

# The Opera: 'Ashmedai' by City Troupe

Work by Josef Tal Is  
at State Theater

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

Add to your list of operas with devils: "Ashmedai" by Josef Tal. It was composed in 1971 and had its American premiere last night at the New York State Theater. Mr. Tal is an Israeli composer and is considered one of the avant-gardists there. But if this opera is representative of his work, his avant-garde proclivities do not extend much beyond Alban Berg's "Wozzeck," which had its premiere about 50 years ago.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about "Ashmedai" is its libretto. Ashmedai is a devil, one of the princes of hell (in the Christian demonology he would be known as Asmodeus). In the libretto by Israel Eliraz (sung to an English version by Alan Marble) he makes a deal with a king to take over the realm for one year. The king, confident in his people, goes along with the game, only to find that demagoguery triumphs over logic. His people gladly follow Ashmedai to disaster. At the end, they destroy themselves.

What Mr. Eliraz is telling us is that only man is vile. The libretto is a literary conception, an allegory of the Final Solution, of racism and hatred. Law, the clergy, the military—these are only figureheads, to be manipulated by the force of evil.

Strong stuff, this, and Mr. Tal has set it in an expressionistic manner in this production at the New York City opera. "Ashmedai" is modern opera, in which the play is much more important than the music. There are a few arias and ensembles, but for the most part the vocal line is declamation, while most of the music comes from orchestral background effects.

There is electronic music, too. Just as Mr. Tal's musical

## The Cast

ASHMEDAI, opera in two act by Joseph Tal. Libretto by Israel Eliraz; English translation by Alan Marble. Conducted by Gary Bertini. Staged by Harold Prince. Sets designed by Eugene Lee. Costumes designed by Franne Lee. Choreographed by Ron Field. Lighting by Ken Billington. Director of electronic sound, Eckhard Marron. American premiere by the New York City Opera at the New York State Theater.

Queen	.....	Eileen Schauler
Mistress of Inn	.....	Patricia Craig
Daughter	.....	Gianna Rolandi
King	.....	Paul Ukena
Ashmedai	.....	John Lankston
Son	.....	Richard Taylor
Taylor	.....	Jerald Siena
First Counsellor	.....	David Griffith
2d Counsellor	.....	Thomas Jamerson
3d Counsellor	.....	David Ronson
Executioner	.....	Irwin Densen
Citizen	.....	Don Yule
First Soldier	.....	Howard Hensel
2d Soldier	.....	Gary Pool (Debut)
Officer	.....	Robert Fisher
Fire Chief	.....	Alan Baker

idiom is in the "Wozzeck" style, so his ideas of electronic music are altogether conservative. There are effects rather than any imaginative use of the new medium. What is most troublesome is the fact that Mr. Tal's vocal settings, with their textbook Bergian disjunct leaps, make verbal intelligibility impossible. A libretto as strong as "Ashmedai" deserves to be understood, but precious little came through last night.

The production was ingenious. Harold Prince, the celebrated Broadway artisan, directed the opera, and his was one of the really imaginative concepts of the evening. He handled "Ashmedai" as a play, and clarified the symbolism by a succession of neat touches. In this he was aided by the stark scenery by Eugene Lee (mostly bleachers, with a few effective props), costumes by Franne Lee and choreography by Ron Field. The choreography, mostly for five soldiers, may have been inspired by the Kurt Jooss of "The Green Table," but it beautifully pointed up the action.

The cast was admirable. John Lankston as Ashmedai and Paul Ukena as the King were brilliant singing actors, with the stress on acting. Too bad that Mr. Tal's vocal settings did not allow the meaning of the words to emerge in higher relief. Also

It's Another Devil of a  
Triumph Over Man

brilliant in characterization were Eileen Schauler as the Queen, Richard Taylor as the Prince, Gianni Rolandi as the Daughter and Patricia Craig as the Mistress of the Inn. Smaller roles were also well handled.

Gary Bertini, the Israeli conductor, led the performance. He and Mr. Tal have worked together many times in the past, and presumably this performance can be considered musically definitive.

"Ashmedai" ends up much heavily weighted as drama than as music. It is a thoughtful piece of work with a telling libretto. But Mr. Tal is not the man to vitalize the opera; in his way he writes as Thomas Pasatieri, whose neo-Puccini "Ines de Castro" came up in Baltimore on Tuesday night. The City Opera has staged "Ashmedai" with imagination and resource, put the work remains more a play than an opera.



© Beth Bergman 1976

John Lankston as Ashmedai

## Tal's "Ashmedai" at City Opera

Blessed with a stunning production and highly imaginative staging by Hal Prince, and enlisting several of the New York City Opera's most talented singing-actors, Josef Tal's *Ashmedai* was an immediate hit with its three audiences—at the American premiere on April 1, and repeat performances April 4 and 6, the first Israeli opera to be heard in the United States.

A tragicomic fable, *Ashmedai* recounts the take-over of a mythical kingdom by the king of the devils, while the rightful king takes a holiday with his mistress. "Israel Eliraz's libretto persuasively mixed the comic and the tragic, the fabulous and the real. And it had the virtue of intelligibility [in its English version by Alan Marbel]," wrote Hubert Saal in *Newsweek*. "It was also skillfully complemented by Tal's eclectic score, which used every available musical idiom from electronics to jazz."

"For a work in the operatic tradition," wrote Irving Kolodin in *Saturday Review*, it is "almost defiantly lacking in visual stereotypes and clichés. To define *Ashmedai* as a *work* rather than an opera is to take into account its use of electronic, amplified, and other artificial sound sources . . . Gratefully, a melodic surge is not excluded from Tal's conception."

Harriett Johnson wrote in the *Post*: "Haunting as the work is in all of its dramatic and musical overtones, the further excitement is the superb musical and dramatic direction of the whole piece. Hal Prince [in his opera debut] has accomplished a miracle with the direction. And Israeli Gary Bertini, a really important conductor, in his American debut, conducted a really eloquent interpretation." Miss Johnson also had praise for the scene designer Eugene Lee and costume designer Franne Lee in their debuts, Kenn Billington, whose lighting "is the best job of illuminating an opera for dramatic effect I have ever seen," and Ron Field for his "imaginative choreography."

"Strong stuff," Harold Schonberg labeled the libretto in the *Times*, set by Tal "in an impressionistic manner."

All writers spoke warmly of the performers: Eileen Schauler as the "kooky, amusing Queen;" Paul Ukena as the King, "brilliant, outstanding," with a death scene that was "chilling;" Patricia Craig as the King's mistress; Gianna Rolandi as her daughter, and, above all, John Lankston in the title role, "a remarkable achievement."

In sum, it was, according to Alan Rich in *New York*, "that rare night when a distinguished opera company, in the hands of some kind of genius, gave this city a brief look at a virtually forgotten style and made it unforgettable."

# Newsletter

## Boosey and Hawkes Inc.



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European press reports on:

## ASHMEDAI

*"...ASHMEDAI must be counted among the few works that are landmarks  
in modern opera music."*

DR. WILHELM HAMBACH  
FLENSBURGER TAGEBLATT 11.11.71

*"... a profoundly intelligent score by an extraordinarily inventive musician."*

HANS OTTO SPINGEL  
DER TAGESSPIEGEL 12.11.71

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I.M.I.'s U.S. REPRESENTATIVES  
BOOSEY & HAWKES INC., NEW YORK

Opening scene of ASHMEDAI (setting: Zbynek Kolar)



... Tal shows great courage in attempting to transform the revolution of contemporary opera into an evolution ...

Herbert G. Hegedo  
np-feuilleton 12.11.71

... the audience is constantly gripped by the pictorially realized action, by the psychological complications, by the tragic and moving scenes in which the essence of existence is mirrored ...

... director Leopold Lindtberg develops the material artistically, dramatically and visually into an extraordinary optical experience ...

... THE MANY INTERESTING ACTIONS OF THE FREQUENTLY UNCANNY PLOT AFFORD THE AUDIENCE A FEAST FOR THE EYE...

HANS HAUPTMANN  
HAMBURGER ANZEIGER-NACHRICHTEN  
10.11.71

... all in all this production ... is a masterpiece of persuasive atmosphere.

Hans Hauptmann  
Hamburger Anzeiger-Nachrichten 10.11.71

... Leopold Lindtberg ... has once again had the opportunity of linking his extraordinary talent to a first-class work ...

... the notional content and the music are so strong that one cannot but approve of "Ashmedai"...

Eric Munk  
Die Tat (Zurich) 17.11.71

... once again the Hamburg State Opera faces the premiere commissioned by a work worthy of world-wide respect ...

... one hears unknown but expressive colours, uncanny atmospherical sounds with moving effects, and one experiences moments of great intensity ...

... together with the precise choir and technical staffing, it was an imposing, collective achievement...

Sabine Tomzig  
Hamburger Abendblatt 10.11.71



Ashmedai (Helmut Melchert) and The King (Vladimir Ruzdak)

... conductor Gary Bertini showed himself to be a musician of extraordinary sensitivity and precision whom we would like to meet more often here ...

K. H. Ruppel  
Sued-Deutsche Zeitung, 12.11.71

... Tal reflects the plot on a higher plane of consciousness ... he serves the words and the actions by supporting and high-lighting them. This is theatre music in the most obvious sense of the concept ...

Israeli conductor Gary Bertini, a discovery for us in Germany, is fortunately ... the best interpreter of this music. He is awake, decisive and has a precise beat and impressive stress ...

... the breathlessness of the scenes following one another with the speed of a lantern does justice to the production ... the mass scenes catch the eye most readily ...

Peter Dannenberg  
Die Welt, 11.11.71

... Helmuth Melchert, the titular hero, gave a masterly performance as the most credible personage on stage ... Gary Bertini was an outstanding conductor, Ekhard Maronn a brilliant tone-director...

Ludwig Pollner

Hamburger Morgenpost 11.11.71

... A CAST OF INTERNATIONAL STARS... BLENDED PERFECTLY WITH A HIGHLY HOMOGENEOUS AND PROFESSIONAL ENSEMBLE ...

ANTOINE GOLEA  
CARREFOUR (PARIS) 17.11.71

... Israel Eliraz has made for Tal a tightly constructed libretto...

Paul Moor

International Herald Tribune 23.11.71

... Prof. Dr. Rolf Liebermann ... has made operatic history ... Joseph Tal's "Ashmedai" should count among the most important ...

Dr. Wilhelm Hambach  
Flensburger Tageblatt 11.11.71

... the costumes are perfect, the production masterly... the whole ensemble is perfectly cast... the conductor fully identified himself with this difficult work ...

... all in all this was an outstanding performance, well worth seeing, of a work that is controversial in point of music and content...  
Norddeutsche Nachrichten 12.11.71

... the staging... choreography ... stage designs was a marvel of movement of light, of truth, of intelligent stylization - every moment being replete with significance ...

Antoine Golea  
Carrefour (Paris) 17.11.71

... the tension-packed two acts ... containing colourful and clearly organized music as well as splendid material for the singers ...

Hans Otto Spingel  
Der Tagesspiegel 12.11.71

Prologue to Act II

... Tal's fondness for rhythm ... lends his music unaccustomed vitality ... he has made expert excursions into other techniques and refinements as aleatory and electronic elements ...

... Gary Bertini keeps tension high from beginning to end ...

... all in all one of the best operas Liebermann has commissioned ...

Paul Moor  
The Times, 21.11.71

... THE PERFORMANCE IS A POLISHED JEWEL OF EXPERTISE, INSPIRATION AND STAGE PERFECTION ...

NORDDEUTSCHE NACHRICHTEN  
12.11.71

... this work that uses numerous means changing throughout is interpretable in many ways: as a fairy tale, as a parable, as a morality - even as a mild piece of agit-pop ...

Heinz Josef Herbert  
Die Zeit 11.11.71



ASHMEDAI

An Opera in Two Acts by

JOSEF TAL

Libretto by Israel Eliraz

Commissioned by the Hamburg City Opera, and first performed on 9th November, 1971. The conductor was Gary Bertini. The Director was Leopold Lindtberg, with Sets by Zbynek Kolar.

The work received a tremendous ovation: there were twenty curtain calls.

FIRST NIGHT REVIEWS FROM THE GERMAN PRESS:

"At the end of the world premiere of "ASHMEDAI" at the Hamburg State Opera the house remained in spellbound silence for a moment before bursting into thunderous applause."

"When have we heard such expressive electronic passages so perfectly blended with twelve-tone music, with the wide-ranging vocal line soaring above? Joseph Tal is a great master."

Walter Schröder, DAS BILD, 11th November, 1971

(This newspaper has a 'star' system of evaluation: ASHMEDAI was given six stars - the highest praise)

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"The dialogue is unadorned and simple - perfectly suited both for narrating the action and for making clear its symbolic meaning. His score has many facets and reflects the dramatic action simultaneously on a higher level of consciousness, although the music is never merely subservient to the action, but rather complements both words and action, giving them support and revealing their true significance: This is truly dramatic music."

"The librettist Israel Eliraz has developed the metaphorical tale along broad lines with strength and directness, without striving for nuances or allowing any side-tracking from the main subject."

"The Israeli conductor, Gary Bertini, a recent discovery in Germany, is without equal as an interpreter of this music. He is keenly alert and decisive with an extremely precise beat and a driving energy which inspires an intense performance."

Peter Dannenberg, DIE WELT, 11th November, 1971

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...a complete unity of dramatic concept and musical structure,"

Klaus Wagner, FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE, 11th November, 1971

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"Tal makes use of avant-garde devices, including aleatoric passages. At crucial points in the work he allows the orchestra to play freely within certain limits, making non-predetermined sound patterns that reflect the confusion in which the characters are caught up."

Heinz Herbolt, DIE ZEIT, 12th November, 1971