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Review: ‘Quicksand,’ Robert Ashley’s Enigmatic Spy-Thriller Opera

By ZACHARY WOOLFEJAN. 31, 2016



Maura Gahan, left, and Jurij Konjar in Robert Ashley’s “Quicksand,” which is receiving its world premiere at the Kitchen in Chelsea.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

[Robert Ashley](#) is no longer with us, but his voice — calm, mellow, reassuring, quizzical, amused, earnest — lives on. Surrounded by a shifting, unstable electronic haze, it is the only thing you hear at [the Kitchen](#) during “[Quicksand](#),” the opera that he wrote in the final years before his death, [at 83](#), in 2014.

It will not surprise those familiar with his idiosyncratic, enigmatic works — assemblages of deadpan observations and stories, not quite sung and yet something more than

spoken — that “Quicksand” is a spy tale that keeps slipping beyond its genre, into ruminations on love, the Pittsburgh Steelers, country music, Jane Austen. The audience listens to a recording of Mr. Ashley’s recitation of the text while watching the modest yet enrapturing, ever-changing staging. Consisting of just two dancers, a large patchwork fabric and a set of windows, it has been directed and designed by the choreographic innovator Steve Paxton, with restless lighting by David Moodey.

While the spectacle is stylized, “Quicksand” is more plot-driven than much of Mr. Ashley’s output: He wrote the libretto, which was published in book form in 2011, in an attempt to evoke the mystery-thriller novels he adored. This being Mr. Ashley, the novel is something closer to prose poetry, quotidian in its language but lyrical, pensive and melancholy in its feel.

The central character, who moonlights as a low-level courier for American intelligence, has ended up in an unnamed Southeast Asian country where he gets entangled in an effort to overthrow the authoritarian government. Dramatic stuff: That the opera’s mood remains so low-key, even slouchy, is a testament to Mr. Ashley’s (and Mr. Paxton’s) determinedly casual, if always exact, style.

Mr. Ashley writes in a note at the start of the novel that everything in the book is true, “except for a lot of the facts.” One true fact is that the protagonist is an aging opera composer. Someone asks him what his operas are about. “This is hard,” the narrator answers. “I say they are about people telling stories.”

It shouldn’t be necessary at this point to defend the categorization of Ashley’s works as operas, but they remain so outside the norm that it feels important to state, for the record, that “Quicksand” is, indisputably, opera. Why? Because of its stylization, its emotional extremity; because the aural element heightens the visual, and vice versa; because it is a thrilling investigation of what can be musical in the human voice, even when speaking.

The legato of a simple sentence — “Why did I do this” — followed by its repetition, staccato this time: “Why. Did. I. Do. This.” A slight elongation of the vowel in the final word of the phrase “some foreign place,” unmistakably estranging. As in any opera, these vocal effects and so many others are precisely lodged in, and emerge from, the music

— here a vibrating, volatile drone, executed by Ashley’s longtime collaborator, Tom Hamilton.

Though full of wit, “Quicksand” has many poignant reminders that the voice coming from the speakers for three hours belongs to someone departed. “I’m getting out,” the narrator says at one point, pledging to leave the spy game — which is no country for old men — while implying much more than that. Constant references to “carry-on” luggage start feeling more and more like invocations of carrion.

Suffused with death, the piece’s emotions build slowly but surely: Mr. Ashley’s art, as ever, eventually does take on both the comforting predictability and quirky surprise of a mystery novel. Or of life. “Something is going to happen,” as the narrator says. “The question is, what?”

“Quicksand” continues Thursday through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Manhattan; 212- 255-5793, the kitchen.org.

Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/arts/music/review-quicksand-robert-ashleys-enigmatic-spy-thriller-opera.html>