

A Water Opera Splashes in Seattle

Category/Issue: Arts & Entertainment, Volume 35 No. 16

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Ebb and flow: unlike the invisible air we breathe, we can see water move and migrate at the beach, during a rainstorm, and even down the drains of our indoor sinks. But what happens when water is restrained, manipulated, or played with? Composer Byron Au Yong explores these questions and others in his latest musical work “Kidnapping Water: Bottled Operas,” a site-specific project that was created to be performed outside traditional music performance venues.

In “Kidnapping Water,” the water is both landscape and instrument. “The percussionist plays the water and are oftentimes in the water,” Au Yong says.

This creates music that is “physical,” a quality that Au Yong has sought to explore during his musical career.

“The singers are splashed by the water, which causes their bodies to react,” Au Yong explains. “Rather than consciously tell the performers that the music should be physical, the spontaneous movements of the performers engage with the joyful and dangerous discoveries of performing with water.”

With physicality comes movement and a sense of location, and sometimes, dislocation.

“The 64 miniatures are performed in 64 waterways throughout King County, so there is the physical movement between locations, yet each bottled opera is a contained world with discrete characters and situations,” says Au Yong.

This migration among sites echoes some of the experiences in Au Yong’s past. “I was born in Pittsburgh and raised in Seattle. In between, my parents and I lived in Los Angeles,” Au Yong says. “When I was age seven I was sent to Chicago to live for a year while my parents got divorced. Moving around defined my early childhood. In the past 10 years, I’ve lived in four cities in two countries.”

“Kidnapping Water” only hints at all this personal movement.

"While I haven't been forced to relocate, perhaps unconsciously there is a pattern of being on the move that feels natural," Au Yong says. "My use of migration as a theme becomes both more literal and understated with 'Kidnapping Water: Bottled Operas.'"

Au Yong deploys the repetition in these travels as a way to create the physical musical rituals that fill "Kidnapping Water." Au Yong says, "I am drawn to ceremony and ritual because they provide order."

Ceremony and ritual also provide a kind of peace, as well. "Paying attention to patterns in nature helps my mind balance," Au Yong says. "I can stand by Lake Washington and feel the wind on my body then get lost in how the wind is also on the body of the lake and the ducks."

He also aims to use ritual to challenge the structure of American society. "If I lived in a society where I had limited options, then I would want to create chaos," he says. "But the reverse is true; I am bombarded with too many choices."

As an example, Au Yong describes the recent loss of his cell phone. "I wish I could get another phone, but I have to decide between 80 million options. It's Friday and I still don't have a phone," he says. "It's kind of nice."

Au Yong's specific occasion for creating "Kidnapping Water" was a study of the "I Ching" or "Book of Changes." Although Au Yong has incorporated the structural elements of the Book of Changes for almost 20 years, he wanted to delve into it further.

In his future musical compositions, Au Yong expects to continue to explore these paradoxes of the American experience, which might resonate with many Asian Americans. "As a non-commercial composer in an advanced capitalist country, I often feel I have little value," he says. "Yet, my incoherent mumbling could potentially have a function. I am drawn to itinerant performances because I feel that to be an American artist is to be a nomad searching for a place."

"Kidnapping Water: Bottled Operas" runs live through August 26, 2008, at various site-specific locations and then from August 29-31, 2008, at Bumbershoot, and then as an installation from September 12 - October 10, 2008, at the Jack Straw New Media Gallery, 4261 Roosevelt Way NE, Seattle 98105.