Our Two Cents Worth:
An Opera of Work, Timeliness, Renewal

by Nicholas Birns

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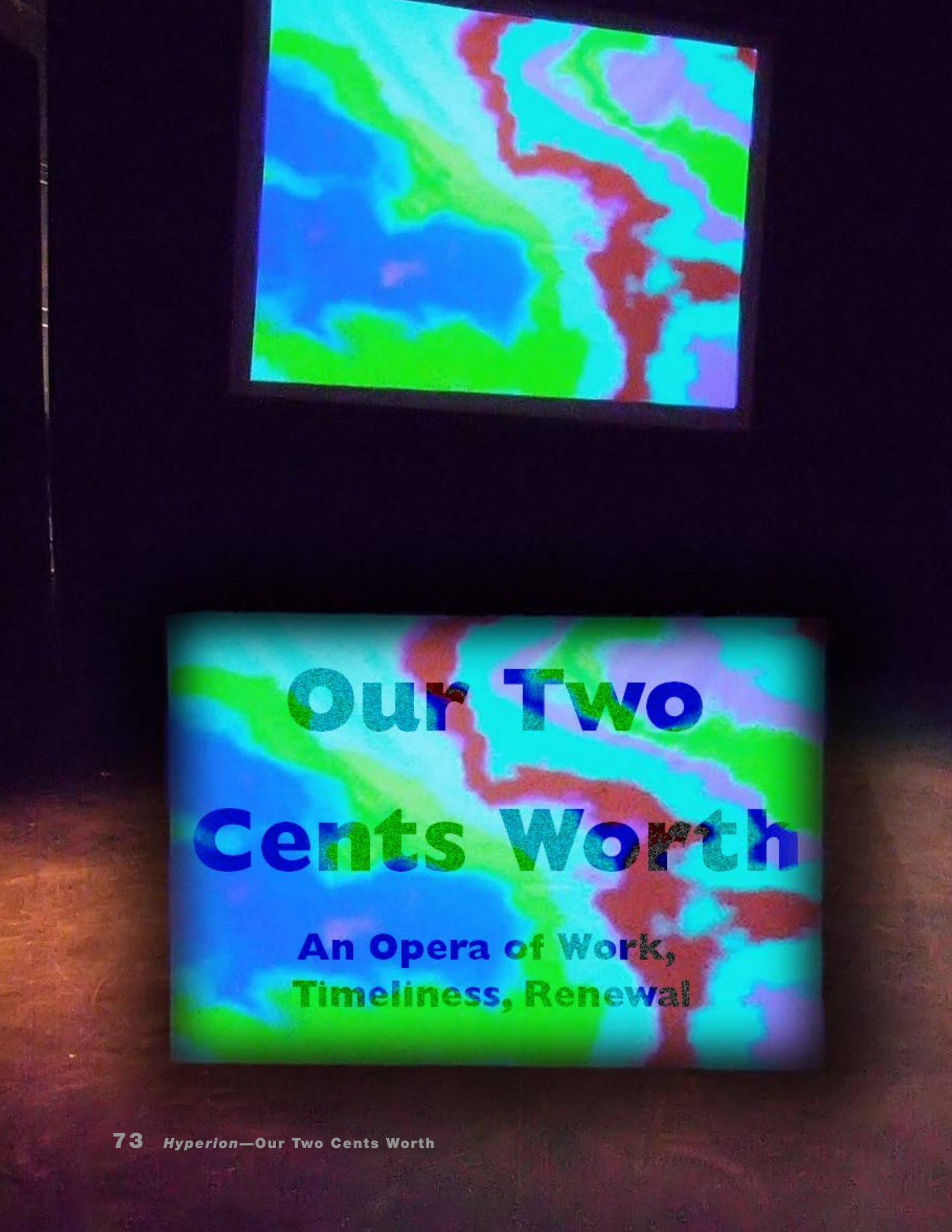
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HYPERION
On the future of aesthetics

THEATER

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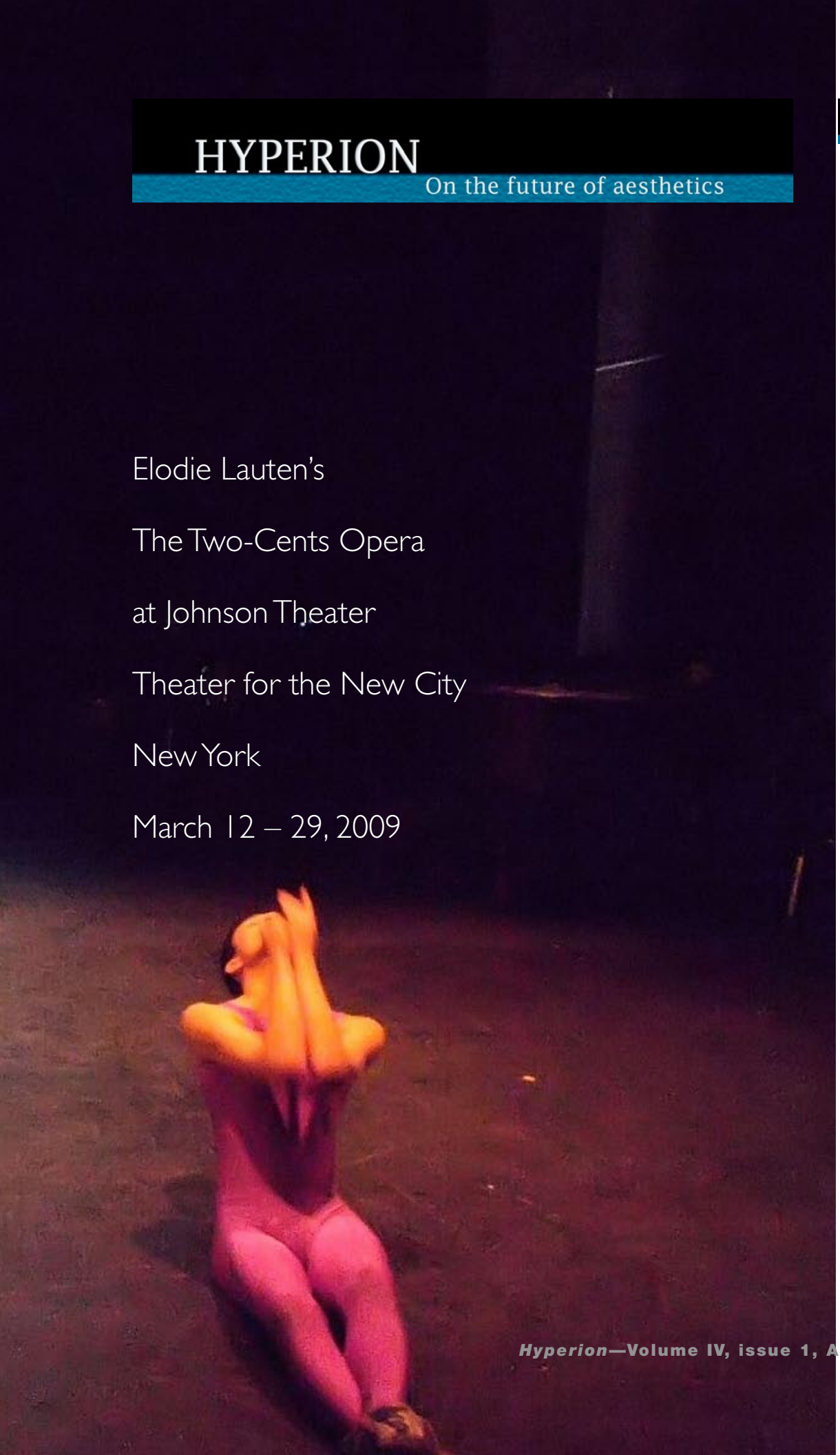

Elodie Lauten's The Two-Cents Opera at Johnson Theater Theater for the New City New York March 12 – 29, 2009

Elodie Lauten's *The Two-Cents Opera* is a work of art about the making of a work of art; but it is also about what makes art work, in its sinew, in what Yeats called its "deep heart's core." Lauten is well-known as one of a group of post-minimalist composers who have kept the repetition and imaginative austerity associated with LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, and most famously, Philip Glass. As in any "post-", there is always a question as to whether post-minimalism, as an operative term, upends, subverts, amends, or perpetuates minimalism. Lauten shares minimalism's rejection of academic serialism and of a cerebral, unemotional approach to making music, but allows for more chord changes, more of a role for language and for wordplay, and more sampling of traditional genres—Lauten's work, like that of other post-minimalist composers such as Lisa Karrer, Corey Dargel, and Barbara Benary, is open to folk, rock, and world influences. Lauten's music possesses a complex and unusual set of layers and odd combinations of instruments. Lauten's work, though, is not at all a concession to mass taste; it is idiosyncratic, haunting, with a melancholy, quizzical quality all its own. The music, at just one remove from sweetness, remains in the interrogative mode, tantalizing us with the prospect of a wholeness it is too rigorous to incarnate.

Lauten's music has found consistent and well-placed champions, such as John Schaefer, Gregory Sandow, and Kyle Gann, but it is difficult to graph it on the current highly commercialized and conventionalized map of cultural history. There is a sense of not totally fitting into what is expected, which may well work to Lauten's advantage. Lauten's French-American background is important for understanding her work. She was raised in Paris and did her undergraduate work there in economics. This contributed to her 'mathematical' side, later evident not only, obviously in her musical composition in the influences of fractal geometry in her multimedia images. She then went to NYU for graduate training in electronic music and ethnomusicology. Her diverse influences—ranging from jazz to rock world music—all against the background of a demanding classical training in music—have arguably emancipated her from standard American mystiques: aesthetic, ideological, generational. Her previous work includes *The Death of Don Juan*, combined a feminist interrogation of the old paradigm with an experimental interest in seeing how far stories can be told without the crutch of traditional narrative unfolding. Revisionary impulse, comic verve, and a genuine belief in the continuing need for high art create a distinct, charming, slightly unnerving mélange. Perhaps her best known work is *Waking in New York* from the poetry

of Allen Ginsberg, which was showcased at the New York City Opera and listed by Sequenza21 as “one of the most influential works of the last three decades.”

The Two-Cents Opera, though, has the potential to be Lauten’s most intriguing and challenging work. The title of *The Two-Cents Opera* might indicate the work has more of a relation to the *Threepenny Opera* of Kurt Weill than it does. The title is less a devaluation of Weill’s—a depreciation by 33%—than a reference to the good old American idiom, “I am putting my two cents in.” Two cents may be all we have left in the financial sense, but it stands for our bedrock right of self-assertion in the imaginative sense. And in style Lauten is very different from Weill. Weill was a musical-comedy composer more or less, taking his sources from cabaret and popular song, and equipping himself with a consciously historical and already mythified scenario in what he drew from John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera.* Lauten is interested more in opera *per se*: the work is in three acts, as a traditional opera might be, and it is a lineal albeit far descendant of opera going back through Monteverdi and Glück to Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini. A subtext of Lauten calling this an opera is to call to mind that our usual assumptions of opera are gendered. We think of opera as the great male masterwork, the product of the solitary individual genius. Women composers write song cycles; men write operas. Lauten gives her work an operatic reach to cast into doubt these traditional frames of mind. Lauten’s opera does not depend on the extravagant plots of traditional opera. Instead of retelling grand stories, she anatomizes the creative process itself, the internal and external obstacles it faces. Yet the work’s greatest achievement—its depiction of plangent, unabashed emotion on stage and in a manner that is, within its own idiom and medium, decorous—is quintessentially operatic.

There are five musicians on stage. Lauten herself plays the piano—she has composed frequently for solo piano and has a supple, chromatic approach. One feels in fact that in her piano playing she is trying to interpret, to make accessible, the complexity of her own composition—not only mediating it to the audience but in a sense becoming the first audience member, making sense of her own work on the keys just as we do so at a further remove. Andrew Bolotowsky’s flute has the task of communicating the looming tension of the tone; this it does persistently and cogently. Bill Ruyle’s percussion does not let the listener miss a beat, keeps us in line and also keeps our pulse going. There is also a guitar and a bass guitar. The string-players, Jonathan Hirschman and Steven Hall, provide the melancholy lyricism, the yearning for something better, which keeps our mind engaged at the same level as our senses. In the opera, the music is the hinge, but by no means the sole element. There is interpretive dance—the characters do not only sing, but move around, the language of gesture is one of the languages of the opera, one which it uses to express its tightly-wound disturbance and joy.

The fractal images Lauten generated on a computer are an important part of the opera. That chaos can be both uncertain and aesthetically pleasing, that it can jettison any sense of the foundational yet still intrigue, delight, absorb, and calm us, is a paradox the music and narrative line also instill but for which the viewer is, as it were, subliminally prepared by the fractal art. Poised on the precipice between being lulling and startling, the images allure us, yet keep us on edge. The fractals also provide an important compositional principle for Lauten, as they indicate a mode of arrangement that is not hierarchical or simply repetitive yet still presents an idea of order, although a very asymmetrical one, lacking any reassuring tradition behind it. Another wayward principle of order in the opera is text. Text is an important feature that Lauten exploits well beyond the superscriptions available at 'mainstream' opera performances—which are most often there as translations. Lauten uses text to orient the audience, to crystallize their attention. She does not provide too much text, which would make the experience too much like reading at home on a computer screen and elevate the linguistic over the work's other register, and, if the signers articulate clearly, which here they do, would indeed add a layer of redundancy. She provides, though, enough text to serve as a kind of sideways commentary on the action, and also to note the continuing presence of the conscious even as we delve into the unconscious. All these elements—music, dance, text, images—were sutured together by Lauten's own staging (and her conception of the work as a multimedia piece). Alex Bartenieff's chiaroscuro lighting and Richard Reta's audio-visual technical work are unifying elements without which the work's different media would not be able to be held in a sustainable gestalt.

Our point-of-view character—the prism through which we experience our own hallucination and reawakening—the composer (played by Jennifer Greene) is unable to compose. She consults seven psychiatrists; we see the eighth, 'Shrink 8' (played by Gregg Lauterbach). Shrink 8 does the best he can—this is not an anti-psychoanalytic jibe, despite the composer's funny

Elodie Lauten

protest, “I don’t want to talk about my childhood! Not my childhood!”—but the more primal aid of the psychic is more productive and unleashes a creative regression that elucidates all the fears and vectors of consciousness that the earlier aesthetic paralysis had blocked. The opera is both witty and mystical; it sounds the depths but sparkles on the surface. The ensemble worked so well together that, when a member of the audience, spurred by enthusiasm rather than any commercial motive, began to, unsanctioned, videotape the piece, the Shrink sung ‘No flash photography!” in such a confident, melismatic way that at least this audience member thought it was a totally preplanned disruption of the frame!

The young Beethoven (played by Ulysses Borgia, who added a compelling operatic feel) is also prominent figure, incarnated in the first act. Beethoven is an interesting choice, as he famously wrote one opera. But he stands for the apotheosis of Romantic creativity that is not only old hat but conceptually implausible now; there lies a difference between “we don’t want to do Beethoven any more” and “we can’t do Beethoven any more,” and Lauten seizes upon the sense of crisis that is generated by this slippage. In addition, Beethoven’s deafness becomes a metaphor for the obstacles facing the contemporary composer. Beethoven could not hear himself compose, and composed brilliantly in spite of that. The contemporary composer cannot be heard by the world. (The work is done and I am alone/A woman, alone/What can I do to change the world?/Without the work I fade, I lose myself/I become anonymous/A nameless drone without a face.) Her audience is deaf to her. In both cases, deafness is a challenge; the opera, though, takes the tentative tack of hope that our deafness is partially treatable, that the work can serve as a sort of audio-therapy. Another ‘helping’ figure is the Eccentric Friend, played by Karmen Kluge, whose performative vivacity and operatic experience add considerable power to the opera.

The second act is dominated by the Clairvoyant, sung spectacularly by the soprano Mary Hurlbut, a psychic who guides the composer through a past life regression. The ultimate result of this regression is the Trickster (Khao Boi Le, who dances uninhibitedly and superbly). The Trickster, a staple of native American legend—with analogues in other traditions such as, most obviously, Odysseus—as been written of with such acuity not only famously by Jung but also by Paul Radin, is subversive, amoral, not to be trusted—but also liberating and with a sense of fun that comes close to making up for all the risks he embodies. The Trickster, though, is not an amiable sprite, a kind of chthonic Ariel; he embodies all the negativity the composer must purge in order to complete her work. It is only when, in an occult healing ceremony, the Clairvoyant catches the Trickster’s spirit inside an egg—immuring, in a sense, the death instinct within a matrix of life and rebirth—that the composer’s path to seeing it through opens. The egg imagery recalled the importance of egg symbolism in J. J. Bachofen’s *An Essay on Mortuary Symbolism*,

which influenced Nietzsche's ideas about Dionysus and Apollo in *the Birth of Tragedy*. The egg as an uncanny force of creation, of representing both division and unity, birth and death, embodies the dangers of the exhilarating creativity the composer seeks to recapture. Lauten's treatment of the Trickster reminded me of Joan Jonas's rendering of the collision of myth and alienation in *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* in its mixture of psychoanalysis, modernity, and multimedia, although Jonas is seeking or at least interrogating modernist 'wholeness' whereas Lauten is in search of just what it will take to create art, and no more; the Clairvoyant and the Trickster do not pretend to provide global solutions, although their individual healing—the restoration of the 'balance' that the Shrink originally warns the Composer she is in danger of losing—may be inferentially global.

The partiality of the sustenance is demonstrated in the third act. The opera has been completed, Clairvoyant and Trickster have done their job, but here is no salvation. The Shrink's warning, at the beginning, that the opera will drain rather than replenish the Composer is all too true. The third act also takes us into contemporary times—the economic downturn and the questioning of truths previously absolute it has entailed. In a sense, all we celebrate at the end is the realization of our own uncertainty. This could be waffling or indistinct, but as it is shown it is rousing and exuberant—even if the working-out has not solved every problem, still, there have been things worked out. Lauten reminds us that opera, etymologically, means 'work.' It is a form where all kinds of expression—movement, voice, scenery, music, and, in Lauten's case, text—work together to create a work: there is a wonderful identity of process and product, Lauten is conscious of opera's role as a popular form, something that as recently as the time of Puccini was one of mass-entertainment. But of course things cannot be entirely the same now. In "Crazy Time", the third song from the end, we hear whispering voices, an ominous rifling of sound, and then the memorable ululation, "It's a Crazy Time," commences. This initially comical aria—"someone at the top has made a series of mistakes"—also has an underlying sadness as well as, oddly, a possibility of release, that this 'crazy item' can lead to a recalibration of sensibility, a new solidarity amid distress and even panic. The sense of instability can catalyze as well as convulse, and the infectious quality of the song owes a bit to both reactions. In the finale, titled, slightly ironically, "Closure," the strings at once accentuate and in an odd way resist the rest of the instruments, indicating not only an instrumental dialogue but a sense of the doggedly unfinished, of a principle that will not consent to neat resolution. What is exhilarating is that this internal resistance within the opera can also be seen as a principle of external resistance—of the opera's unwillingness to give in to the forces in the world that would contest its very existence.

The work was conceived before the current economic crisis and is not totally dependent on it for meaning, yet the recession provided a hook that is more

than convenient for helping us relate to the issues Lauten engages. The real occasion of the opera is the challenges art faces in our time. During the boom years, art, though inessential, was affordable. It did not cost much to give at least the illusion that we were an artistically thriving society, curious about forms new and old, rife with a proliferating set of talents and agendas. That the actual infrastructure of funding for the arts always lagged well behind what was economically available and the rhetoric of aesthetic prosperity was ignored. Now that the lid is off our illusions, though, we see how little art matters, how little it ever mattered, how few people genuinely care about it. For every one person genuinely interested in art, there are two who care about it only when convenient or self-flattering, and four, alas, who literally do not care about it at all. Those who do care are an embattled minority: in the boom times, there was the illusion of the culture caring about the arts as a side-effect or self-celebration; when this disappears in the lean times, those who care are faced with their own sparseness, its evidence rendering absent even the consolation of self-pity or inverse superiority. As an artist in mid-career, Lauten's work particularly solicits our notice. We are always ready to applaud the hot young thing and to give a respectful nod to the *éminence grise*. What we forget is that yesterday's hot young thing so often becomes today's neglected midcareer artist, and that few of those will ever make it through to the *éminence grise* stage if they are not supported and given notice. How is creativity possible in this situation? How can someone actually create? There is an element of social protest here—and this reminded me a bit of Mimi Stern-Wolfe's splendid restaging of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* this winter at St Mark's Church—but there is also a more fundamental ontological unease. Creativity is paradoxical because it is at once intensely personal and disinterested. This is why Lauten's scenario, with its layers of progressively deeper and more collective counselors—Shrink Number 8, The Clairvoyant, the Trickster—got away from the merely personal—from simply talking about the composer's

'childhood' in a specifically individual way—yet continued to call up the emotional, to sound as thoroughly as possible "the deep heart's core," but with a lightness and a flair that prevents the work from being preachy or ponderous.

The opera could not have had a better setting than the Theater for the New City, one of the few Downtown institutions to not only survive but expand in an era of gentrification and hyper-gentrification, in which the once-Bohemian East Village is a sea of Duane Reades, Chase banks, and seamlessly interoperable Yuppies. TNC's dual dedication to downtown fun and to serious artistic pursuit made it the ideal venue. The work's production was assisted by Lower East Side Performing Arts, represented by Carolyn Ratcliffe, one of Manhattan's true champions of the arts and of imagination. Its successful run in March 2009 was a singularly New York achievement. One hopes, though, that The Two-Cents Opera will not join the ranks of so many works that are staged in New York City to acclaim and then wither away, not seen in any of the many other sites that could prove fruitful for work and audience alike. The Internet (there are some clips available on YouTube) may alleviate this tyranny of distance, but this work really needs to be restaged, literally, on the ground in many other places. One way this could work is for it to be put on by colleges or even high schools; it is a perfect introduction to the concept of opera, to the procedures of contemporary multimedia art, to the capacity of our age to still have 'composers' who are sensitive to pop music but do not capitulate to its structures. This is a scenario by which *The Two-Cents Opera* could one day, in at least a figurative sense, be worth a million bucks.

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