heroism, indeed all of opera's customary big-picture items seem missing from this surreal transversal of America's airports, interstate highways, college cam-

puses and cocktail parties. But are they? Opera likes to simplify and enlarge its characters to make them fit grand themes. Mr. Ashley goes in the opposite direction and arrives at the cosmos just as easily. Mundane chitchat about good eating habits or car repair turns to metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, not to mention psychiatry, before we know it.

Characters move from one piece to the next. Don leaves Linda in the lurch. Linda meets Mr. Payne. Don gets a teaching job at a small college in the Southwest and is enlisted in a secret project. He learns to stop talking to himself by talking dirty to others. Mr. Ashley's people are very puzzled by what makes things happen in life, whether memory tells the truth, if effects have causes, or if any of it matters. "Oh well, forget it" is a memorable line in "Improvement."

Mr. Ashley's tetralogy is a relentless attempt to snatch chaos from the jaws of order. Mr. Payne is a tap-dancer. Unseemly questions are asked at the airline ticket counter. These pieces have been described as Mr. Ashley's "Ring" cycle and yes, they do resemble Wagner's great operatic monster in their slow and sometimes grindingly tedious methods of accumulation. Over two evenings, all that is unknown and unfathomable to these small lives piles up as an intolerable weight. Don's secret project is to find the origins of premonition. Premonition is a lonely signal from above. It hints that imagination and events do have some kind of causal relationship. But don't count on it.

Part 4 ends with a long, extravagant hymn of hope led by Joan La Barbara. It preaches an original past predating purpose and intelligence, fired by intuition and memo-



Tom Brazil

A scene from the "Foreign Experiences" section of "Now Eleanor's Idea," Robert Ashley's work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

rialized in the storyteller's art. Ms. La Barbara, like everyone else here, delivers seemingly endless monologues, half sung, half chanted. Voracious powers of memorization are required. At moments some players reverted to scripts, but mostly they remembered.

Ms. Humbert, who designed the sets, costumes and staging, is also an extraordinary performer, and Sam

Ashley and Amy X. Neuburg are hardly less so. Mr. Ashley narrated in his liquid singsong, though by late Thursday night he sounded tired indeed. Marghreta Cordero and Adam Klein are other valuable players. Tom Hamilton's electronics create echoing, self-generated duets; at one point Ms. Humbert sings in harmony with herself. Katy Orrick's lighting works subtly.