

The Whole Story

By Sally Baner

FOUR AMERICAN COMPOSERS. Films on Robert Ashley, John Cage, Philip Glass, and Meredith Monk by Peter Greenaway. *The Kitchen* (April 21 and 22).

A CELEBRATION OF JEWISH STORYTELLING. Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University, 245 Lexington Avenue, 481-0587 (May 14).

The '80s has witnessed a return of the narrative in all the arts, so it should not come as a surprise that storytelling has emerged as a major genre in performance art over the past few years. Storytelling is not, of course, the only way to make narratives. For instance, Meredith Monk creates mythic images and stories largely through nonverbal means, and in one of the interview segments of Greenaway's film on her music, performances, and films, she specifically states that in a world where the word is often overemphasized, she prefers to mine the riches of gesture and other expressive systems. But for many artists it is not only narrative, but the word itself that has returned in the '80s. If in the '60s and '70s words seemed tyrannical, inexact, and a barrier to experience, in the '80s we are fascinated by them, having realized that they are, admittedly, imperfect and incomplete, but that they are still the basic material of human consciousness—as well as communication. But storytelling, one of the oldest arts, does seem paradoxically new in the context of the avant-garde, which for most of the 20th century has preferred to fragment narrative. Yet it is even more surprising to realize that even

in folklore performance, where its status as a traditional genre is unquestioned, it is enjoying a period of revival.

The composers of Greenaway's series (made for Britain's Channel 4 by the brilliant director of *The Falls* and *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and shown here just before their scheduled broadcast on British TV) are not purely composers. Ashley and Monk make mixed media performances, Glass has collaborated on several operas and dances, and Cage, of course, is the father of American performance art. These four have redefined what it means to create a musical performance in ways that blur the boundaries of the discipline, at least as it has evolved in the western "high" art tradition. Greenaway's elegant, leisurely, highly controlled style permeates these four hour-long films, all based on performances by the artists produced by the Almeida Theater in London and amplified by interviews, but at the same time each segment is distinctively shaped by its subject, so that camera movement, editing style, and even interview setups reflect quite different aesthetics.

For instance, the camera sweeps in circles around Glass's ensemble and creates a sense of loftiness as it looks up at the composer from low-angle shots or captures his dramatic toss of the head in slow motion. But at the same time, the Glass interviews are "demystified" because they are shot against a mirror that lets us see the cameraman as well as the subject and the interviewer (not neces-

sarily present in the other films). The layering process of Monk's way of working is stressed as we are shown shots of her company warming up, her solo singing, group tableaux, and not only films of her films, but also films of her films-within-performances. Her own modes of miniaturization, close-up, distortion, and other forms of focusing attention are mimicked by the camera.

All four films are skillfully done, but the Cage and the Ashley installments are more inspired and, what is interesting to me right now, frame their subjects very powerfully as master storytellers—a role that Greenaway delights in in his own feature films. Cage's famous one-minute tales of his *Indeterminacy* series are the nucleus for his film, and Ashley's own role in his *Perfect Lives*, which he has presented both as a live performance and as a TV opera, is that of the Storyteller. Cage's stories are Zen-like aphorisms, very often centering on food, in particular his specialty—mushrooms. For Cage the act of mushroom hunting is a metaphor for the act of listening—and, one infers, for the act of living with full consciousness. The film very satisfyingly interweaves these stories (with their formal time constraint and their didactic content) with exactly the kinds of sound and time experiences referred to in the texts—not only in the chronologically arranged concert of Cage's pieces, but also in the interviews, in the sounds of construction in St. James's Church as it is prepared for the concert, and even in the audience applause at the end. Although the actual narrative content in Ashley's opera is practically buried by the vocal and visual effects of his performers and technicians, it remains the key element in the work. Like Ashley's live and filmed versions of the piece, Greenaway's film is studded with titles taken from the vocal score. Ashley states in one of the interview segments that his inspiration to make music since childhood has been the act of talking itself, the infinite possibili-

ties of individual styles and dialects. And in the deliberate banality of the opera's seven narratives, Ashley and his collaborators find a space in which to listen to the ways of talking.

Storytelling seems so downright simple—and yet not everyone can carry it off. When I see downtown performances where it doesn't work, I think younger artists (and audiences) suffer from not having grown up listening to well-told tales. So I looked forward to the evening performance that was part of the First Jewish Storytelling Festival, a series of workshops and demonstrations held in conjunction with a national Jewish Folklore Conference sponsored by YIVO and CUNY's Center for Jewish Studies. "Ah, now we'll get to hear some of the real thing," I promised myself. Unfortunately, the program was disappointing for a number of reasons. First of all, it was not the real thing—i.e., traditional storytellers—but for the most part revivalists who retold us stories their informants had told them, or new-style tellers who research, write, and pedantically present their own works as part of a tradition they see as a moral imperative. The results are scholastic in the worst sense. Secondly, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has pointed out, the storyteller's gift is to create the story in performance, so that not only the text but also the mode of presentation is apt for the situation at hand. And although many of the narrators made reference both to that point and to the Jewish penchant for relating stories within stories within stories, most of them merely read us tales—even if what they were "reading" was a mental, memorized text. The performances that succeeded—Norman Simms's and Larry Litt's—resembled good stand-up comedy routines not only because these men specialize in jokes, but also because their timing, their sense of purpose, and their connection to us, the audience, had a spontaneity and spark that made them live. ■