

# 'Music-theater piece' probes lens vs. truth

By Mike Steele  
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## Critical preview

"Collaboration" is clearly the new watchword out there in the forefront of 1980s American experimental art. The mating of diverse, sometimes contradictory artists from all fields has taken on bunny hutch proportions. If a composer is good he'll be even better if paired with a terrific choreographer, playwright, filmmaker, or maybe, an animal husbandry specialist or scuba diver.

Anything goes. Diverse perspectives collide and, *voilà*, an exciting new perspective larger and deeper than either of the others alone appears. We're shaken from predictable ruts and made to relook and rethink our notions of art and the world.

With that the thinking, anyway, it was no surprise that "The Photographer/Far From the Truth," which opened the Brooklyn Academy of Music's highly-touted "Next Wave Festival" last October, instantly became the New Wave/postmodern-/cutting edge/must see event of the New York art season. It was collaboration in spades.

It combined the singular resources of composer Philip Glass, the hottest serious-songwriter since Orpheus, with those of director JoAnne Akalaitis, a founder of the influential theater company Mabou Mines; choreographer David Gordon; designers Santo Loquasto and Jennifer Tipton; writer Robert Coe, and, not least, the ground-breaking imagery of Eadweard Muybridge, the famed 19th century Victorian photographer whose series of sequential still photographs of men leaping hurdles and nude women ironing attempted to capture the essence of movement and broke ground for the invention of the motion picture. That's collaboration to take your breath away.

Thanks to the Walker Art Center and the College of St. Catherine, "The Photographer/Far From the Truth," billed as a "music-theater piece" in an arena where categories count, will come to O'Shaughnessy Auditorium in St. Paul for one performance only, at 8 p.m. today.

The piece got started in Holland when co-author and director Rob Malasch approached Glass about doing a work based on an incident in Muybridge's life. It was the kind of incident that set Victorian hearts from every age to palpitating. The photographer's wife had an affair and had the man's child. Muybridge murdered his wife's lover and was tried and acquitted in a blare of lurid publicity. The idea was to start with a literal presentation of the incident, then slowly make it more abstract and universal.

After the work had its premiere at the Holland Festival in 1982, its recording zoomed to the top of the U.S. charts. It became clear that an American version was essential. The Brooklyn Academy, which has been the nation's leader in presenting new

wave art, decided to produce it in a different form and the present creative team was brought together. (The team that did it at the academy will remain mostly intact during the tour, though the sets and lights have been slightly altered for touring efficiency.)

"The Photographer" immediately reflects its collaborative beginnings. It's in three acts, the first a play, the second a musical concert (featuring the Philip Glass Ensemble along with a slide presentation of Muybridge's motion studies), the third David Gordon's dance.

Though it begins as a narrative work, it is soon fragmented. The work overall is not based on a linear story and certainly isn't a documentary. Rather, it's an exploration of the nature of photography, of perception, of the fragmentation of reality, all based on Muybridge's life and work. The most dramatic contrast is between his melodramatic emotionalism, which led to murder, and the supposedly cool, detached eye of a photographer. The supposedly scientific objectivity of his work was in fact a highly subjective expression of the way he saw Victorian life, especially male and female roles.

From there the work explores the very nature of visual truth, how the photographer controls the image by deciding what to show and what to leave out, which image he decides to pull out from the world and preserve for history, which meaning is finally given by the viewer to the photograph that is selected. Ultimately, it says, visual reality is subjective and open to interpretation. As Susan Son-tag has said, "Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy."

The collaborators pulled on many sources for the work. Coe, who rewrote the work, pulled heavily on Victorian melodrama trying, he has said, "to do for emotions what Muybridge did for motion: formalize them, atomize them in time, break them down into constituent parts." The first act play was most heavily criticized in New York and, word has it, has been extensively rewritten and shortened since.

Loquasto and Tipton (who have designed sets and lights for several Guthrie productions as well as for Twyla Tharp, American Ballet Theater and other dance companies) were influenced by the surreal collage novels of Max Ernst, which took Victorian life into fantasy and dreamscape.

Akalaitis is a veteran of both collaborative creation and multimedia, having devised and directed such Mabou Mines shows as "Dressed Like An Egg" from Colette's life and the anti-nuclear essay "Dead End Kids,"



An Eadweard Muybridge photo in "The Photographer."

both of which have been seen in Minneapolis. Gordon, who was most recently in town a year ago when he set a dance on the New Dance Ensemble, had done a piece based on a study of Muybridge as early as 1972. A solo from that work for his wife, Velda Setterfield, is retained in this piece.

And Glass, of course, brings in a great deal of collaborative experience, having worked with Mabou Mines (he was once married to Akalaitis), with several dance troupes and, most dramatically, with Robert Wilson in the successful opera "Einstein on the Beach." His fusion of classical musical training at Juilliard, with Nadia Boulanger in Paris and at the Peabody Conservatory

along with his confrontations with the cerebral Pierre Boulez school of serialism, his studies of East Indian music, rock and pop make him a virtual solo collaborator with various musical aspects of himself.

Whether all this prime contemporary art talent can successfully come together remains to be seen. Critics were iffy in New York though everyone seemed to like some sections. According to Robert Stearns at the Walker, work has continued on the piece since its Brooklyn Academy premiere in October "and it could well be a better piece now. The requirements of touring have caused it to be tightened. Under any circumstances it is a fascinating and important work."

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