

KYLE GANN

Paeans to the Rewards of Mass Culture

Sell Out!



Shala Fears for the Poor, a caricature of life in no-nuance black and white

Dennis Cleveland

By Mikel Rouse
The Kitchen

October 29 through November 2

Shala Fears for the Poor

By Anthony Braxton
John Jay Theater
Wesleyan University
October 24 and 25

Read this column. When you've finished, hold the page up toward the person sitting next to you and say, "Wow, here's one critic who's really on target!"

That's just a test to see how manipulatable you are. When you're at a performance and someone holds up a sign that says "APPLAUSE," do you applaud? Will you clap your hands to the music on command? Cheer? TV productions ask audiences to roll over and sit like that all the time, but transfer that behavioral modification to an avant-garde art space like the Kitchen, as Mikel Rouse's opera *Dennis Cleveland* did, and you've got a very peculiar situation. At the October 29 premiere, people seemed amused, but most nervously kept their hands in their laps. Three nights later (I went twice), the irony of the piece must have sunk in, for nearly everyone went along. And the artsy types must have found manipulation a blast, for not only did *Dennis Cleveland* sell out all five nights of its run, it was the first new-music event I've ever heard of that attracted scalpers.

After all, the hands-in-their-laps were making a reasonable distinction: this was a performance, not real life, and the audience didn't come to perform. But now and then Dennis Cleveland (Rouse) would walk over to

someone sitting next to you who would stand and start talking in strangely poeticized clichés. After that, you'd glance at everyone around you with suspicion, wondering who's next. That ambiguous playing with reality, along with the mesmerizing repetition of subliminally complex rhythmic patterns, made *Dennis Cleveland* the most exciting and innovative new opera since *Einstein on the Beach* and *Perfect Lives* in the 1970s. The totalist generation has its own highly visible festival, Bang on a Can, but what it's needed for 10 years is one major work that transcends stylistic issues and grabs people where they live. Finally, *Dennis Cleveland*—an opera so high-energy that even the audience was exhausted afterward—was that piece.

Lots of theater directors have played fast and loose with the "fourth wall," but no opera composer had ever yet made a semblance of real life flow in synchronization with a taped musical score. Assembling a delightfully varied cast, Rouse (who has not yet received a MacArthur "Genius" award as reported in the *Times*; that was his video designer, John Jesurun) had nine actors camouflaged in the audience and eight "guests" onstage. The guests argued circularly about their relationships with reiterated, emblematic lines like "When I get my sex on I like to position, if I can't position then I ain't enjoyin' it." Katy Sullivan and David Masenheimer played a convincingly sleazy low-class couple, while Levensky Smith showed off some impressive acrobatics and even succeeded in getting real audience members to dance. One "audience member," Ryuji Noda, played fantastically agile harmonica whenever Dennis

approached him with the microphone. Others, notably Peggy Jo Jacobs, John Margolis, Rebecca Masternak, and Elle B. Wilson, gave touchingly believable, if gently skewed and elliptical, monologues. And from the stage, Christina Rac prompted us so enthusiastically that even I clapped on cue.

The opera's verbal energy spun out of phrases sampled off real talk shows and replicated by the performers with close attention to nuance, phrases like "My way or the highway, straight up!" and "You, you, this is the woman that you love." The hesitations and asymmetries of those repeated phrases, which no notation could have captured, gave *Dennis Cleveland* the richly textured feel of an oral document. Meanwhile, Rouse as Dennis exulted in the power of TV, singing paeans to the rewards of selling out to mass culture:

*This time the finger
that I put into the pie
'gonna be a gold retriever,
not just pointing to the sky.*

*This time the mystery,
the questioning of life
will surrender to addiction;
the celebrity of lotype.*

Scene by scene, though, the audience members' monologues gradually and inadvertently revealed the vapidness of their visions, and ultimately the emptiness behind Dennis's slick facade. When Dennis asked audience member Renee Rizzo whom she had to thank for her taking control of her life, she bubbled, "Well, the culture, I guess—celebrities. . . . I just find it comforting to borrow images—other people's images." And as the lights finally dimmed, audience member Chris Freeman yelled "You son of a bitch!" at a startled but now hapless Dennis.

Although this was Rouse's most straight-ahead rock 'n' roll work since he left his band Tirez Tirez back in the '80s, its 4/4 drum-machine beating obscured some remarkable rhythmic complexities. The chorus in the "Soul Train" scene, for example, was a two-against-three tempo canon like those pioneered by Conlon Nancarrow, its occasional sharp dissonances smoothed out by the audible canonic process. Later in that same scene, the couples sang to each other "I'm glad if you're glad, I'm sad if you're sad" in a tricky rhythmic sequence (de rigueur for Rouse, but I was amazed to hear his singers negotiate it) that reversed the meaning: ". . . if you're glad, I'm sad—if you're sad I'm glad. . . ." Moreover, passages of music heard previously would return overlapped with other passages in complex, polytonal effects, and yet, since you recognized them, the music never lost its transparency.

Probably no one but me noticed all that stuff, though; they were too busy

clapping and worrying whether Dennis was going to stick the microphone in their face. No goal has been dearer to composers born in the 1950s than to fuse the intellectual with the physical, to melt down all those complex procedures their teachers taught them and reforge them into art that enchants and engrosses and entertains people in human and emotional, not merely technical, terms. A piece that achieved that goal any more fully than *Dennis Cleveland* would probably scare people to death.

If Rouse held up a mirror of life and gradually shone a light on its shallowness, Anthony Braxton's very different opera painted a caricature of life in no-nuance black and white. In *Shala Fears for the Poor*, the title character (sung by Lisa Bielawa) pitted her integrity against a cast of characters who might as well have worn T-shirts that said "BAD GUY." In Act I she was the lone dissenter in a business meeting of corporate execs who laughed about people who would die from the poisonous effects of their products. In Act II she didn't appear at all; instead, in a tender domestic scene, a husband and wife, played by Melton Sawyer and Melissa Fathman, sang pious statements about what kind of images a "nation-state" should project to its youth. Braxton took the opera format not as a human drama, but as a backdrop for his own heavily didactic Platonic dialogues, a chance to tell the world what's wrong with it.

That's not to say *Shala Fears for the Poor* was dull, just that it was barely theatrical. By now Braxton, conducting a large pickup orchestra of new-music stars, has a wonderful ear for complex and colorful orchestral textures, and they washed over us in relentless waves. He can churn out music as prolifically and in as endless variety as Stockhausen, but his complex artonality was so utterly devoid of landmarks (save for one dippy Act III tune) that I couldn't swear that Act II didn't use the exact same music as Act I. The one truly theatrical element was the movements the singers made while singing: raising their arms in Roman salutes and a ranging their limbs at right angles, an enigmatic but beautiful metalanguage of movement that seemed to be choreographic analogy to the esoteric musico-geometrical formulas found in Braxton's writings.

This important premiere by a important composer attracted scandalously little attention. Still, each of the four acts lasted an hour, and each revealed its entire trajectory in the first 10 minutes, so that the whole thing could have been profitably boiled down to 90 minutes. Braxton, who plans to write a cycle of 36 operas, which *Shala* is only the beginning, really did get a MacArthur; let's hope recognition doesn't blind him to the dicious editing operas often need.

DENNIS CLEVELAND
is the most exciting and innovative new opera since *Einstein on the Beach* and *Perfect Lives*.