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IPR presents Experiments in Opera's "New Shorts"

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Something (as far as I know) unprecedented will happen in Brooklyn this Saturday night, February 9th. There will be an event similar to the "10-minute-play" evenings that often take place in the theater world. But the 10-minute-things won't be plays, they'll be operas. A young group called **Experiments in Opera** (good name) has invited an even younger chamber music group called **Hotel Elefant** (very good name) to collaborate with them on an evening of ten ten-minute operas, to be presented by **Issue Project Room**. They've commissioned ten brand new operas from ten composers. They've got the operas to prove it.

Have I been missing out? Maybe 10-minute-opera nights are flourishing and I'm just not on the right email lists. It seems somehow like an idea whose time has come. There's a need for the largest of the performing arts to scale down, partly because of the ever-worsening financial malaise and partly because of, well, a certain kind of exhaustion with the large scale (and yes, in my mind those two things are linked). I love Don Giovanni at the Met, really, I do. But I admit I sort of wish it was, well, a little smaller. Evidently I'm not alone. According to Mary Kouyoumdjian, one of the directors of Hotel Elefant, Saturday's performance hopes to rescue/resuscitate opera from its current image as "a big formal production that's funded, produced, and viewed by only the upper class. Today's opera can be of any scale; on any range of topics from the intimate to the controversially political; can neglect politeness and expectation; and most importantly, can be written for any audience."

Leaha Maria Villareal, another director of Hotel Elefant, told me that aside from the ten-minute constraint, the commissioned composers were given no instructions about whether the operas should be comic, tragic, tonal, atonal, or sung in a particular style, or whether there should be singing at all (why shouldn't people speak throughout an opera?). Some composers wrote their own libretti, some turned to friends, some borrowed stories from literature. For some pieces, directors were brought in, costumes were hunted up, etc. For other pieces, not. It's not surprising that one of the commissioned composers is the brilliant Robert Ashley, who has been redefining the world of opera for decades, producing a series of masterpieces which gorgeously combine American vernacular idioms with stark musical forms and spin them into devotional epics. What is surprising (SPOILER ALERT!) is that Ashley has contributed what may be the evening's most radical re-definition of opera: a piece for solo piano. No words at all, no people on stage.

I've heard/seen bits of some of the operas, some in rehearsal, some in "demo" form (I like the idea that an opera today can have a "demo"), and I can report that what we've got here is a genuinely experimental impulse, allowed to set off impulsively in all directions. The results (that I've heard) combine a sort of merry shot-in-the-dark presumptuousness with a truly endearing false modesty. None of the pieces I've witnessed sound anything like each other musically or share any sort of tone theatrically. There's a funny story about a frustrated New York artist whose retired mom is taking guitar lessons from Loretta Lynn, set to groovy almost-pop rhythms and sesame-street-jazzy chords. There's a monologue built from middlebrow-philosophical musings of a stamp collector, accompanied by smeary not-quite-atonal punctuations that slowly take over, pushing the monologue into narrative territory. There's some frighteningly intense electronica, and there are some hip-hop beats. It all feels exploratory and germinal, and germinal feels exactly right.

But I don't want to suggest that this is going to be an evening of baby steps. Aaron Siegel, co-founder of Experiments In Opera, writes: "We are living through a hugely transitional time period and have an opportunity to question many of the basic assumptions about the way we have constructed our world. Opera gives composers, librettists, designers and directors a voice in helping to define and shape the stories, mythologies and archetypes of our times." Some of the composers (not just Ashley) featured on this evening already have well-established careers in which they have already composed operas (including hours-long ones). This evening isn't anybody's attempt to make it big by "starting small."

Still, to me at least, "start small" (or maybe "stay small") feels like a timely suggestion for opera in general. Apologies if I seem to be reading too much into this premise, but if you can't read too much into an invitation to an evening of ten-minute operas, what can you read too much into? Let's see what happens.

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Issue Project Room and Experiments in Opera present:

'New Shorts' featuring Hotel Elefant

Sat, February 9, 2013 – 8:00pm

The Actor's Fund Arts Center, 160 Schermerhorn Street, Brooklyn

Click [here](#) to buy tickets.