

Memory, Music, and Melville Mix in the Record of a Soul at Sea

## ABOUT THIS WHALE . . .

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

## AND GOD CREATED GREAT WHALES

By Rinde Eckert  
Dance Theater Workshop  
219 West 19th Street 212-924-0077

"The play is memory," Tennessee Williams said it, but Rinde Eckert's music-theater piece, *And God Created Great Whales*, lives by the same dangerously slippery parameter. Memory is its life—not lingered over lovingly and regretfully, in the Williams style, but clutched, urgently, in a desperate race against the tricks time plays on our minds. Memory dies, or fades, or subtly rewrites itself; all that's left when it goes is the part you managed to record. Which takes art: the art of writing it down, putting it in sounds or images, getting it right on paper or on tape. Those who equate the human record with history should remember that to the Greeks, Clio was merely one of nine muses.

Nathan, Eckert's hero (played by the author-composer), has an urgent need to record. Suffering from accelerated memory loss, he must complete the opera he's working on before he forgets everything—not only his plan for the opera but who he is and how he lives. "Eventually," we hear his doctor tell him in a taped prologue, "you will forget how to breathe. One might say you will drown in your own ignorance." By no coincidence, Nathan's opera is an adaptation of *Moby Dick*, also the story of a man who might be said to drown in his own ignorance. Nathan's art, like Melville's narrator Ishmael, is to be the sole survivor of this mental shipwreck.

"All things pass. Art, robust, survives eternally." Théophile Gautier's famous lines, summing up the Romantics' vision of artistic immortality, ring a jarring note these days. We've seen too much garbage archived and too much greatness lost; we've gotten used to questioning whether art's preservation of memory is worth something after all. But maybe the two views are the thesis and antithesis of a dialectic: The practical world—the one where the Turks' need for electricity is currently drowning the mosaics of Zeugma—must always be against preserving and remembering; the world of art, addressing the spirit, has no choice but to compel remembrance, without which the spirit dies.

Nathan, at any rate, has no choice: His recovery from each memory lapse, like his composing, is guided by the ability to record. An audio cassette player, always hanging around his neck, provides the explanations that get him on track after each blackout. All he has to remember to do is push "play." The device is fraught with danger, of course: By hitting the wrong button, Nathan could erase the instructions. He could take the tape out of the player. He could remove it from his neck and put on, by mistake, one of the innumerable other cassette recorders scattered around the room—one for the final draft, one for work tapes, one for personal thoughts, one for incidental data. The machines are color-coded, but Eckert, under David Schweizer's direction, seems to take a fiendish delight in switching from one to the other—actions as suspenseful as Ahab's hunt for the great white whale.

But how does Nathan remember to push

ECKERT AND COLE IN *GREAT WHALES*: ALL HANDS ON (TAPE) DECK.

"play"? A woman in the room (glamorously pixieish Nora Cole), facing him as the lights come up, tells him to. The tape around his neck tells him that she's imaginary, but also infallible—where art, music, and the dark night of the soul are concerned. Clearly, the muses are still being heard. Nathan's muse is the African American superdiva Olivia Walsh, who has given up the opera stage at the height of her career; her waning faith in opera's grand gestures parallels Nathan's waning memory. Not that Olivia herself is present; what we see Cole play, except at the very last moment, might be described as Nathan's perception of the diva's gestalt, his consciousness of her musical gifts always reawakening his own creative powers.

Eckert unwisely gets us too interested in this figure, causing a bad structural lapse, as the piece hurtles toward its climax, in the form of a big solo number for Cole, in which the muse declares her independence and almost quits. The song's a good one, and Cole sings it with fierce elegance, but our emotions aren't invested in her; we're waiting to watch his struggle for survival, and the shift of focus is as if someone photographing a prizefight tilted the camera away from the ring just before the knockout punch. It softens the work just at the point where it might have carried us to tragic heights. This, too, may be part of Eckert's point: The gradual ebb of memory always makes us miss a few essentials.

Eckert himself misses scarcely any others. Despite its seemingly disjunctive nature, the piece overall has the smooth solidity and assur-

ance of a gorgeous marble sculpture, plus an emotional febrility that keeps it from lapsing into sculptural impassiveness. There's no pretense of actually attempting to dramatize *Moby Dick*: What Eckert does, cannily, is create the novel's atmosphere—with particular reference to the musical world on which Melville drew—while letting its drama seep from our memories into the analogous story of Nathan's mad quest. Melville's characters, seen only in brief blips, are largely embodied by Eckert himself, as Nathan, while Cole plays narration, description, and a multiracial variety of outsiders; she has a real flair for playing roistering seamen.

Big, shaven-headed, seemingly weighed down by woe, Eckert's an imposing figure from the start, but not one that you'd instantly peg as a hero of blazing charisma. That's where his performer's cunning cuts in: While Nathan's waking up to his responsibilities, Eckert looks blank, dull, almost stupefied. You're ready to bag: This guy could never write an opera. Then he starts to play, to speak over the music, finally to sing full out. Talk about finding drama in the human voice: Eckert's a master. Gifted with a heldentenor range, he can growl out Ahab's low baritone squall or, as the cabin boy Pip, render a folk song in unearthly countertenor tones. Easy to take, his compositions always have a songlike clarity of line, over an inventive array of harmonies. In moments of high drama, he sometimes pushes his voice unattractively to the edge of the tone, but opera singers giving their all have done that for at least the last 200 years; it practically certifies

him as the revitalizer of a great tradition.

Because, make no mistake, opera's what we're talking about here—pure drama expressed by way of music. Eckert's means would have seemed a little odd to Rossini, and his techno-impressionist scenery (the subtly evocative set and lighting are by Kevin Adams) might have puzzled Verdi, but the emotional intensity the action produces would have struck them as perfectly natural, just what a composer of *dramma per musica* ought to be doing, via whatever stylistic tactics could reach his audience most effectively. And reach it Eckert does, not only with the terrible spectacle of memory vanishing, but through a host of motifs that touch provocatively on Melville's main themes: human and natural violence, society and freedom, maleness, otherness, and the disquieting sense that pursuing any ideal means pursuing Destiny, which means pursuing your own death. Rich with ideas, the piece is also too constantly in passionate motion to be called cerebral. It made me feel alive at a time when little in the musical theater does. ▣

The Albo Show

## TUBE BOOBS

## SEXOTHEQUE

Krairie Theater at KGB  
85 East 4th Street 212-777-6088

Part *Truman Show*, part *Bride of Frankenstein*, Mike Albo's gaudy, psychedelic *Sexotheque* attacks media manipulation in a manner just as manic as the process itself. Pitting caffeinated Nielsen analyst Randy Taylor (George Henderson) and his minions against the stars of *Totally Hot* and the Blahblue family, the comedy meditates on control—how advertising hypnotizes consumers and how celebrities are at the mercy of the public and the ratings system.

Director Michael Goldfried shows us Taylor directing the stars (who are permanently "colorcast" inside the television) via mic and remote control. "Latent lesbian" Mara Blahblue (Abby Scott), 13, smacks gum and stares at the tube, entranced. Led by Cassie Neet (Cary Curran), the celebrities resemble the Fly Girls on acid, performing pseudo-Janet Jackson moves in bright, tacky outfits, stuck where "everything smells like plastic." Trouble begins when analyst Tina (Barbara Stein) falls in love with Mara and tries to communicate with her through the celebrities, sending Taylor's plan awry.

The celebrities are rejects: fallen magazine editors (one, played by Sandra Bauleo, cites "Five Steps to Happiness"), MTV VJs, and commercial actors. We learn that head celeb Cassie—a sort of bad-girl Britney Spears on Prozac—has been sent to the celebrity chamber for calling someone a fag "in front of Michael Musto." Set to a techno score by Blondie's Chris Stein, *Sexotheque* is hyper Downtown monologist Albo's first play, and while he doesn't set foot onstage, you feel his wily ways in every scene. Nothing about Albo or the play is subtle. He mocks commercial jingles, idol worship, and our capacity for devouring pop life hook, line, and sinker. —Tricia Romano