

ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING

by Mark Shapiro

Serendipitously, as I was walking down Broadway pondering how to convey to readers of *New Music Connoisseur* the experience of watching 31 year old Australian filmmaker Rohan Spong's tenderly engaging 2011 documentary film *All the Way through Evening*, my attention was drawn to a fellow pedestrian coming up the avenue toward me. On his lapel – startlingly – was pinned a frayed and faded AIDS Awareness Ribbon. Those inverted twists of red satin once seemed ubiquitous, but it was ages since I had last noticed one. Later I read on a blog that in some circles they long ago came to be considered “unfashionable.” To a teenager or a twenty something in America or Europe or Australia today, the once savagely omnipresent AIDS epidemic might seem as remote as the Vietnam, or for that matter the Peloponnesian War. In the film's press kit, Spong observes that, although he is gay, “I come from a generation that came after the initial outbreak of AIDS. I didn't know anyone who had died, and didn't know anyone who knew anyone who had died as I was growing up.”

The actor Jeremy Irons inaugurated the AIDS Ribbon at the Tony Awards in 1992, five years after Larry Kramer founded ACTUP, seven years after President Ronald Reagan's first public mention of the disease, and three years before the epidemic peaked in the United States, extinguishing over 48,000 lives. (Not a parenthesis: since the beginning of the pandemic, AIDS has killed approximately 30 million people worldwide, and continues to claim nearly 2 million victims annually.) In the 1980s and 1990s artists produced a cornucopia of books, plays, films, paintings, ballets and musical compositions evoking the sorrow and anger felt so personally by so many as they reacted to the losses exacted by the virus.

Zoom in on New York City, 1990, where the epidemic is raging but has yet to reach its peak, and where many of these artists lived and worked.

Zoom in more closely, to the gracious and airy St. Mark's Church in the Bowery. We're still in 1990. It's December 1, and the

socially and politically aware Mimi Stern-Wolfe, Artistic Director and Impresaria of Downtown Music Productions, has curated, and is now presenting, the first in what will become an unbroken string of annual concerts in connection with World AIDS Day. (In a sly bit of historical irony, St. Mark's happens to enclose the vault of none other than cantankerous anti-Semite Peter Stuyvesant, who sought, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to rid New Amsterdam of Jews; to his Dutch bosses he wrote understatedly that he “deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart.”)

Zoom over now to an East Village (sorry: “Lower East Side” – more about that in a moment) apartment, a film location agent's dream, chockablock with scores, archives and videotapes – *videotapes!* – with just room enough for a sonorous Steinway grand incongruously adorned with leftie stenciling: “Support Your Local Musician.” These are the headquarters in which Stern-Wolfe, now an impish 75, appears to have been living for decades.

In 2010 Spong touched down in New York City and somehow connected with Stern-Wolfe as she was in the throes of putting together the program and recruiting the artists for her twentieth annual show. The undertaking is, as she confides in the movie, a hassle; the project entails a lot of sweet-talking on the phone. Spong immediately perceived the possibilities for a documentary that would celebrate both the missionary labor of Stern-Wolfe and the loving camaraderie of an intimate community of composers and performers, many just a few degrees of separation from Stern-Wolfe's confederate and pal, the tenor Eric Benson, for whom the concert series is named. The concerts, and Stern-Wolfe's dedication to presenting them year after year, constitute the material of Spong's film.

“All the Way through Evening” magnanimously folds into its sixty six minutes extensive footage of vintage concert performances of music by three composers – Kevin Oldham, Robert Chesley, and Chris DeBlasio – plus interviews with a cadre of artists who have loyally been tending the votive flame, notably “heldentenor” (as he is billed) Gilles Denizot, deploying a winsome Gallic accent, and countertenor and violinist Marshall Coid. Underscoring memorably poetic shots of painterly looking skies and cityscapes is the grittier music of Robert Savage, performed by cellist Robert Kogan.

The film is organized into acts, each of which focuses on a single composer. The acts hew to a pattern, schematic yet satisfying, progressing from wintry exterior shots in city neighborhoods to the cozy interiors in which Spong interviewed the speakers. In each panel the composer's family and friends reminisce and offer commentary about the era in which the early concerts took place. A musical performance concludes each episode.

Oldham gets to go first. His is a flashy, easeful pianism, gratifying to watch and to listen to; his collaborator Karen Kushner, tells us that he had big hands and liked to play Rachmaninoff. She chokes up. After learning of his diagnosis Oldham devoted himself single mindedly to composing; there was the pressure, not surprisingly, of “something he

wanted to say." Heartbreakingly, many of the projects on the long to-do list he set himself remained unfinished, and survive only in sketches. In photos Oldham looks like Donny Osmond in his early prime, all gleaming teeth and bright, glad eyes.

Next comes songwriter Robert Chesley, represented by his Emily Dickinson setting "Nobody Knows this Little Rose." The camera's eye travels over the glittering ornaments on a Christmas tree as Chesley's sister Joan Englehaupt talks about her brother: he was, she says, a "keen observer." Segue to the naughty bits. There is a brief clip from a film of Chesley's play *Jerker* (as, also, in "tear ") about phone sex that morphs into something loftier and more vulnerable. Chesley's friend Perry Brass deftly skewers the kebab of "high art and low sex" on which Chesley and his circle routinely feasted. Countertenor Marshall Coid brings Chesley's Dickinson setting to life in a sweetly communicative rendition.

Anchoring the film is a performance from *Walt Whitman* in 1989, a songcycle by Chris DeBlasio (on poetry of Perry Brass) that contains the movie's melancholy but also promissory title phrase. Stern-Wolfe reports that after receiving his diagnosis, DeBlasio, in contradistinction to Oldham, turned his back on composing; AIDS activism became his preferred – his only – expressive medium. For a time he could see no point in writing music, until successfully goaded by Brass, who lured him back to pen and paper with an obvious but essential imprecation: "Only you can write your music."

In the movie, we eavesdrop as Stern-Wolfe watches, apparently for the first time, a videotape of a performance by the baritone Michael Dash, with Chris DeBlasio at the piano. In an outburst of spontaneous collegiality she exclaims, movingly: "He was such a good pianist." Moments later her anguish is palpable as she realizes that the cameraman has focused entirely on Dash, cutting DeBlasio out of the picture.

In press materials and on-line commentary about the film, Stern-Wolfe has attracted to herself, like iron filings, a trilogy of e adjectives: elderly, eccentric, exuberant. Actually, she seems not to be any of these things. Age has brought to her features a craggy, crannied elegance that the camera

adores, but she is no Methuselah. She is more mischievous than strange, and notwithstanding her high spirits admits that she is slowing down.

While the composers themselves undoubtedly raged against the dying light, the movie is eerily devoid of anger. The overall mood is one of sorrow, reconciliation; the vein is lyric not tragic. Stern-Wolfe astutely points out the simplicity and directness of expression that characterize all of the vocal music we hear. Referring to the fading legacy of her beloved composers – and, no doubt, to the gradually nearing terminus of her own personal voyage – Stern-Wolfe observes: "The world moves so fast...it sweeps things under the rug." There is a triple poignancy: of the athletes dying young; of Stern-Wolfe in the early twilight of her journey through the Vale of Sorrows; and of a vividly remembered era already receding, with shocking swiftness, into history.

The film's visual style is subtly appealing. The nostalgia the movie rather queerly inspires is attributable not only to the fossilized-in-amber (culturally speaking) quality of its heroine – Stern-Wolfe inhabits not a gentrified contemporary "East Village" but a poor, artsy, teeming-with-immigrants "Lower East Side" – but also to the sepia tones in which the images are cast. Spong has a particularly alert way with hands and faces. He crops them interestingly, at curious angles, and catches them in the act of doing captivating things. With a film-maker's tactile gaze, he shows a thumb passing under fingers at the keyboard, or a lowered eyelid softly palpitating in an effort of recall. He presents Sterne-Wolf in eloquent silhouette, as she might have been painted by de la Tour.

Fifteen years ago I had the privilege of conducting a recording of Chris DeBlasio's beautiful cantata *The Best Beloved*. Marshall Coid played first violin. In a strange and bitter irony, that recording's producer Gabe Wiener died, shortly after the music was recorded, of a cerebral aneurysm. He was 26. ■

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