

Thulani Davis and Bernadette Speach

A Cooler Beat

BY KYLE GANN

Seein' you is a slow dance that goes on too long," crooned Thulani Davis, not singing, but drawing each sentence into a gentle arabesque and savoring its shape. "Beware of slow dances, pretty men, kitchen tile and fallin' out of bed/Boppin' is safer than grindin'." Behind her, Oliver Lake on sax, Myra Melford on synth, Jeffrey Schanzer on guitar, Jeff Hoyer on trombone, and Lindsey Horner on bass punched the air with twanging ostinatos and muted staccato notes that bore a peculiar resemblance to Davis's supple inflections. This was the *Telepathy Suite*, the climax of a January 11 program at the Alternative Museum made up of music that Bernadette Speach had written to accompany Davis's poetry.

Davis, known for two books of verse, the libretto to *The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, and many articles in the *Voice*, was the evening's star, not only because she's as seductive as Robert Ashley, but because Speach had recorded her recitation before composing the music, then written the lines to imitate her speech patterns. That relationship didn't stay constant over the evening; it crescendoed from the abstractness of *Acquittal* to the pure jazz of *Song to Some Other Man* to the bittersweet remembrances of *Goes Without Saying*, which hid among quiet keyboard repetitions. But the interplay always worked, and at the end *Telepathy's* starkly syncopated chords pounded the point for those who had missed it.

It was kind of Beat—not quite the way Patchen and Ferlinghetti used to preach over jazz quartets in San Francisco nightclubs, but a cooler Beat for the '80s, the '90s, socially conscious but aware that today's ills are more insidious and must be handled more shrewdly. The political references in *Acquittal* were overt if non-specific: "The state can have no case/there is no case/against freedom." Other poems implied injustices in the context of love songs and reminiscences:

*but the midwest was an open
treacherous place, . . .
where five or six blacks took hands
in small parlours with wood-
burningstoves
chanted 'Up Ye Mighty Race'
into the dreams of children tucked in.*

Musically, it was smoother than Beat, because instead of just throwing two artforms at each other, Speach had happened on an intelligent method of collaboration. What the performance lacked that Beat had was spontaneity, the sense that it might grow into something unexpected.

Speach's music has many sides, most of them apparent on the well-played, ill-recorded CD *Without Borders*, released recently as part of the Mode label's women series. Speach's debt to her teacher

Morton Feldman is easy to hear, easy to overestimate; she's taken one aspect of his late work, asymmetrical repeating figures that hold his marathon pieces together, and expanded them into an expressive, not at all minimalist form. Her characteristic gesture pivots easily enough into jazz, but loses some distinctiveness upon becoming ostinato-ized. In this concert she conducted, which I wish could have been avoided; Melford, usually such a pianistic butterfly, seemed uncomfortable pinned to the page by the baton, and Lake's swing felt boxed in. Playing chamber jazz under a conductor is like making love with the metronome on.

This is a nagging downtown problem, that of working with excellent performers with completely different approaches. The scene is mapped for people whose music lies in the cracks, but the cracks

are not so cavernous that they're easily fallen into or comfortably overpopulated. Except for *Telepathy Suite*, most of the pieces on *Without Borders* work perfectly well within them. The angular themes that give *Moto* (for trombone, percussion, piano) its rhythmic vitality, that create a marvelous sense of impressionist sonic sculpture in the Piano Sonata (both on the Mode disc), sounded mannered floating in jazz conventions at the Alternative Museum. So what to do if your music is too ontologically normal for downtown, but can't squeeze into uptown's centimeter-wide aesthetic definitions? You take it outside New York, which isn't, at present, big enough to accommodate it. Speach has done that with two of her

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best pieces, which have been touring in the able hands of the Arditti Quartet.

New York music has something most music scenes would give up their NEA grants for: personality. It's a luxury, but if your music doesn't jive with that personality, it can't really be perceived here, which is why some of New York's best composers (like Speach) get overlooked in favor of those whose music better fits the stereotypes. Speach's sensibility is too reflective, too cosmopolitan to sound New York. This concert was an honest attempt to retune her aesthetic to work with some musicians she rightly admires, but she couldn't both do that and play to her strengths. In terms of Davis's poetry, Speach was square on target. Instrumentally, the result was enjoyable but compromised, like watching great lines impede the drama in a play by a good poet.

Thanks to John Rockwell for sending me his *Times* review of a Phill Niblock new music series in 1973. I mistakenly reported that only Tom Johnson had written it up. ■



Davis and Speach

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