ABOUT THIS WHALE . . .

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

AND GOD CREATED GREAT WHALES

By Ritse Eckert
Dance Theater Workshop
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"The plays in memory." - Tennessee Williams said it, but Ritse Eckert's music-theater piece, And God Created Great Whales, lives by the same dangerously slippery parameter. Memory is in its life—not lingered over lovingly and respectfully, in the Williams style, but clattered, urgently, in a desperate race against the trials into play on our minds. Memory dies, or fades, or subtly reverts 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 on tape, 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 what he is and how he lives. "Eventually," he hears his doctor tell him in a taped, protracted, "you'll 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 narrate Ishmael, is to be the sole survivor of this musical shipwreck.

"All things pass. Art, robust, survives eternally." - Isidore Ducasse's famous lines, summing up the Romanticism's vision of art as immortally, ringing a jarring note these days. We've seen too much gasp and cringe, too much greatness lost; we've gotten used to questioning whether art's preservation of memory is worth suffering the pain it requires. In the end, the two sides are the thesis and antithesis of a diabolic. The practical world—the one where the Turks' need for electricity is currently drowning the mosaics of Zanzibar—must always be against preserving and remembering, the world of art, addressing the spirit, cannot be ignored, for the spirit, has no choices but to compel remembrance, without which the spirit dies.

Nathan, at any rate, has no choices; 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 dancer is taught 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 respond to it from his neck and put on, by mistake, one of the innumerable other cassette recorders scattered around the room—ones for the final draft, one for rough tapes, one for personal thoughts, one for incidental data. The machines are useless, coded, but Eckert, under David Schweitzer's direction, seems to have taken the idea of "playlist" and run with it. The music is, in a word, dazzling. With the time they might have used to-tragic heights. Thus, 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 derivative nature, the piece overall has the smooth solidity and assurance of a gorgeous marble sculpture, plus an emotional integrity that keeps it from lapsing into sculptural immanence. There's no pretense of actually attempting to dramatize Moby Dick. What Eckert does, correctly, is create the novel's atmosphere—with particular reference to the musical world in which Melville lives—while letting its drama seep from our memories into the analogous story of Nathan's mad quest. Melville's characters, seen only in brief glimpses, are largely embodied by Eckert himself, as Nathan, while Cole plays narration, description, and a multitudinous variety of observers; she has the real flair for playing reiterating sound.

Big, shaven-headed, seemingly weighed down by hose, Eckert's an imposing figure from the start, but not one that you instantly peg as a hero of blazing charisma. That's where his performer's cunning comes in. While Nathan's weakness up to his responsibilities, Eckert looks bleak, dull, almost stumped. You're ready to hug. This guy could never write an opera. Then he starts to play, to speak over the music, finally to sing out. Talk about finding drama in the human voice. Eckert's a master. Gifted with a holdover range, he can growl out Abbe's low-baritone lead or, as the calms boy Pip, render a folk song in unashamed counterpoint tones, lippy to take. His compositions always have a songlike duality of tone, over an inventive array of harmonies. In moments of high drama, he sometimes pushes his voice unattenuately to the edge of the scoop, 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 water of music. Eckert's means would have seemed a little odd to Rosenzweig, and his techno-impressionist sense (the subtly evocative set and lighting are by Kevin Adams) might have puzzled Verd's, but Eckert's innovative use of action this production would have struck them as perfectly natural, just what a composer of dramas per musica must be doing, via whatever realistic tactics could reach his audience most effectively. Eckert's contribution, not only with the terrible spectacle of memory warping, but through a host of motifs that touch provocatively on Melville's novel themes: human and natural violence, society and freedom, madness, others' singing, and the singing sense that pursues any ideal means pursuing Destiny, which causes pursuing your own death. Rich with ideas, the piece is also disarmingly, positively moving, the title of cerebral. I made me feel alive at a time when little in the musical theater does. \[\]

THE ABEL SHOW

TUBE BOOBS

SEKODOHUE

Kraine Theater at KGB
85 East 4th Street 212-777-5000
Part Thrown Down, part Thrown of Frankenstein, Mike Butera's new one-act takes its queuing from the novel's manipulation in a manner just as maniacal as the process itself. Fittingly called "Natalist" (the novel's key scenario), and his monologues against the stars of Truly Hot and the Blakie family, the comedic madness is endless, not ad vertising hypnotic consummating and how celebrities are at the mercy of the public and the ratings system. Director Michael Goldberg shows us Taylor directing the stars who are permanently "categorical" inside the television via mic and remote control. "Laconic" Lesbian Mara Blakie (Abby Scott), 13, snarks and stores at the tube, entrenched. Led by Cassie Nett (Gary Curran), the celebrities resemble the Fly Girls on ice, performing pseudo-Janet Jackson moves in bright tacky costume, still where "everything smells like plastic." Trouble begins when analyst Tina (Barbara Stein) falls in love with Mare and tries to communicate with the television through the celebrities, sending Taylor's play away.

The celebrities are rejects: fallen magazine editors (one, played by Sarena Basile, cites "Five Steps to Happiness"), MTV VJs and commercial actors. We learn that head oink Coolie—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 Musts." Set in a technorally by Blandon's Crispin Stein, "Sekodohue" is hyper Downtown monologist Albino's first show, and while he doesn't set foot onstage, you feel his ego wars in every scene. Nothing about Albino or the play is subtle. He mocks commercial jingles, idol worship, and our capacity for devouring pop life hook, line, and sinker.—Irina-Romano