

Shotgun Tells Story of South Berkeley District

By KEN BULLOCK
Special to the Planet

From an Ohlone woman's menage with a zoot-suited Coyote, through a Japanese ex-houseboy and his picture bride eating pickled plums while awaiting relocation, a pair of Cain-and-Abel brothers who end up as Black Panther and strung-out Vietnam vet to the hip-hop kid of an interracial couple who bought a fixer-upper amid the drive-bys, the Shotgun Players' premiere of Marcus Gardley's *Love is a Dream House in Lorin* employs a cast of 30 to play 40-some characters that personify the story of the South Berkeley district in something like the narrative style of a WPA mural, all chromatic persona and event, motifs overlapping in time and space, recurring in gesture and song.

The elaborate and engaging show, a true group effort to reflect a community's reemergent identity, reads like a staged mission statement for the Players, who have called the Ashby Stage home just over two years.

It began right after Shotgun had settled in, when Aaron Davidman, artistic director of San Francisco's Traveling Jewish Theatre (who directs *Dream House*), a resident of Lorin in the early 1990s, read Melody Erma-child Chavis's neighborhood memoir *Altars in the Streets*, and approached Shotgun founder Patrick Dooley about working together on a show that featured the community itself. Oakland-born Yalie playwright and Columbia U. teacher Marcus Gardley was commissioned last year, local people's stories

LOVE IS A DREAM HOUSE IN LORIN
8 p.m. Thursday-Sunday through Nov. 5 at the Ashby Stage, 1901 Ashby Ave. \$15-\$30. 841-6500, www.shotgunplayers.org.

were gathered by the Shotgun team, Gardley's many drafts of the play that he workshopped with the cast during his residency swelled ("We told him, let your imagination run wild," said Dooley), and an exultant yet fiery public reading and discussion of a late version in July set the stage for last week's triumphant opening night.

Dream House, with its broad spectrum of present-day and historical (and mythic) local characters, its elliptical leaps between interlocking events from all eras, its language that ranges from Sunday sermon to rhymed street talk to song, sprawls—yet is tightly interlaced in all its vignettes and incidents, completely coherent, until at the end the crowd of previously divisive locals steps forward to tell their stories, their spirit eliciting a glowering gunman to put down his piece, have his say, and join them.

"In some ways it was a lot easier than writing a play from my own imagination," Gardley told Shotgun's literary manager Liz Lisle. "For one, the stories were already rich and moving; I just had to thread them together."

But Gardley's script is indeed rich with imagination, following a pattern he saw emerge from the research: a place where all kinds of people came to live, all with dreams they watched crumble. "This land is cursed," Gardley recalls saying out loud, adding, "It wants to be healed."

Whatever they see in it, the stories *Dream House* provides a mirror to stimulate imaginations of locals and visitors alike, touching on both the dreams and hard times, and just suggesting current controversies. It's an evening-long paean to that time-honored but neglected injunction, "Love Thy Neighbor."

Across the board—cast of 30, all ages and levels of performing experience, and production team of half that size—everybody has delivered to the best of their considerable abilities, costumed variously and choreographed across a set of a house undergoing remodelling under a backdrop of hills and swirling clouds, with quick, dramatic changes in light and sound.

It would be unfair to single out anyone without naming all of them. Or maybe provoking a roll call of Lorin itself, past and present—of which only a dozen or so residents came to greet the opening of the Ashby Stage two years ago, but as of now, according to Dooley, "the biggest zip-code in our database is South Berkeley."

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Oakland Opera's 'Les Enfants Terribles'

By JAIME ROBLES
Special to the Planet

The Oakland Opera Theater opens this Friday its third Philip Glass opera—the compelling dance opera *Les Enfants Terribles*. This final opera of his trilogy based on the work by French artist Jean Cocteau, *Les Enfants Terribles* has been described by Glass as Cocteau's "tragedy":

"If *Orphée* is Cocteau's tale of transcendence and *La Belle et la Bête* his romance, then *Les Enfants Terribles* is his tragedy. Like the others, it articulates Cocteau's belief in the power of imagination to transform the ordinary world into a world of magic. But unlike the two previous works, in which transformation leads to love and transcendence, *Les Enfants Terribles* takes us to the world of Narcissus and, ultimately, Death."

The opera, which is sung in French with a narration in English, tells of a teenage brother and sister, Paul and Elizabeth, who after the loss of their parents strive to live in a fantasy world they call "playing the game." Increasingly isolated, they pass the days acting out their bizarre imaginings.

Two friends—Gerard and Agathe—join them to form an oddly four-sided love triangle. When Paul falls in love with Agathe, Elizabeth conspires to have Gerard marry Agathe. By ensuring that her brother will never leave her, Elizabeth leads them both into destruction.

Although the original story was set in Paris, director Tom Dean has moved the setting to 1954 French Indochina. Placing the story amidst the turmoil of war, Dean gives the opera a context that lends motivational logic to the characters' escapism. It also restages the piece as a commentary on the self-reflective nature of colonialism. The children of the story are adopted, just as in *Indochine*, French couples found it fashionable to adopt Vietnamese children who were then treated as someone (or something) between a child and a servant.

Soprano Joohee Choi makes her Oakland Opera Theater debut in the principle role of Elizabeth. Choi recently completed a two-year residency with the Los Angeles Opera, and was acclaimed for her performances in *Aida*, *Romeo et Juliette*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Falstaff*.

Axel Van Chee returns to Oakland Opera Theater in the role of Paul. Recently described by Opera News as a "resonant baritone with striking stage presence," Chee performed Captain Valentine in Oakland Opera Theater's *Johnny Johnson*.

Mezzo-soprano Cary Ann Rosko plays Agathe. Tenors Ben Johns and Johathan Smucker alternate in the role of Gerard.

Soprano Choi says she had doubts about singing the part of Elizabeth. Although she wanted to add Glass' work to her repertoire, she was taken aback by the piece's difficulty. At first glance, she says, the music looked simple: "just a piano line." Further study revealed the opera's difficult tones and disharmonies.

Baritone Chee agrees, describing the music as a game of cat and mouse: "The singers are the cat and the notes are

LES ENFANTS TERRIBLES

8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays from Oct. 6 to Oct. 22 at the Oakland Metro Operahouse, 201 Broadway, Oakland (one block from Jack London Square). 763-1146, www.oaklandopera.org.

the mice. You have to keep chasing them."

The music layers an intense rhythmic drive with a melodic line that Chee describes as "very romantic." There are no duets or trios within the opera; the singers continuously switch from line to line, the music making slight shifts between singers. Because the music is minimalist, however, the smallest shift can sound huge.

The singers agree that the melodic lines are lovely. In contrast, Chee remarks, this "very interesting and beautiful" melody provides the setting for a disturbing text. The story is a classic tragedy, with the characters fated to die, unaware that their obsessiveness will ultimately destroy them.

The original score was written so that the singing line could be played on one piano; second and third pianos enrich the music by adding subtle complexity. Oakland Opera has engaged four of the Bay Area's top accompanists—Skye Atman, Paul Caccamo, Daniel Lockert and Kymry Esainko—to perform the three-piano score under the musical direction of Diedre McClure.

Dance, integral to the opera, is woven in from play's beginning to end, and represents the children's fantasy world. Each singer has his or her dance double, and must dance as well.

The eight dancers working with the singers on stage are from the Oakland-based Nguyen Dance Company. Choreographer Danny Nguyen was recently recognized as one of the seven best creative choreographers in the Bay Area at Paul Taylor's annual choreographic symposium in San Francisco.

The sets, painted by Garrett Lowe, represent the house the characters inhabit, and like the music and the realities the children inhabit, are built in many levels like an intricate labyrinth.

Once again Oakland Opera is offering a unique and fascinating theatrical experience with excellent singers, musicians and performers. The company's increasing recognition for its innovative performances of 20th and 21st century operas is well earned and deserves the best of the community's support.

Oakland Opera Theater presents three operas per year, two fully staged and one in concert. Thanks to Jo Vincent Parks, a new member of the board of directors, the theater will launch a concert series this year that will include recitals and instrumental music.



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