

# East Village Buddha

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, JUNE 5, 2001 AT 4 A.M.

In 1973, a 22-year-old punk rocker named Elodie Lauten saw an ad in *The Village Voice* seeking musicians for a women's rock band. She went to the audition and, in her words, "banged out a couple of songs on the out-of-tune upright, along with some of my wildest Ono-style vocal improvs." One of the guitarists in the band was Denise Feliu, who was living at the time with that New Yorkest of all poets Allen Ginsberg and his lover Peter Orlovsky. Feliu and Ginsberg rescued Lauten from a manager who was trying to manage her by keeping her locked in his loft, and gave her a place to live with them at 10th Street and Avenue C. Lauten baked Ginsberg apple pies, and he bought her a Farfisa organ—her first nonacoustic keyboard—so she could accompany him when he sang and chanted.

Zip ahead 23 years. Lauten has returned to New York after two dismal years living in Albuquerque. Wanting to celebrate New York after her long absence, she contacts Ginsberg to ask him for a libretto. He responds in the summer of 1996 by sending her a selection of poems from his *Collected Works*, *Cosmopolitan Greetings*, and *White Shroud Poems*. To this day Lauten thinks the sequence of poems contains a secret message, an intimate self-portrait; the poet died only six months later. And so in homage she wrote an hour-and-a-half chamber opera on Ginsberg's texts called *Waking in New York*. The work was premiered here in a concert version a couple of years ago, but this weekend saw the official premiere of the operatic version at the 14th Street Y Theater: actually a multimedia piece with photos of New York, some taken by Ginsberg himself. An additional coup for Lauten is that the piece was directed by Tom O'Horgan of *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* fame.

Despite the formality of its cantata-like structure, *Waking in New York* is certainly one of the most intimate large-scale vocal works ever written. "As I cross my kitchen floor the thought of Death returns," soprano Tyler Azelton sings, joined by baritone Mark Duer as Ginsberg himself: "day after day, as I wake & drink lemon juice & hot water,/brush my teeth & blow my nose, stand at toilet a yellow stream/issuing from my body, look out curtained windows, across the street/Mary Help of Christians R.C. Church, how many years/empty the garbage pail, carry black plastic bags to the sidewalk,/before I boil the last soft egg. . . ." It's a loving look at life in the East

Village.

This is a large work for Lauten, but large works have become her *métier*; her recent *Deus ex Machina Cycle* for singers and baroque ensemble was 100 minutes long. Two things strike the listener about the musical style of *Waking in New York*. One is the imaginative combination of singers: Azelton is a jazz and classical singer, Laura Wolfe a gospel-tinged pop singer, and Duer an in-between musical-theater talent. The work seesaws among these vocal styles, but the music is calm and neutral enough to absorb them all.

The other remarkable quality is how closely *Waking in New York's* hovering harmonies, gentle but relentless momentum, and chantlike melodies remind one of another great vocal work, from the 1920s: Erik Satie's *Socrate*, based on the last words of Socrates. Lauten turned Buddhist under Ginsberg's informal tutelage, and somehow her cleanly linear brand of musical mysticism matches up exactly with that of the *petit maître d'Arcueil*, whose Zenlike stance set the tone for musical dadaists throughout the century, including Virgil Thomson and John Cage. It's worth remembering that *Socrate* was one of Frank Zappa's favorite pieces; in front of a thousand astonished rock fans, he used it to open his last New York concert before his death in 1993.

Born in Paris, daughter of the jazz drummer Errol Parker, Lauten seems a legitimate heir to Satie's imperturbable aesthetic. Ginsberg's references to Rimbaud and *The New York Times*, to masturbation and fights with landlords, to his ideal personals ad ("courageous/warrior who may also like women and girls, no problem,/to share bed meditation apartment Lower East Side"), are blended into a serene meditation in which one can imagine Ginsberg himself singing. "He was quite a good singer," Lauten remembers. "He always had music in his head."

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