

Dad Was an Old Master

By Kyle Gann

El Greco

There are composers, and there are opera composers. The latter hear not in measures, but in quarter hours. Like Richard Wagner and Robert Ashley before him, William Harper paints in long, bold strokes, balancing scenes instead of motives, and propelling the ear on voyages of emotion. It's a shame his earlier operas, premiered in the Midwest—*Peyote Roadkill*, *Crimson Cowboy*, *Snow Leopard*—haven't yet played New York. Couched in an electronic vernacular, they're ambitious pieces, so ambitious, in fact, that the productions have rarely matched the music's fractured, violent energy. What New Yorkers won't realize about *El Greco*, Harper's first major gig here in a decade (it runs through October 17 at Playhouse 91), is how much smoother it is than his earlier work, under the influence of its Renaissance sources. As a result, the production has had a chance to catch up, resulting in Harper's most polished, least frenetic, and perhaps most stirring work.

The libretto by playwright Bernardo Solano is ambitious, too, tying together themes of father-son conflict, anti-Semitism, censorship, and fair pay for artists (in that order). How fathers mess up sons is the crux; this could stand as the first operatic expression of the Iron John men's movement. Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco by the Spanish

priests who can't manage his Greek name, is in love with a Jewish woman, Jeronima. Although he can't marry her for fear of the Inquisition, she bears him a son. Obsessed with his painting, El Greco has no time for the kid, and slaps him when the boy damages a painting. (At this point we artist fathers in the audience get fidgety.)

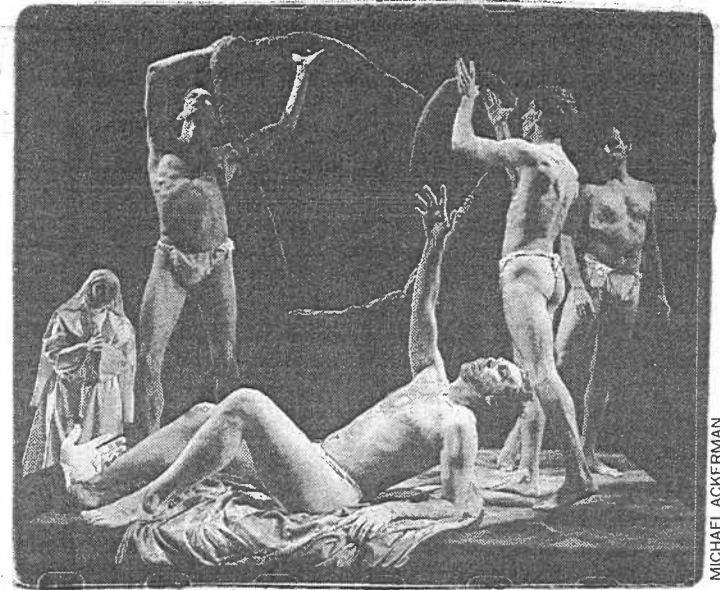
Harper has a soft spot for the obsessed artist who's a failure at living. (*Crimson Cowboy* was about Orpheus losing Eurydice through musical self-absorption.) The Grand Inquisitor, Quiroga, wants El Greco's paintings for his cathedral, but he wants them cheap and altered to suit the most trivial details of church dogma. El Greco, of course, considers his visions divine. "I can see Christ's suffering," he says in a trance, "but I can't feel it." Solano's swift verbal strokes juggle such issues in nicely nested layers. When El Greco complains that "the Inquisition takes criticism badly," his assistant replies, "Look who's talking."

El Greco's son, Jorge Manuel, grows up, natch, to be a drunken jerk as his father wonders why. In the second-act climax, when Quiroga nearly burns Jorge for heresy, El Greco renounces his illegitimate son and sits by impotently, mentally turning every scene into a painting. Only Jorge's mother can save him, by blackmailing Quiroga with revelation of his own Jewish ancestry. Act three is an anticlimax, combining the prettiest tableaux and most elaborate music

with little action. Under protection of the abbess Teresa (later Saint Teresa, star of *Four Saints in Three Acts*), Jeronima enters a convent. El Greco dies following an 11th-hour reconciliation, 375 years before Robert Bly could tell him where he screwed up.

This attention to the two men instead of the romantic relationship is an intriguing departure from usual operatic focus, and, through its understatement, the music lets the archetypes hit home. One of my favorite conceits in recent opera is that of Harper's *Peyote Roadkill*, in which the music continually re-emerges from a low B-flat (60 cycles per second) emitted by an electrical tower in the center of the action. *El Greco* rises similarly from a low A, and is anchored more often than not by a pulsing pedal bass. As accompaniment, Brad Ellis conducts a string trio plus guitar over some state-of-the-art computer-sequenced electronics in lieu of an orchestra. Sans voices, the dark textures of unobtrusive modal ostinatos could sound Philip Glass-ish, but Harper sidesteps Glass's static scenarios via the surging drama of his vocal lines. The tonality is postminimal, but the way textures alternate and recur provides an effective, Stravinskian illusion of perpetual forward motion.

The production slants more toward theater than opera, and the actors meet theatrical challenges better than musical ones. Daryl Henriksen is perfectly cast for his gaunt face, long El Greco-ish tor-



MICHAEL ACKERMAN

Leaf through a book of El Greco's paintings before you go.

so, and powerful baritone, though Harper's coloristic modulations sometimes slip out from under him. Selena Cantor as Jeronima, a lively actress with a brilliant upper register, matches him well. The only truly operatic talent among the major roles is Veronica Tyler (Teresa), and Harper, with Mozartean practicality, has taken excellent advantage of her with a lovely third-act aria called "Seasons of the Heart." Tom Bogdan and Maggi-Meg Reed, the latter with a strikingly warm alto, play well-fleshed-out roles as the painter's assistant and housemaid, even enjoying one Monteverdian comic-relief scene together. If the bass of Gabriel Barre (the Inquisitor) sounds a little pinched, well, he's the villain. And Sean Dooley, as the young child Jorge, did a heroic job opening night despite a candle (the Eternal Flame of Childhood) that absolutely wouldn't stay lit.

There are also some Mozartean tricks, notably the opening, which starts soft and mysterious before bursting into a spine-tingling chorus. In fact, the piece lives from chorus to chorus. The Renaissance plot is sufficient excuse for elegant counterpoint interwoven with Gregorian chant. Joyous ensemble pieces break out at every dramatic juncture, including a theatrically motivated setting of that ubiquitous old motet text "O vos omnes." (Another chorus explodes at the mention of El Greco's first big fee.) Director Tom O'Horgan has staged the choruses with a delightful tendency to fall into the poses of El Greco's paintings; to add an extra level of enjoyment, leaf through a book of El Greco's paintings before you go. Genuinely operatic composers are too rare in new music for New York to remain unacquainted with Harper much longer. ■

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