

Robert Ashley's Opera *That Morning Thing*

By Ceci Moss



Robert Ashley's opera *That Morning Thing* is a rumination on spoken language. Split into three acts and an epilogue, the first piece, "Frogs", sets the tone by motioning toward the inevitable misunderstandings and inconsistencies of language. The composition is introduced by audio of various frog species croaking, most likely sampled from scientific recordings, which then gives way to an essay read aloud by a man in a suit. Delivered in a resounding voice and assertive manner, the essay discusses the inadequacy of language to communicate human thought. Four men in a row repeat "1, 2, 3, 4", and after multiple repetitions, their sounds begin to recall a chorus of frogs. At the same time, a group of women in matching white dresses and rounded goggles, with their hands held up in front of them with open-faced palms, walk in robotic lock step. Periodically, the female dancers collide with another and connect hands, an action that triggers flashing lights on the goggles. Their movements seemed both random and controlled, as if they were directed by a larger system. The chance connections between dancers remind the viewer that despite the obstacle of miscommunication, understanding is possible.

If "Frogs" points towards the unreliability of verbal speech, the focus of Act II, "A Cool, Well-Lighted Room", seems to be the non-verbal body as a site of expression. The act consists of two interludes and the piece "Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon." In the interludes, a singer intentionally counts "1,2,3,4" in an out-of-sync meter in an effort to throw off the accompanying piano player, who struggles to follow. While a proper rhythm is never established, the players' frustration becomes apparent through the

movement of their bodies, which lurch forward in annoyance.

Perhaps one of the most powerful segments of *That Morning Thing* is the composition “Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon”, which combines a disturbing audio of a woman describing a rape scene in detail with the chiming of bells. Alongside the recording, a female dancer refers to images of models from a magazine and contorts her body to mimic these poses. The dancer’s uncomfortable gestures magnify the heart-wrenching affect of the audio, resulting in an almost visceral experience for the viewer. The piece is an unsettling commentary on the subjugation of women’s bodies.

Act III, “Four Ways”, and the Epilogue disassemble aspects of conversation in order to reflect on its limitations. “Four Ways” is a jovial question and answer session between a man with a microphone who wildly stomps around onstage and the female dancers, who ask everyday questions such as “Where is the Statue of Liberty? Where is Little Italy?” The man with the microphone enthusiastically answers these questions, before launching into humorous non-sequiturs. The man’s movements are imitated by a row of men to the back of the stage, who freeze into position. All the actors deliver statements that are not correctly interpreted by the other members; thus, the scene seems to parody conversation. The Epilogue, which is the composition “She Was A Visitor,” turns to the audible sound of speech. The sentence “She Was A Visitor” is repeated over and over again by an actor, while the audience at different times repeats individual phonemes from the statement such as “Sh” and “V”. This results in a strange back and forth, where the crowd’s cacophony is askew from the actor’s continuous repetition. Everyone says the same thing, but no one speaks in unison.

Robert Ashley’s *That Morning Thing* reconfigures spoken language in various ways, and in the process, demonstrates its strained relation to experience. Words and speech are incomplete in that they can never fully convey experience. *That Morning Thing* is carried along by the actors’ relentless (and unrealizable) struggle against this problem.

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