

# Little things mean a lot in opera

By Robert Hicks

In John Moran's futuristic opera, "Mathew in the School of Life," dialogue becomes a musical structure through which the precisely programmed robots pass in a life filled with terrible childhood memories and multiple visions of heaven. Nightmarish scenarios interrupt the repetitive moments of daily experiences, involving Disneyland and Peter Pan, carnival humor, the slapstick of vaudeville and an authoritatively frightening allegory on religion.

"The type of stuff that I'm working with, the small little elements that come together -- I try to pick moments that are as universal as possible, yet expressive. Sometimes those moments can be really small, instinctive, insignificant things, but as they repeat and come back into the piece you get the feeling that those are the type of moments that we are just barely conscious of and come back to remember later a lot," says Nebraska-born Moran.

Performed by the Ridge Theater, directed by Bob McGrath, entirely to Moran's pre-recorded dialogue and sound, "Mathew in the School of Life," which runs at the Kitchen through Oct. 29, is technological multimedia theater that aims to emote its findings in the jerky robotic motions of the three Mathews (one played by Moran) and in the impeccable timing of the shifts from scene to scene.

"A lot of the theater, and especially opera, that I see is incredibly removed and distant. There's not a lot of emotion portrayed. All the little nuances and repetition that we use are about emotion. I want to get the illusion of cinema on the stage," says Moran, a protege of composer Philip Glass.

As in all of Moran's earlier operas, "Jack Benny!," "The Manson Family" and "Everyday Newt Berman," there's the frightening aspect of death, not as some contemplative end, but as a subtle nuance that plays over and over again in our daily lives and in our ability to learn and recall events. In one scene, Mathew is drilled about crossing the street. What is a simple task erupts with the carnival fun of bumper cars and flashing lights, and however harrowing an obstacle the crossing is, the death of the first two Mathews is played out as a vaudeville stunt, complete with red-nosed clowns as ambulance men.

"Every piece I've ever written is trying to understand death in some way. There's this idea that people talk about all the time, about their lives flashing before their eyes, and I wonder about what the difference would be between actually living this moment and having it flash before your eyes later -- if there is a difference, and maybe it's the same thing -- maybe that's what's happening now and that we think we're in the moment. I have a hard time understanding the difference between an actual event and remembering it," says Moran.

Supporting the roles of religion and education in these

The  
Villager

Music

matters of memory and visions of death and heaven are cyber-gothic: pull-out kitchens and circles of confinement and submission (designed by Laurie Olinder and Fred Tietz) in which Mathew usually finds himself accompanied by Fred, a kind of drill sergeant at the space station, Justinus, the head of operations and chief programmer at the space station, and Lucy, a prototype of the overbearing nun and maternal guardian who takes Mathew to the space station on his first day of life. Films created by Bill Morrison as well as animation by Marco North underscore the rites of passage and information overload Mathew experiences in his basic life training.

"I watch Sesame Street whenever it's on while I work," says Moran. "I find it to be beautiful and kind of dark. I kind of play around with that element of it -- finding things that are for a really young mind, yet were so open to abstraction. It evokes a certain unconscious thing in me, a quality of nostalgia or melancholy. All my stuff has a lot to do with melancholy and memory."

Police play a role in Mathew's education too, which the audience follows over four days of the androids' life from Maundy Thursday to Easter, but the scenes which might remind the viewer of the Rodney King beatings, for Moran, speak more to psychological control rather than actual physical violence.

"It's a way of masking the idea of having things imposed upon you, being made to submit to something whether you want to or not. I wanted that idea to be frightening and over the course of the opera become something else," says Moran.

"Something that can seem incredibly frightening sometimes at first can end up doing the most good. It's not really a comment on the police in society," adds Moran.

Repetition in all its guises in "Mathew" takes on the aspect of mechanized play and of a child's fantasy world.

"Joseph Campbell used to talk about time stopping in certain moments when you're transfixed by what seems to be the perfection of something that you're looking at," says Moran. "and that those moments are suspended, and in those moments you are in eternity. We are in eternity. We just don't realize it because of the time line we go through."

"Mathew in the School of Life," at The Kitchen, 512 West 19 St. (between 10th & 11th Aves.); through Oct. 29, 8 P.M.; \$12-\$20. 255-5793.

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