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"THE CAVE"

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Race, ethics, gender politics, cultural history, geography, the Torah, the Koran, and current affairs: these are the seemingly improbable ingredients of *The Cave*, 1993, a majestic music-theater collaboration between video artist Beryl Korot and composer Steve Reich. Yet it is the intricate layering of facts, myths, legends, and opinions along so many lines of video cable and music keyboard that makes *The Cave* an important work. Indeed, this intellectual theater shows not only that media and technology can be vessels for complex ideas, but that they can also be used for humanistic debate.

Reich's *Different Trains*, 1988 (in which taped speech patterns are used as the basis for melody and structure, and mixed with live music) and Korot's *Dachau*, 1974 (a multimonitor installation that rhythmically creates a video tapestry of sound and image) were the models during the more than four years that *The Cave* was in the making. The rigorous esthetic of both those works—continuous repetition and frontal, unadorned imagery—also explains what some have called the limitations of this production. *The Cave* is not a piece that visually or aurally interprets the exotic lands of milk and honey; rather, it elaborates on the formal concerns of the artists. We are very definitely in the land of Reich and Korot.

To both Reich and Korot the story of the Cave of the Patriarchs and of the ancestors supposedly buried there (Abraham, Sarah, Adam and Eve) was familiar after years of independent study of the Torah. In the opening scene, we see five large monitors come to life that are set into a silver-filigree scaffolding (designed by John Arnone to suggest first temple, then mosque, then modern city-building). On three screens (in English, German, and French), the complex story of Abraham, Sarah, and their Egyptian handmaid Hagar (from Genesis XVI: 1–12) is typed out in boldface, accompanied by the sound of its own making—the amplified tapping of fingers on a plastic computer keyboard. Two more screens show pale, mustard-colored excerpts of the same text in Hebrew. Simultaneously, musicians inside the structure begin a force-



Steve Reich and Beryl Korot, *The Cave*, 1993. Performance view. Photo: Andrew Pothecar, London.

ful clapping-driven melody, while singers on multitiered platforms sing the biblical story. The questions "Who for you is Abraham?" "Who is Sarah?" "Who is Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac?"—are then repeatedly asked in each of the three acts, first of Israeli Jews, then of Palestinians and, in the final act, of Americans. The replies, in close-up head-shots, result in fascinating composite cultural portraits that also set in motion a silent interactive exchange with the viewers.

The Israeli section (which, at 64 minutes, could possibly use some editing) and the Palestinian, both show the emphatic presence of biblical history in the geography of the Middle East, and underline the ancient source for the rivalries between the Judaic and Islamic states. Further West, however, the American section takes off at a run; irreverence and indifference together providing a humorous twist. "Abraham Lincoln?" "Moby Dick" (re Ishmael), and "The first single mother?" (re Hagar) propel the story into contemporary America and speed up both sound and visuals to a final crescendo.

Remarkably, current affairs caught up with *The Cave* in America; it was on United States soil that the handshake between descendants of Isaac and Ishmael—Yitzhak Shamir and Yassir Arafat—was choreographed.

—RoseLee Goldberg