

# The New York Times

## Review: 'Quicksand,' Driven by the Rhythm of Words, Light and Bodies

By GIA KOURLAS JAN. 31, 2016



Maura Gahan, left, and Jurij Konjar in “Quicksand,” at the Kitchen.  
Credit: Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

Told from the point of view of a wry, vodka-swilling composer and freelance spy, Robert Ashley’s “Quicksand,” a 2011 opera written as a novel, anticipates action from the start: “I’m sitting on the bathroom floor, leaning back against the sink. I have the gun in my hands.”

In the production of “[Quicksand](#)” at the Kitchen, the force behind the movement is Steve Paxton, the venerable postmodern choreographer who was a founding member of Judson Dance Theater and the creator of contact improvisation. Mr. Paxton met Mr. [Ashley](#), who died in 2014, in the 1960s, and has used his works before.

Mr. Paxton's first foray into opera, "Quicksand" — a mystery story in which a man travels to an unidentified Southeast Asian country and helps to overthrow a military dictatorship — is a choreographic feat, driven by the rhythm of words, light and bodies. Even beyond Mr. Paxton's contribution, this three-act production — scrappy and odd, understated and whimsical — is filled with movement. There is Mr. Paxton's set, which includes a billowing, patchwork curtain that at times seems to swallow the performers Maura Gahan and Jurij Konjar whole. And in David Moodey's lighting design, gliding spotlights and flashing strobe lights — they frequently signify gunshots — swirl across the stage through clouds of fog.

Mr. Ashley's recorded voice, gentle and unemotional, reads his story more or less verbatim — think of an audiobook — while the dancers occasionally appear in front of the curtain to perform movement phrases. (Sometimes they play corpses.) Mr. Konjar, a silky dancer, stands upright while shaking his shoulders so that his arms sway forward like loose strands of spaghetti; he leans over, crumples to the floor and stiffens his body into a jackknife pose. Ms. Gahan bends her elbows and clasps her hands onto opposite shoulders while slowly twisting from side to side. Even when, later, she appears with a palm tree on her head, she is as serene as a statue.

Evident is Mr. Paxton's longtime focus on [everyday movement](#), in which seemingly normal activities like standing, sitting and walking are reframed to reveal individual personalities. Here, repeated actions, as when Mr. Konjar sits in a chair in profile while typing on an invisible keyboard, are simple yet possess a weighted sincerity.

It's a wonder that "Quicksand" isn't sentimental. Is it Mr. Paxton's presence that keeps it so guileless? He makes a few appearances, at one point sitting with uncanny stillness in front of a three-paneled window. Later, with Mr. Konjar and Ms. Gahan, he uses a long stick to push the curtain, which has been lowered onto the floor into a heap center stage — it comes toward the end of the story, as if they're mopping up the operation. With Mr. Paxton, what seems ordinary never quite is.

"Quicksand" continues Thursday through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Manhattan; 212-255-5793, [thekitchen.org](http://thekitchen.org).

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