

Laurie Anderson - Spoleto Festival USA

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SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

In the opening of Laurie Anderson's newest performance, *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick*, 1999, a single shaft of light illuminates a large, black-bound book, its pages turning and fluttering. Although Anderson observes in her program note that only "approximately ten percent" of Melville's novel appears in her piece, she does faithfully retell the tale of Captain Ahab's monomaniacal pursuit of the white whale. Anderson's efforts to capture the novel's atmosphere noticeably affected her musical style: Much of the score is in the form of sea shanty-like songs for three male voices singing in close harmony, a robustly melodic sound quite different from Anderson's usual spiky compositions. Nevertheless, the book that turns its own pages - an image that first appeared in a sculpture of the performance artist's from 1975 called *Windbook* - signals that however much the production owes to Melville in terms of its narrative and imagery, it is also in line with Anderson's ongoing thematic concerns, refracted here through her reading of a literary classic.

One of Melville's more philosophical passages, spoken twice in the production, clearly resonates with Anderson's own preoccupations: "Seat thyself sultanically among the moons of Saturn, and take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe. But from the same point take mankind in mass, and for the most part, they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates, both contemporary and hereditary." In part through an ambivalent relationship to the technologies she uses in her performances, Anderson has long explored the question that Melville raises concerning the value of individual human beings. In previous works she has created duplicates of herself - including a male video "clone" and a digital puppet - as if to suggest that the technology on which her work depends may ultimately usurp her own presence, transforming a real person into an "unnecessary duplicate."

Duplication abounds in *Songs and Stories*, from split-screen video projections, in which the left- and right-hand images mirror one another, to a moment at which two performers on stage are multiplied into a crowd by means of repeated, projected video images. Most provocative is the performance artist's self-duplication. Even when sharing the stage with other musicians or singers, Anderson has always been the central figure in her pieces. In the new work, the speaking and singing parts are distributed equally among Anderson and three singing actors (Tom Nelis, Anthony Turner, and Price Waldman). Waldman, in fact, duplicates and replaces Anderson at several points in the production. In one scene, he speaks a monologue in a perfectly pitched imitation of Anderson's signature deadpan delivery. Later, at the start of the second act, he reappears in a blond fright wig to give a lecture, normally the kind of text Anderson would deliver herself. His voice is distorted electronically, recalling the stereotypically "male" voice that Anderson uses when parodying what she calls "the voice of authority."

Technology and replicability are but two thematic strands in *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick*. The long, densely packed performance is redolent of the tragic atmosphere of Melville's novel visually as well as musically. Black punctuated by blood red is the dominant color scheme, while projected images of the sea and other elements from Melville's novel dwarf the actors, conveying a sense of their lack of control over their own destinies. Although Anderson uses *Moby Dick* as a vehicle for exploring her own preoccupations, she does not treat the book as a mere pretext. Rather, she and Melville are revealed to be kindred spirits pursuing similar narrative obsessions.

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