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## Avant-Garde: By Ashley

By ROBERT PALMER

Robert Ashley calls his "Perfect Lives (Private Parts)," which has been receiving its most complete performances thus far at the Dance Theater Workshop this week, an opera. Literalists will quibble, as they did when Robert Wilson and Philip Glass called their "Einstein on the Beach" an opera, but at least Mr. Ashley is announcing his intentions early on. If the word "opera" can be most broadly defined as "a work," then in the context of the contemporary avant-garde it can safely be taken to mean "a major work." And on the basis of the four half-hour segments (out of a projected total of seven) that were performed on Thursday, the second evening of a run that ends with performances tonight at 7:30 and tomorrow afternoon at 2:30, "Perfect Lives (Private Parts)" is a major work, comparable to "Einstein" in its confidence, originality and richness, if not in its considerably more intimate physical scope.

Mr. Ashley's opera has been a long time coming. Two of its seven parts were recorded as early as 1977, and there have been several more-or-less fragmentary live performances. But at the Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, the parts that are being performed are getting what looks like a full-scale production, with staging by Mary Ashley and Harold Borkin, a large number of video monitors, three silent actors, two singer-speakers, (Blue) Gene Tyranny on both piano and a spiffy "Palace" organ, pre-recorded tapes using both orchestral and electronic instrumentation, and the narrator, Mr. Ashley himself.

Basically, the opera's text is a vo-

luminous prose manuscript, but it is rhythmic prose and during several years of performances Mr. Ashley has perfected a wholly idiosyncratic method of delivery that seems to be speech, but keeps crossing over into droning song. The subject is small-town middle America, and there are echoes of Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein and, perhaps, William Burroughs. The mode is interior monologue, with Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghem emphasizing and answering certain lines in a manner that sometimes recalls a Greek chorus.

Mr. Tyranny's keyboard improvisations blend bewitchingly into the pre-recorded music, which tends toward steady rhythm and repetition, but varies in idiom from section to section. "The Supermarket," for example, has the briskness and gloss of shopping-mall Muzak, and "The Bar" is set to crisp funk rhythms. The television screens place the action in a large context through a series of selected images and focus on certain aspects of the performance — Mr. Tyranny executing his right-hand filligree, Mr. Ashley gesturing nervously.

The overall tone of the work is difficult to pinpoint. At various junctures Mr. Ashley seems bitter, empathetic, supercilious and flatly reportorial as he relates the lives and interior monologues of his characters. Presumably the completed opera, which is to be performed at the Kitchen next fall and recorded for television-radio simulcast, will leave a more unified impression. But what's here already is quite wonderful, despite (or perhaps partly because of) its complex emotional ambiguity.