

## MUSICAL EVENTS

## THE OPERA LAB

*The Prototype Festival rethinks a venerable genre.*

BY ALEX ROSS

*Jonathan Blalock in Gregory Spears's "Paul's Case," based on the Willa Cather story.*

Cashiers at a supermarket endure another day of monotony. A war reporter is visited by the spectre of the slain American soldier whose corpse he photographed. A Pakistani woman fights for justice after being ritualistically raped. An effete young man whose proclivities put him at odds with his family commits suicide. No one will accuse the composers participating in the Prototype Festival—which, in mid-January, presented half a dozen new operatic pieces around New York—of ignoring contemporary reality. Happily, Prototype offered musical vitality alongside social pertinence. The recent demise of New York City Opera has been widely, and fittingly, lamented, yet in an eleven-day period Prototype managed to uncover more new work of substance than City Opera was able to do in the past decade or more.

The festival came into being last year, when the alternative-opera impresario Beth Morrison joined forces with Kristin Marting and Kim Whitener, who run the downtown arts space HERE. Their aim is to give a platform to

composers who might otherwise be forced to wait half their careers for an operatic commission, and who would run up against the inherent caution of so many American companies. Furthermore, Prototype encourages—though it hardly requires—composers to move beyond traditional classical techniques of singing and playing. The resulting body of work has been dubbed “black-box opera,” indicating a convergence of classical composition with the spirit of experimental theatre. Such a fusion is, of course, nothing new; Weill and Brecht pursued something similar in the nineteen-twenties. But, as the music publisher Norman Ryan argued in a recent issue of *Opera America*, there are economic reasons for the latest surge: in the wake of the recession, recent conservatory graduates have adopted a do-it-yourself strategy, instead of waiting for the Metropolitan Opera to come calling.

The black-box trend is international. At a competition in Sweden, Morrison encountered “Have a Good Day!,” a supermarket satire from the

Lithuanian music-theatre collective Operomanija; Prototype brought the show to New York, where it played at HERE, in a white-walled space under bleak fluorescent light. When the audience enters, ten women in blue aprons are seated on platforms on one side of the space, scanning bar codes and staring blankly. The libretto, written by Vaiva Grainyte and sung in Lithuanian, allows each cashier in turn to reveal her personality: one is a self-involved flirt; another spouts clichés (“Every day is a gift”); a third thinks obsessively about her son, who is in England. In choral passages, they mouth the liturgy of consumerism (“Hello, how are you? Thank you! Have a good day!”). The music, by Lina Lapelyte, combines the unsentimental minimalism of early Philip Glass with hints of folkish melody. All told, it is a tightly constructed, multi-layered creation, its humor pierced by melancholy. At its heart is a woeful two-note aria, sung by Milda Zapolskaite, in which an art-history major bewails her inability to find a job: “I wrote to *Art Echos*. They published some bits of my thesis. . . . I bought myself some good stockings and the rest I spent on wine and calming tea.” The downtown audience shuddered.

Prototype is a particularly bracing addition to New York musical life because it gives equal time to female artists. If misogyny is an implicit topic in “Have a Good Day!,” it dominates Kamala Sankaram’s “Thumbprint,” which dramatizes the experiences of Mukhtar Mai, a resident of a rural Pakistani village who, after being gang-raped at the order of a tribal council, in 2002, made history by bringing her case to trial. Sankaram, an Indian-American composer, singer, and sitar player, not only wrote the score but also performed the lead role. Here, too, Glassian minimalism came into play, intermingled with sinuous patterns from Hindustani classical music. This eclectic vocabulary, while adroitly handled, never quite conveyed the full horror of the subject; an excess of insistent ostinato patterns caused the mind to wander. Still, Sankaram brought clear conviction to her dual role as creator and performer. She is representative of a growing wave of composers who, in the vein

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of Meredith Monk, Joan La Barbara, and Laurie Anderson, use their own voices as instruments; another is Kate Soper, whose theatre piece "Here Be Sirens"—an erudite, hilarious, furiously inventive meditation on the siren myth—had its première at Dixon Place, under the auspices of the Morningside Opera, while Prototype was ongoing.

The male protagonists of Prototype were a desperate, wounded bunch. At Roulette, in Brooklyn, the festival presented two one-act operas by the Stanford-based composer Jonathan Berger: "Theotokia," in which a schizophrenic mental patient hallucinates a congregation of Himalayan yetis; and "The War Reporter," which adapts Dan O'Brien's play about the photo-journalist Paul Watson, who was both celebrated and condemned for his picture of a soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Vocal parts were sung by the four male singers of New York Polyphony, which alternates between early and modern fare, and by the multitalented soprano Melissa Hughes. Woven around the voices is an intricate instrumental fabric that combines modernistic gestures with ancient-sounding chants. At times, Berger's writing is too busy with refined detail, but the pivotal scenes make their mark—especially the wrenching sequence in which Watson, here portrayed by the expressive baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert, attempts to apologize to the soldier's mother and is told never to call again. The bustling ensemble retreats, leaving the lead character starkly isolated.

I was haunted most of all by Gregory Spears's "Paul's Case," based on Willa Cather's classic 1906 tale of a doomed young Pittsburgh aesthete. On paper, it was the least adventurous piece in the Prototype lineup; American opera houses have a notorious weakness for dramatizations of public-domain literary properties. But Spears, setting a libretto that he wrote in collaboration with Kathryn Walat, avoids the trap of slavishly reenacting a familiar text. Instead, his plaintive, eerie score delves into the inner world of Paul, who defies his teachers, steals from his employer, lives grandly in

New York for a few days, and ultimately chooses death over shame. Spears, too, has minimalist roots, and draws also on the bittersweet textures of Renaissance consort music and the vocal ornaments of Baroque opera. While his musical language is predominantly tonal, he creates tension by adding acidic dissonances and by layering voices in claustrophobic ensembles, which represent the carping spirits encroaching upon Paul's daydreams.

The young tenor Jonathan Blalock, a North Carolina native, proved integral to the success of the Prototype staging, which originated with the Washington, D.C.,-area group UrbanArias. A lyric tenor of the Mozart and Rossini type, Blalock had no trouble with the high-lying music of the title role, his sweet, pale voice shining through the silvery mist of Spears's instrumentation. Beyond that, Blalock's ironic smile and haughty poses signalled the character's conflict with his humdrum surroundings. Generations of readers have concluded that Paul is gay; in the opera, a seeming flirtation with a Yale freshman, played by the tenor Michael Slattery, makes that subtext legible, although the two singers kept their body language properly ambiguous. ("They had started out in the confiding warmth of a champagne friendship, but their parting in the elevator was singularly cool," Cather writes, leaving the rest to the reader's imagination.)

The ending is as quietly harrowing as anything in recent American opera. Paul, having thrown himself in front of an onrushing train, has a split-second glimpse of the life he will not live—he sees "the yellow of Algerian sands, the blue of the Adriatic." Kevin Newbury, the director of the Prototype production, had Blalock lie on his back as overhead lights descended upon him, stopping within inches of his face. The vocal line repeatedly comes to rest on a quick, courtly two-note descent; in its final iteration, the figure is pushed up another step, to a high, hopeful, heartbreaking A. The opera ends, as it began, with a procession of bell-like E-major piano chords, dissonant tones sounding in their midst. At once impassive, bright, and dark, they echo Cather's cosmic closing phrase: "Paul dropped back into the immense design of things." ♦

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