

# Mixed on Mixes

By Terry Curtis Fox

**PERFECT LIVES (PRIVATE PARTS).** An opera in progress by Robert Ashley, presented by Dance Theatre Workshop, live kitchen, and Performing Artservices, at the American Theatre Laboratory, 218 W. 18th Street, 924-0077. (Closed.)

**THE LOST FAIRY TALE.** A *Laterna Magicka* play by Peter Folta directed by Jaromil Jires, presented by the Young People's Theatre of Toronto. (Closed.)

**HOW OUR ANIMAL FRIENDS SPEND CHRISTMAS** Six windows at Altman's, Fifth Avenue at 34th Street.

Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives (Private Parts)* is a mysteriously moving staged presentation of what the author/composer calls "an opera in progress for television." Both form and title seem to be in constant flux: When Ashley recorded two sections of the seven-part work, "The Park" and "The Backyard," they were known as *Private Parts* and seemed to be a kind of meditative poetry set to music. At the American Theatre Lab, where three sections ("The Park," again, plus "The Supermarket" and "The Bar") were performed in an electronic setting complete with multiple video monitors, "Palace" organ, and live performers, the meditations began to take a narrative shape, emerging as studies within a mid-western melodrama.

The story which surrounds *Perfect Lives* involves a singer and a cocktail pianist, who come to a small town where they meet the son and daughter of the Sheriff ("and his wife," as Ashley quickly adds) who engage their participation in a crime. The Sheriff discovers the crime and then—for this is a pastoral midwestern piece—muses on the moral implications of his children's path. Each of the seven "songs," which last about half an hour apiece, will be a portrait of a specific part of the unnamed Illinois town in which the story takes place, and will center on a few characters who are directly or haphazardly privy to the action.

The piece proceeds simultaneously through immediacy and indirection: Buddy, the cocktail pianist, is portrayed on stage by pianist "Blue" Gene Tyranny, whose improvisations express Buddy's cool detachment. Buddy's story, however, must be deduced from Ashley's chanted lyrics. This odd dichotomy is emphasized by Buddy's piano and organ being the only "live" music in the evening; the rest is prerecorded so that Buddy's playing is similar to that of a star recording artist who plays against a taped background track.

A similar situation exists within the staging. Ashley is seen stage center as the singer, while David Van Tiegham and Jill Kroesen appear, stage right, at a cocktail table, effecting a slow, offhanded, bored, almost incestuous silent conversation when not leaning into microphones to provide back-up choruses to Ashley's chant. Meanwhile, farther stage right, is a bank of four video monitors: two exhibit "live" images drawn from the performance; one presents still photographs of the rural midwest; and one displays images of a rehearsal of the piece, in which Ashley, Tyranny, Kroesen, and Van Tiegham can be seen wearing slightly different costumes and performing slightly different actions from the ones they are performing in front of us.

Initially, I found all the media distracting. The set is further complicated by a mirror placed in back of the performers and additional monitors are scattered around the space, so that the whole had the feeling of a transitional stage between the record and a projected broadcast next fall. Ashley suggests that the TV version will look like the nightly news as viewed in a cocktail lounge. I doubt it: he is far too formal an artist to put up with the haphazard imagery which is television's basic style. But knowing that the multiple images were going to be condensed into a single screen made the live performance appear to be an unedited series of takes, as if it were merely a camera rehearsal.

I started to long for the monitors to be placed on top of the mirrors, so that we could at least appreciate—control-room style—the difference between the stage image and the "live" video image and compare the "live" video image, with the taped video image; until I realized that for Ashley, there was no distinction between one type of image and another, any more than he elevated any one repetition of the piece over any other slightly different repetition. Time and perspective simply disappear in his work—rather like the conversation of the two men in "The Park" who discuss permanence and impermanence as if the one naturally brought about its opposite. In the world of *Perfect Lives* things are so slightly different from each other that they might as well be the same. This is the root of Ashley's midwesternism, that flat understanding of sameness which informs the inflections of his

voice, the droning of his percussion, the echo-like quality of his choral additions. I have heard *Private Parts* described in terms of Zen. It is not. It is American meditation.

If Ashley's piece is a surprising end-of-decade example of media well mixed, then *The Lost Fairy Tale* is a prime example of why most media should have been kept apart. This is a particularly heinous piece of fake-whimsy because it uses Josef Svoboda's *Laterna Magicka* technique—which has failed utterly as "serious" adult theatre—for children, presumably in the belief that one could pass off its deficiencies on less-trained minds.

Where Ashley refuses to make distinctions between one quality of presentation and another, Svoboda and his associates (in this case Jaromil Jires, Peter Folta, and Jan Rubes) simply pretend that the differences don't exist. The on-stage narrator (Rubes) reaches out and stretches his hand behind a screen on which the hand suddenly appears, grabs an object; then retracts his hand to "reveal" the object to the audience. No kid around me was fooled, any more than they were intrigued by Rubes'



Ashley meditates on media midwesternism.

"running" in front of a moving image on screen, a less-convincing version of the "U-Drive-It" 25-cent car games I remember playing as a kid.

If this were all there were to *The Lost Fairy Tale*, I'd simply put it down to Condescension and let it go quietly back to Toronto, whose Young People's Theatre has adapted (with some difficulty) the Czech version for North American use. But adding insult to injury, author Folta has made *The Lost Fairy Tale* into an anti-narrative tirade. He presumes his audience is too "sophisticated" for actual stories and instead supplants them with a notion about a missing book in which the fairy tales are contained. Folta's scenario is so fragmented (the better to go with the technique, my dear) that it is indecipherable, and pop-up imagery replaces any sense of causality and progression. There is no real fear in this story, no threat, and no possible triumph. Extreme example: kids selected from the audience ("could I have a girl wearing a skirt, please?") are supposed to recover the book by solving puzzles. But the puzzles are pieces of film which would solve themselves no matter what the onstage kids did. One boy just looked at the screen, shrugged, and sensibly left.

What Folta seems not to have realized—and Ashley does—is that all successful anti-narrative artists, from Gertrude Stein to Jean-Luc Godard, are secret storytellers, so intrigued with the notion of narration that they must tear stories apart and put them oddly back together again. You don't reach that stage through contempt.

As for the kids, they clapped when the on-stage objects floated in the air and were mystified when the dubbed Czech girl on screen started running behind the live narrator. On the way back to the subway, two eight-year-old girls discussed the performance; one said it was "bored"; the other insisted it was "boring." It was both, of course, but they have years to find that out.

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