

MUSIC REVIEW

Capote's 'In Cold Blood' as Basis of a Quasi Opera

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Calling "Failing Kansas" a multimedia opera, as its composer and lyricist, Mikel Rouse, does, is pushing things a bit. It certainly displays some operatic characteristics. It is inspired by Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" and is scored for voice, film and multitrack tape. But an opera is usually a public event, a narrative meant to communicate something out of the ordinary. On Friday night at the Kitchen, this new 75-minute piece actually seemed private, constructed for those who already know what is to be communicated and why. It is full of codes, signals and inside allusions.

This impression does not really come from the music; it is not an esoteric or difficult score. It contains a Protestant hymn, folk-rock-style accompaniments, some tender motifs, sounds of harmonicas, guitars and strings and much Minimalist patter. It also contains something that Mr. Rouse, who is the sole performer, calls counterpoetry, in which he recites lines in strict meter that are accompanied by other taped lines in strict meter; a phrase might be heard overlapping itself in a sort of metrical fugue, resembling what Glenn Gould accomplished in his radio documentaries.

Much energy is devoted to such intricacies. Mr. Rouse calls himself a Totalist, mixing Minimalism with grander ambitions; in the program notes, he drew attention to the piece's repeated themes, permuta-



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mikel Rouse, the composer and lyricist of "Failing Kansas."

tions of rhythmic patterns and chordal progressions. Given Mr. Rouse's talents, one hoped that the interest in structure and nuance would create a more-than-minimal sense of character and drama as well.

But that expectation was disappointed again and again. This piece is dominated by a sense of elegy, though the question kept coming up: elegy for what? Mr. Rouse creates a

collage out of the now-famous story of the two Kansas ne'er-do-wells who murdered an entire family. Unfortunately, the libretto — the lines recited by Mr. Rouse drawn from transcripts, testimony and verse associated with the case — is almost indecipherable. We hear without attribution: "Where is Jesus? He walks with me"; "The rich never hang," and "She had a flashlight and she hit me with it."

One would only know by reading Kyle Gann's interview with Mr. Rouse in *The Village Voice* that the last line was said by one of the killers, recalling how, as a child, he was beaten by nuns for wetting his bed. There is almost no attempt to make sense out of these recitations; the music either covers up the words or declines to illuminate them. And aside from providing some glimpses of newspaper reports, the accompanying films by Cliff Baldwin are much more interested in tedious scenes of cars at tollbooths or a Swissair plane being loaded with cargo.

The films and language presume the mythic importance of this crime and a detailed knowledge of its minutiae along with a shared attitude about its perpetrators. The opera also has a disturbing set of implications, latent even in the Capote work: that the killers are more authentic and profound souls than the people they killed. The elegy is not for the dead, but for the executioners.

Little was done to justify this view or to overcome its baleful implications. The work declined to persuade one of anything other than that a great tragedy had taken place and that listeners should have come prepared with proper sentiments. Mr. Rouse is not alone in demanding that audiences come bearing prefabricated ideas and feelings. But this listener keeps waiting and hoping to see a more public art develop out of contemporary downtown styles.