

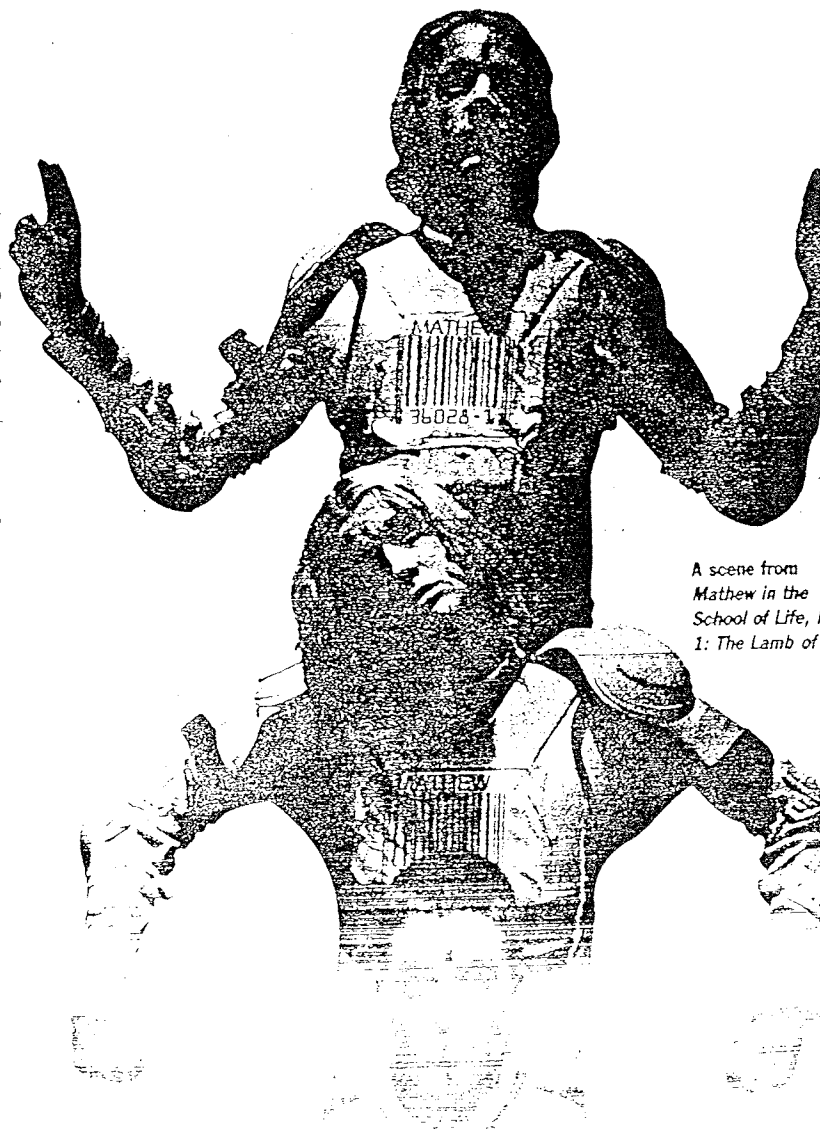
**H**AD HE LIVED INTO THE COMPUTER AGE, CHARLIE Chaplin might have dreamed up something like John Moran's latest electronic opera, *Mathew in the School of Life, Part 1: The Lamb of God*, a Ridge Theater production currently on view at the Kitchen. I don't believe that Chaplin, who also fancied himself a composer, ever wrote an opera, but I'm not sure Moran has either. His music-theater pieces, from *Jack Benny!* through *The Manson Family* and *Every Day Newt Burman*, have become increasingly assured and sophisticated in their manipulation of digital sound-sampling processes, but their comic-strip sensibility seems mainly rooted in old silent movies—and even back then audiences would have heard more background music. What passes for a score is essentially electronic slapstick, and those expecting anything as conventional as a human voice raised in song had better stay away.

*Mathew*, we are told, is the tale of "a robotic Christ figure, an android built to absorb human suffering, trapped in a schizophrenic obstacle course in a terrifying space station." That's rather grand—our sorely beset hero, a dehumanized piece of goods with his pricing bar code pasted on his chest, behaves more like an updated Little Tramp still coping with modern times. We see Mathew born on a lab table, pushed about by his suburban mommy, out of place in school, and generally put upon as he jerks and toots through an automated world of malls, traffic lights, computer games, and endless trivia. I suppose this is meant as a comment on our industrialized society. If so, the satire is paper-thin, although the plot may thicken when Part 2 is added on and Mathew's tragic mission, presumably messianic, becomes clearer.

Right now, *Mathew in the School of Life* is more an electronic exhibit than a finished artwork, and watching it click and whir along is rather like studying an ingenious mechanical contraption in operation. Moran's sound design consists of deconstructed and re-constructed sonic fragments—slamming doors, sirens, footfalls, creaking joints, people noises, even occasional pitched sounds—a frantic world of eclectic pop culture assembled with a composer's ear for tempo and rhythm. The large lip-synching cast, trained by director Bob McGrath and headed by Moran himself as Mathew #1, performs with awesome athletic discipline amid art director Laurie Olinger's collection of technological artifacts. Part 1 of *Mathew* is at least free of pretense and has a breezy theatrical flair, but like so much post-minimalist music theater it is cold, inexpressive, and as emotionally stunted as its hero. Even Chaplin's Little Tramp had a heart.

CLASSICAL MUSIC PETER G. DAVIS  
**Do Androids  
Dream of  
Electric Sheep?**

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A scene from  
*Mathew in the  
School of Life, 1*  
1: *The Lamb of*