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Operas With Integrity in Common

By ANNE MIDGETTE

A lot of opera composers today seem to get straitjacketed in their ideas of what opera is supposed to do or how it is supposed to be put together. So it is edifying to see two experimental operas that say exactly what their composers wanted to say, rather than what they felt they should.

Robert Ashley, 73, has been creating multimedia chamber opera since the 1960's, and has often used the same cast — Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, and Sam Ashley, his son — that appeared at the Kitchen on Thursday in the New York premiere of his new piece "Celestial Excursions" (through Saturday). The next night saw a revival of "Carmilla," written in 1970 by Ben Johnston (now 77) and kept in repertory by La MaMa E.T.C., which reunited for this production (through April 27, Thursday through Sunday) virtually the entire original cast.

The two works share a fundamental integrity, and nothing else. "Celestial Excursions" is about old age. There's no story as such: the characters are adrift in fragments of memory without context, floating in a continuum of music, part taped, part live (from Blue Gene Tyranny, the pianist). "Carmilla," by contrast, fuses rock and chamber music in a Gothic tale of lesbian vampires.

Robert Ashley taps into the poetical aspects of senility. I don't mean to be flip, and neither does he; he delves into his subject with dignity, without descending to cuteness or the maudlin. His five central characters (including himself), seated at card tables with microphones, speak or sing fragments or long episodes of meaningful past, out of context: pieces of story like tiles

fallen from their mosaic, lovely and broken.

What he creates is a dream state that's brought into relation to the outside world only through structural conventions. The characters, for example, come together in a meeting at an assisted-living center, with Mr. Ashley as the group leader trying to impose some kind of meaningful order out of the waves of feeling welling around him.

Their monologues are also grouped into episodes that have the appearance of traditional musical forms, if not their sound: a deft, intricate quartet juxtaposing speech and song; a big ballad-aria, "Lonely Lady," which is spoken by Mr. Ashley. But there's never a resolution; the music intensifies, climaxes, ebbs, while Joan Jonas, a performance artist, enacts a sequence of dreamlike images at the back of the stage. Imposing form on feeling is every artist's task; in this piece, age is the threat to this difficult act, and attempts at structure seem like thin walls seeking to hold back shifting sands.

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Robert Ashley's "Celestial Excursions," having its New York premiere, continues through Saturday at the Kitchen. The work examines old age