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OPERA REVIEW

Look, listen, but most of all, wonder

The avant-garde "What to Wear" is music theater best enjoyed by the unprepared.

By Mark Swed
Times Staff Writer

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"What to Wear" — with dazzling, hard-hitting music by Michael Gordon and words, staging, design and equally hard-hitting and dazzling zaniness by Richard Foreman — is being called a rock opera.

It's not. If it were, rock opera could, after the premiere of this arresting new hour of music theater at REDCAT on Wednesday night, be acknowledged as having finally come of age. Sorry, rockers, desperate for your very own operatic fashion statement. You'll just have to wait and see what Elvis Costello comes up with next year at the Royal Danish Opera.

Rather, "What to Wear" is what opera in America might have been like if the Virgil Thomson/Gertrude Stein model in the '30s had become mainstream and kept evolving. Foreman is the irrepressible wild spirit behind the Ontological-Hysteric Theater in New York, a company of untidiness for which Stein and Bertolt Brecht are dueling patron saints. Foreman has also, on occasion, offered up his Ontological realm to the opera house. His "Fledermaus" in Paris was not to be forgotten. This would be a more madcap Mozart year if someone, somewhere, had dared to revive his "Don Giovanni."

Gordon is one of the three founders of the musical collective Bang on a Can, a composer with an ear for grating textures, rock-driven rhythms and sometimes punishing high volumes. He also has developed a personal harmonic language in which he creates dynamic, dramatic processes and follows them through so forcefully that a listener almost feels pinned against the wall. He has absorbed Steve Reich's Minimalist counterpoint and made it his own. Every piece he writes seems to be more riveting than the last.

So what is "What to Wear"? I'm doing my best not to tell you, because this is music theater for the unprepared, a theater that you discover while you look, listen and wonder.

This much, however, is worth knowing: The production, mounted by CalArts' Center for New Performance, is a riot, what with its flamboyant murals (Kate Manheim), wacky props (Carolina Angulo) and outlandish costumes (E.B. Brooks) all merrily competing for attention.

There is a quartet of terrific singers, dressed alike and looking like a kind of postmodern Andrews Sisters, except one sister is a brother in drag — Sarah Chalfy, Harmony Jiroudek, Marja-Liisa Kay and Marc Lowenstein. A six-member chorus marches about, wearing screwy plaids. A larger crew of movement artists marches about, carries skulls on poles, deals with serpents with human heads. A lot of people, including the seven members of the instrumental ensemble, wear headdresses with colored balls atop them.

Playing cards form another visual motif, as do targets. The lighting comes from a chandelier, naked lightbulbs and theatrical lights shined in the audience's face (a Foreman trademark). A duck is somehow in the center of things. Ducks have fun, we learn, because they know when and how to. Foreman's ducks like to drive ominously goofy tanks as well.

The show doesn't make much sense, but it doesn't need to. Foreman sets up word grooves with his elliptical Steinian text, and Gordon goes to town with them. His vocal writing takes inspiration from that of the Dutch Minimalist Louis Andriessen. He asks his singers for little vibrato, and he uses syllables as musical missiles for rhythmic propulsion. The result is a kind of high-octane updating of how Thomson set Stein.

Midway through, at a sort of pinnacle of oddball insecurity, the singers cry that they don't know what kind of movements to make, what kind of language to use, what are the limits of their own bodies or stupidity. They just don't know what to wear. Gordon tells them by having them burst into complicated counterpoint, the music practically bouncing off the funny walls. Only the great duck deity can answer what has become an exhilarating existential question.

Yeah, sure.

The musical ensemble is conducted by David Rosenboom. It includes some of the finest new-music players in this town or any other. It is one more reason not to miss a show that is going to be very hard to get into. REDCAT has reduced its seating to 171 to accommodate everything onstage. "What to Wear" is scheduled for nine more performances. Ten times that number would be more like it.

'What to Wear'

Where: REDCAT, Walt Disney Concert Hall, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: 8:30 p.m. today, Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Sept. 29 and 30; 3 p.m. Oct. 1.

Price: \$20 to \$40

Contact: (213) 237-2800 or www.redcat.org

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