

MINNEAPOLIS

Everything under the sun is under me," bellows Man, the otherwise unnamed hero/villain of William Harper's new opera *Snow Leopard*, and "everything under me is under control." Man is building a dam in Tibet as part of a covert operation by the U.S. government designed to help the Communists strengthen their control. An idealist, he thinks he's helping modernize Tibet: "I turn prayer wheels into turbines." Then the American press exposes the project, the government disavows it, Man becomes the fall guy, and even his wife abandons him. In a surreal rap wedding/trial/press conference, the judge shouts, "I now pronounce you guilty, you may kiss the bride." Man, at wit's end, responds plaintively, "I really don't understand what's going on here."

It's a typical Harper confusion. I followed Harper's early operas when I lived in Chicago, back when, with daunting energy, he wrote and produced one new full-length stagework a year: *John Ball Shot Them All, I've Known Rivers* (the only one New York's heard so far), *Dead Birds*, *Crimson Cowboy*, and *Peyote Roadkill*. They were intense, complex, ambitious pieces, ornate as to plot, full of video, dance, and slides, the kind of pieces Robert Ashley might have made if he loved c&w and wasn't so laid-back. They contained some of the most inspired musicodramatic devices I've seen: I'll never forget the low B-flat hum of alternating current from which *Peyote Roadkill* emerged, just as *Das Rheingold* does from an E-flat major triad. They also took plenty of risks, and sometimes fell on their faces; "In Chicago," Harper once told me, "no one can hear you fail."

With *Snow Leopard*, Harper's finally going national—the Minnesota Opera New Music-Theater Ensemble produced the work at Minneapolis's Southern Theater November 9 through 19, and hopes to tour it. Accordingly, he's scaled down his ambitions, streamlined his plot, re-

duced his sets and costumes, and, in the process, delivered a 90-minute opera as smooth as a good detective novel. A firm believer in the vernacular, he fused rock, blues, gospel, rap, and Protestant hymnody in the work's taped, MIDI-created accompaniment. In past works those elements have jarred, but *Leopard's* most ingenious quality was how inconspicuous-

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ly it slid between styles. Nothing was more Mozartean than the deceptive simplicity of Harper's "vernacular": if you listened carefully, you realized that eccentric meters and Schoenbergian sonorities were more common than the pop-tinted surface led you to think.

The premiere's performance circumstances could hardly have been more auspicious. Its text written with Roger Nieboer, *Snow Leopard* grew out of Ben Krywosz's work in bringing together composers and librettists, first with Opera America, now with the Minnesota company. Members of the latter benefited from H. Wesley Balk's acting techniques for singers; not only was the ensemble acting flawlessly convincing, but the nine-person cast maintained perfect voice whether rolling on the floor or swinging from the set's stylized dam framework. As Man, Paul Garth Pruitt had a rich tenor that made an effectively slow transition from unbounded pride to

"Snow Leopard"

Prayer Wheels
Into Turbines

BY KYLE GANN



Clockwise: Pruitt, Lillis, and Kalm

SUSAN NELSON

wounded vulnerability. He was almost overshadowed, though, by his primary nemesis, New Yorker Stephen Kalm as the Potter/Judge/main Dark Angel, a devilishly oily Sportin' Life-type character.

Comparisons between Harper and Wagner are difficult to avoid. Like Wagner, he searches for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the theatrical totality designed in detail by a single brain (allowing a colibrettist was a rare act of delegation). Like Wagner's, Harper's tonalities move slowly with a steamroller momentum that eased me into three cases of goose bumps before I knew what had happened. Harper's most impressive achievement is that he's found a way to divorce rock opera from song

form, to make vernacular music continuous without falling into the staidness of Ashley or Glass.

The peripeteia in Man's fortunes came surprisingly early, and the opera then turned into the mélange of gospel numbers and game-show satire that characterized *Crimson Cowboy*, finally dissolving into Wife's lament for the man her husband once was. That shape underscored not the political conflict, but the feelings that arise when a worldview backfires, and Harper has a kinky Democrat's sympathy for Republicans trapped in their own crumbling dream. We were supposed to read Ollie North, Richard Nixon, Jerry Falwell into Man, but his lack of a name, combined with the absence of empathetic opposing characters, denied us the luxury of distance; we got a hint of what it feels like to inadvertently earn society's wrath and incomprehensibly face it. In a less highbrow idiom, *Snow Leopard* tackled the issues a sequel to *Nixon in China* might have had to.

Harper's stylized, multileveled approach to those issues didn't quite escape his bugbear obscurity; the opera's middle was too busy too long, and for a quarter-hour I was as lost as Man was. Still, the Met couldn't fill its season if it used uninterrupted comprehensibility as a criterion, and, as in Wagner, Harper's music bulldozed its way through dramatic flaws via sheer beauty. The Wife's "Once upon a time I knew a man" (sung as it deserved to be by Nancy Lillis) may be the most touching love aria in English since John Adams (the president, not the composer) courted Constance Fletcher in *The Mother of Us All*, and the choral spirituals (quoting "Motherless Child" and "Going Home") lifted you above the action with a heavenly commentary reminiscent of Monteverdi. When words failed, the political and psychological points were shaped and propelled by the music, which is why, despite its rock idiom and absence of live instrumentalists, *Snow Leopard* remained very much an opera. ■

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