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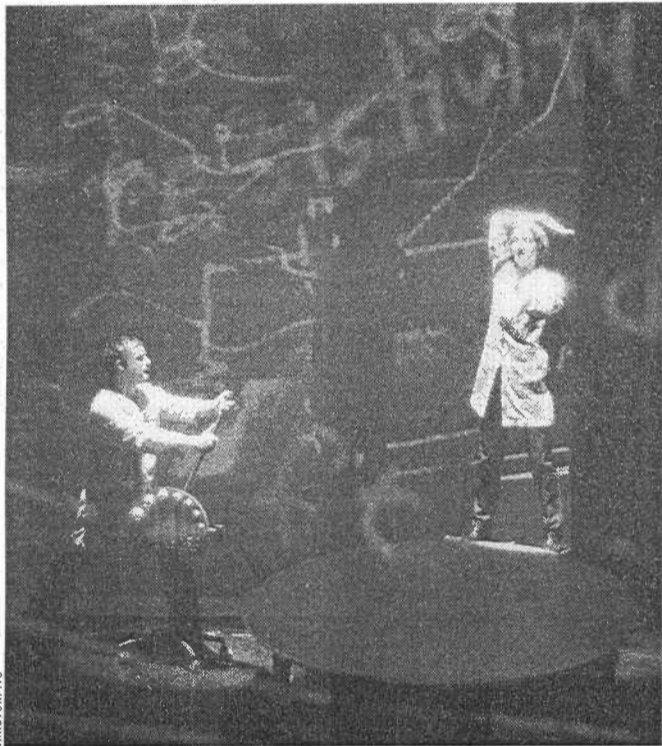
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# Drip, Drip, Drip

*Chaos*  
The Kitchen  
October 9

BY KYLE GANN

To be an opera composer, Aaron Copland wrote, "The urge has to be so strong that because of some inner drive, little else in music attracts you—and then you are an honest-to-God opera composer. I am not such." My generation doesn't believe it. Opera has become the bull's-eye of one's career trajectory, the way you prove yourself. Eventually, it seems, all composers write their inevitable operas the way 19th-century tonesmiths did their oratorios— oratorios that are hardly ever performed today, one might note. And too often, opera's prestige blinds musicians to its vast differences from regular music. When it does, bad opera happens to good people.



*Chaos*: when bad opera happens to good people

Take *Chaos*, one of the most promising-looking operas of recent years. The composer, Michael Gordon, is unquestionably one of the most brilliant of his generation; his rhythmically gripping works have shown an exciting development, from *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!* of 1983 to *Trance* of 1995. His librettist, Matthew Maguire, is an Obie winner with a musical theater track record, and the director, Bob McGrath, is famous enough to have been heard of by a non-theater type like me. If I had been director at the Kitchen, I would have looked at this trio on paper and said, "Yow, this is gonna be great. Let's do it!"

But then our illustrious trio took a pop-sci concept that was really hip about 10 years ago, chaos theory, and wedded it to a plot stale enough for a made-for-cable-TV movie: scientists stumble across truths that threaten cherished beliefs of the profession; scientists get funding cut because they won't abandon their research; scientists get careers back by exposing evil administrator who tried to squelch them. No moral ambiguity here, only a cartoon villain. Up behind the stage, they put Marie and Pierre Curie in the background—just as Philip Glass did with Einstein in *Einstein on the Beach*, with Tolstoy in *Satyagraha*, with spacemen and Columbus in *The Voyage*, and just as everyone else has done with every sentimentally histori-

cal figure in every half-thought-out trendy opera of the last 22 years. It was charming in 1976, but that cliché's beginning to scream.

So is the stylized habit of having your singers frantically stare out into space above the audience for almost the entire opera as though they're gazing into some spellbinding optical illusion, rather than occasionally looking at each other and relating. *Chaos* boasted Lisa Bielawa as the female lead, a soprano as necessary for a Downton opera today as Jeff Goldblum is for a science-fiction movie. It offered Toby Twining as the male lead, a singer capable of fantastically athletic vocal feats. Such superb talents cried out for something more exciting to do than gawk into the rafters for 75 minutes and sing streams of plodding, uninflected eighth notes.

For Gordon was composing with one hand tied behind his back. Most of his music has been for his own ensemble, which can play rhythms of eight-against-nine and 27-against-16 more

easily than you can do "shave and a haircut." Seven years ago he wrote a wonderful non-staged opera, the *Van Gogh Video Opera*, for that ensemble, with lots of good melodies racing through complex rhythmic cycles. He couldn't have done that here, though, and expect live, acting singers to perform rhythmic acrobatics against an unyielding, taped accompaniment. So he pared his rhythmic style way down; your only hints that he's a cross-rhythm fanatic were occasional repeating vocal lines that would shift out of phase. And while constant streams of eighth-notes beautifully spell out the tempo frictions in his usual music, he didn't allow for the possibility that text-setting might be enhanced by a less monotonous approach.

Even so, the music was far more fun to focus on than the stage action. Gordon kept up a rock-inspired pointillism of industrial noises as relentless as technopop and considerably more complex. Although the texture sometimes changed, the energy level stayed pretty close to max for the entire length of the opera. This strategy weaves magic in Gordon's hypnotic instrumental music. One could imagine it working for an opera based on some mystical, slow-moving subject devoid of conventional plot. But for this oh-so-conventional plot, with denunciations and mad scenes and love scenes and epiphanies, it denied the audience any articulation that would have clarified the action and projected some kind of organic unity on the whole. Even Glass has never attempted an opera so minimalist that it didn't occasionally change tempo and volume. And since the music was too loud and raucous for many of the words to be audible, the plot and stage action quickly sank to the status of a dripping faucet that now and then distracted one's attention from the music.

Not that *Chaos* was the worst opera Downton has seen in recent years; that honor has to go to the sublimely embarrassing *Naked Revolution*, which the Kitchen staged awhile back. The question is how such smart people, with such laudable artistic histories behind them, can make such obvious mistakes in such an expensive production. ▣

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