

Robert Brustein on Theater

I had the privilege this past weekend of witnessing a work with considerably greater humanity, though its hero is an android. *Mathew in the School of Life* (at The Kitchen) is the product of two stage wizards, John Moran (composer) and Bob McGrath (director), who work as a single-cell unit with a company called Ridge Theater. McGrath trained at Carnegie Mellon; Moran is a homespun product of Lincoln, Nebraska. Although both men are barely into their 30s, their collaboration may be potentially as important for American performing arts as that of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. Moran actually happens to be a Glass protégé, though he seems equally influenced by the electronic experiments of Laurie Anderson (like her, he uses technology to indict technology). Moran composes on synthesizers and computers and calls his pieces "operas." But they are more like digital collages than musical compositions, mixing acoustic sound effects with recorded voices which are then lip-synched by the actors. As for McGrath, he serves as stage director, actors' coach, drill sergeant and visual magician on behalf of the most intricately technical presentation I have seen since Wilson's *Black Rider*.

Although *Mathew* is my first experience of their work, Moran and McGrath have already fashioned four previous pieces together, *Jack Benny!*, *The Death Train of Baron von Frankenstein*, *Every Day Newt Burman: The Trilogy of Cyclic-Existence* and *The Manson Family*. The other titles suggest how deeply these two men have been influenced by popular culture and

yesterday's news—so does *Mathew*. Yet, like the best of modern artists, they use these images to inform a higher vision. *Mathew* is set on some future planet in outer space, totally mechanized and dehumanized—in short, a planet very much like our own. Featuring "an android built to absorb human suffering," it proceeds as a kind of nightmarish Christian allegory cum Passion Play. Proceeding over four days, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday, and concluding with the death of the hero (the opera begins and ends with a woman in black mourning over a coffin), *Mathew* audaciously parallels the life and death of Jesus were he to return to life as an alien humanoid.

The progress of Mathew, a holographic unit in a fiberglass white armored suit that gives him the appearance of a medieval knight, takes him from lobotomized infancy to agonized adulthood through a process of enforced education. Everyone and everything contributes to his painful discovery of what it means to be human, especially a tutor named Justinus (the voice of Allen Ginsberg). What he learns is the message of the Gospels and of Ecclesiastes—and also of Strindberg's *Dream Play*—that humankind is pitiable. He learns how to cross a street—and gets hit by a car. He learns about clock time. He learns how to shop in a supermarket. And he learns to feel rage. Over and over again, Mathew witnesses the beating of a fleeing perpetrator, much like Rodney King. Over and over again, he is taught to "draw" and say "freeze." Finally, he is shot by the same forces that instructed him, his last question being "Is death as long as life?"

Mathew is played by three different actors (one of them Moran), which allows McGrath to use such cinematic conventions as jump cuts and closeups. He also employs actual filmed sequences and projections, scattered between scenes on two-dimensional cutout sets with three-dimensional elements. With the aid of an excellent design team—Laurie Olander and Fred Tietz (sets), Elizabeth Evers (costumes) and Howard S. Thies (lights)—he has created an ever-changing physical environment which a large cast navigates with the efficiency of robots. You will find echoes in this work of George Lucas's *THX 1138*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Steven Spielberg's *Star Wars*, Stanley Kubrick's *2001* and just about every other sci-fi film you've ever seen. But *Mathew* is, for all these influences, a completely original achievement. Although the second act seemed to me unfinished (it involves a pirate sequence the relevance of which escaped me), *Mathew* commanded my continuous respect as an electrifying and compassionate work of art.