

Delusion 2.0;

Harry Partch and the Philosopher's Tone

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Delusion of the Fury

Japan Society, Dec 7, 2007

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I believe in many things; in an intonation as *just* as I am capable of making it, in musical instruments *on stage*, dynamic in form, visually exciting. I believe in dramatic lighting, replete with gels, to enhance them. I believe in musicians who are total constituents of the moment, irreplaceable, who may sing, shout, whistle, stamp their feet. I believe in players in costume, or perhaps half-naked, and I do not care which half; perhaps only with headpieces, *but something, just something*, that will remove them from the pedestrian, the city-street, the beloved-and-dutiful-son or daughter, the white-shirt-and-tie or evening-gown syndrome.

I believe in Bass Marimbists with footwork as beautiful as that of skilled boxers, in kitharists who move the trunks of their bodies like athletes. I believe in all sounds of the human voice, free from the bel-canto straitjacket. Finally, I believe in a total integration of factors, not as separate and sealed specialties in the artificially divorced departments of universities, but of sound and sight, the visually dynamic and dramatic, all channeled into a single, wholly fused, and purposeful direction.
All.

—Harry Partch, *Statement*, 1960

Harry Partch's (1901-1974) *Delusion of the Fury* is back: a legendary 1960s work as alive and powerful today as it was in the heyday of West Coast counter-culture. In many ways this mature masterwork of hybrid music-theater represents the culmination of Partch's iconoclastic life; employing as it does the majority of his unique handmade instruments, tuned to his system of acoustically pure Just Intonation intervals, and telling a compelling pair of serious and silly humanistic tales by means of dance, vocalizing, movement, music, lighting, and costumes. While almost all his other works have been performed since his death in 1974—either on his own set of original instruments led by Danlee Mitchell and now Dean Drummond, or by John Schneider's West Coast replica set—the music for *Delusion* is especially hard to play. Twenty players, who can commit to months of grueling rehearsals,

must learn a new notation and memorize over an hour of music that has more than enough time-signature changes to demand extraordinary focus. The players must also sing, whistle, stamp their feet, and project visual agility and engagement; this is no pit orchestra or concert recital. It is a lifestyle commitment. And you need to spend years working your way through Partch's smaller and simpler pieces before tackling this one.

To compound matters, three lead actors must bear the weight of the drama and be equally adept at stylized movement, dance, and acting, as well as in possession of extraordinary vocal abilities; thanks to our climate of over-specialized training, performers typically excel in one discipline but are lacking in the total range of abilities required for Partch's integrated art form.

Even if the performers are capable, the management team needs tons of money, shared vision, clockwork coordination and an extraordinary degree of collaboration. Unifying art forms in the West has been an uphill battle for centuries partly because of this; just ask Wagner.

It's a tall order to mount such a work, and anything short of success in Partch's terms is sadly typical yet still lamentable—Partch himself had a long history of less than ideal productions. Even when he was at the helm of a production, his singular value-system was difficult to inculcate in a team of rookie collaborators.

By and large the Japan Society performances December 5-8, 2007, were a prodigious achievement. A new generation of fans (at least the portion that managed to score a ticket to the sold-out, Uptown-priced run of shows) saw the original Partch instruments in all their glassy, woody glory; heard a well-rehearsed band play his fragile, addictive and soulful music; and saw a visual feast of sexy dancers, fluid lighting, and assured actors. You could be forgiven for thinking you had experienced an authentic representation of Partch's vision (and the standing ovations and favorable press reviews attest to that), but he set high standards for his art and the production had a couple of telling flaws. In most cases, a theater work with a few production miscalculations would be forgivable; in Partch's case, any botched element betrays a deeper misunderstanding of his total ideals, and proves fatal.



Act I treats with death, and with life despite death.

Act II treats with life, and with life despite life.

They have this in common: both convey the mood that reality is in no way real: this despite the very different locales, subject matter, and the very different paths toward the awareness of unreality.

Both—essentially—are happy in their focus; the reconciliation with some kind of unreal death makes the one with some kind of unreal life possible.

—Harry Partch, *Scenario for Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964

Delusion of the Fury (originally entitled *Cry From Another Darkness*) is a dramatic work of ritual music theater in two sections: a tragedy followed by a comedy. As such it follows the ancient Greek practice of linking a tragedy with a less tragic but still poignant satyr play immediately afterward (just as Partch had done with his settings of the *King Oedipus* tragedy followed by the bathetic *Plectra and Percussion Dances* in 1952).

The acts are based on a Japanese Noh play (*Atsumori*, as translated by Arthur Waley) and an Ethiopian folk tale (from the book *African Voices*, edited by Peggy Rutherford). Yet despite their exotic origins, they are intended as directly relevant to contemporary life: Partch, for instance, often brought up ancient Greek myths in everyday conversation—the stories were alive and immediate for him. Although he is best remembered for his homeless wanderings during the Depression and the works based on hobo life of that period, Partch was globally minded long before multi-culturalism was fashionable. He set texts of Chinese poet Li Po in the 1930s, but *Delusion* was his only major dramatic work using non-European material.

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I am drawn to the Oriental attitudes because, in the Orient, there has never been any great separation of the theater arts, therefore no need to conceive of integration... I should emphasize that I do not think or plan on the level of reproducing anything, but rather in terms of revitalization of the over-specialized Western theater, through transfusions of old and profound concepts.

—Harry Partch, Proposal to the Ford Foundation to spend a year in Japan, Dec. 8, 1962

Partch wanted integration among the art forms, a literal, relevant, powerful *Gesamtkunstwerk* that speaks directly to our lives and human condition. The abstract, European arts he felt were symptomatic of losing touch with our whole selves and compartmentalizing our multi-faceted roles in life:



[I want to] be aware of the total potential of any human involvement. The musician as dancer, the dancer as ditch-digger, the ditch-digger as physicist, the physicist as hobo, the hobo as messiah, the messiah as criminal, or any other conceivable metamorphosis.

—Harry Partch, *No Barriers*, 1952

He complained that we go to the opera and get singing, the ballet and get dance, a concert and get music, drama and get words: “basic mutilations of ancient concepts.” How much more powerful would the experience be if we were struck by them equally, all at once?

These ideas are fused in his notion of One Voice—his version of a “Unified Field Theory”—that has as its kernel the facts of basic acoustics. Small number ratios (such as described by Plato and Pythagoras) are the purest form of tuning musical intervals, and by happy (but debatable) coincidence, when we intone our speech in heightened dramatic situations, we hit similarly subtle microtonal inflections in the resulting melodic contour: Inflections that the 12 equal fixed notes of the piano cannot even approximate. (Ironically, skilled concert performers on Western string, brass, and wind instruments play naturally in tune—by ear—according to these fine shadings of the harmonic series, yet their conventions and terminology are incompatible with Partch’s nomenclature.)

Rather than take the common approach and have the speech-singing voice conform to the available instruments, he did the opposite; he gave Voice the primary role and constructed the necessary instruments to support it (along with corollary unique notations, rehearsal and transportation difficulties, and the life of penury that ensued). Harmonics, Tuning, Voice (loosely combined under the term Monophony) then became extended beyond the mere articulation of vocal language to encompass the whole body and mind under the term Corporeality. This term not only implies a “body feeling” in performance but also an implication of focus and dedicated mindset, a performance intensity, presence, and charisma that are typically neglected or constricted in routine concert music.

Partch was a musical philosopher and once stated that he was as interested in the “idea” of music as he was by music itself. His works stand as uncompromising expressions of theoretical concepts; equally important as intellectual demonstrations as they are powerful in effect.

Partch saw ritual as a linking element between his familiar worlds of ancient

Greek myths and contemporary America; Ulysses' wanderings were exactly those of his own freight hopping in the 1930s; Dionysian idol worshiping rituals were exactly those he saw in Elvis or The Beatles. The purely formalistic structures that had developed in instrumental music since the 17th century with their own rules of harmony and counterpoint and architectural forms of sonata, rondo, and fugue were anathema

to him because they had no connection with drama or storytelling *per se*.

They were useless to him; they wasted their potential for wholeness. It is one thing to theorize about how art forms should all support each other—his book, *Genesis of a Music*, deals with this—it is another to put it into practice.

During his career, whether he was riding the rails or working with undergrads, Partch's artwork is inextricably linked to the circumstances of his life; it is always autobiographical to some degree. It is consequently tempting to see in the conciliatory tone of *Delusion's* Act I a similarly resigned and mellow Partch at the end of his tempestuous life. It is equally easy to see the hobo in Act II as a version of Partch himself 30 years earlier stating, "But I'd rather be a hobo"; a political defiance against the establishment.

Yet, Partch is no longer around. It is not the 1960s any more and producing any work after the author's death presents its own set of challenges and opportunities. To compound the difficulties, Partch was especially precise and thorough about how his work should be presented and what it should convey. (Where aspects were left unspecified he always provided instructions on the boundaries of acceptable interpretation; guidelines that any producer would presumably want to know.) There is also an absence of a track record to refer to; some Partch works have been performed many times (*Bewitched*, *Castor & Pollux*) so we have a tradition that can withstand a wider range of personal interpretation. In the case of *Delusion*, it was done once and imperfectly at that ("Academically static modern dance and the ultimate nadir in costume



treachery,” as he described it in 1972 to Madeline Tourtelot). Does a revival under such circumstances have a greater duty to be faithful to the artist’s original intent? To set the record straight before future generations reinterpret it? If only to learn what he envisioned for the work?

By analogy, prior to the 1980’s Early Music movement and its advocacy of historically informed performance practice of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music, performances of Monteverdi, Bach, and Perotin still took place, but they largely missed the point. They used inappropriate instruments, tunings, and phrasing that bludgeoned the works’ original purpose and sensibility. We are now, thanks to scholarship, in a better position to realize a different aesthetic in musical performance and appreciate qualities absent from the blindly received tradition. The works thus become fresh and new to our ears precisely because we have questioned every assumption and performed them in an un-contemporary way. Fidelity to a work’s idea through an informed reading of the text can be a path to discovery and authenticity; appropriating some of the ideas and taking them intentionally in new directions is something else.

When does a new conception of a work, if it is that at all, actually mask inability and not reveal inventiveness? Nietzsche addresses this symptom rather acutely in “On Style,” aphorism 290 from *The Gay Science*. Here’s an excerpt: “It will be the strong and domineering natures that enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own. . . . conversely, it is the weak characters without power over themselves that hate the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned; they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve.” This seems to address rather precisely the problem with such approaches and a problem of our epoch. Directors think the only way for them to be creative is to mutate however they wish what they are directing because of their inability to achieve the creator’s original vision. If they don’t include their ‘point of view’ they don’t think they are ‘doing anything.’ The result of being rooted in their ego instead of the vision of the work.

So the first questionable statement regarding *Delusion*’s revival comes from the festival director:

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Our challenge was to see how far we could get from Partch’s original creation, yet still remain loyal to his concept—without dropping into the pitfall of mounting a museum piece that even the creator himself would no doubt hate.

—Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director

Are works from the 1960s necessarily museum pieces already? Is Partch's favorite musical, *Hair*, from the same era, less relevant because it is a period piece? Is the original choreography to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* somehow less powerful because it assumed a different audience culture? The fear that a work may seem "dated" may stimulate a producer to "update" it, but does that solve the problem? Was there a "problem" in the first place? Some works are considered "timeless": who decides?

Here is a piece, *Delusion*, that had never been done totally right, and the director already wants to stretch it away from its roots? This anyhow was the shaky premise for this performance. It takes the hare-brained challenge of separating Partch's concept from his concrete instructions; a path that led to Partch's condemnation during his lifetime and has surely become no more fruitful since.

How then to realize an authentic vision of his canon now that his ashes have been floating off the Santa Monica Pier for over 30 years? There have been several attempts. Currently there are about 1.4 sets of instruments his music can be played on, based in Venice, California (think Muscle Beach and Flower Power), and Montclair State University, New Jersey (think leafy burbs). This original set is led by Dean Drummond who met Partch at the age of 16 and performed with him for a couple of years late in Partch's life—surely a formative influence for any teen.

Everyone takes away from a Partch encounter a different sense, based on the circumstances of the discovery and what resonates with their own latent interests. Ben Johnston, for instance, who knew him in the 1950s, became a sophisticated composer (and teacher) of microtonal concert music. James Tenney, David Dunn, Johnny Reinhard, and Phil Arnautoff likewise had their musical worlds expanded. Others more distant from the source (including Paul Drescher, Skip LaPlante, and me) became sound-sculptors. Few swallowed Partch whole. Dean Drummond developed as a composer, leader of Newband, and ultimately guardian of the Partch instruments through an arrangement with Partch's heir Danlee Mitchell to borrow them in 1989. (Note I didn't use the word "Instrumentarium," a now-common neologism that Partch never used and might have thought designated the tools of his trade as peculiar specimens in glass jars.)

Theater is considered to be a collaborative art form; playwrights, actors, set designers, and directors all work together to mount a production as a collective effort. Partch, however, went farther than most modern authors by not only composing the music but also specifying in detailed and imaginative terms the costumes, characters, movements, and motivations of all the performers. In this regard he is similar to ancient Greek poets who likewise took on the whole

range of production tasks—providing music, costumes and choreographic gestures (*chieronimia*) in addition to the dramatic narrative.

During his life, while he needed people to realize these visions in his productions, Partch (like his near-contemporary, Samuel Beckett) left little leeway for personal interpretation or competing viewpoints. His singular vision and aesthetic led to notorious spats with the likes of Alwin Nikolais (*The Bewitched*, 1957), Joyce Trisler (*The Bewitched*, 1959), and Kenneth Anger (*Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* misappropriated Partch's *Plectra and Percussion Dances* in 1954), who abandoned Partch's instructions and suffered the consequences. Who knows what revenge Partch may have concocted had he seen the recent version of his *Castor & Pollux*, revamped as *Calculus & Politics* and choreographed by Molissa Fenley first at Mills then at the Joyce Theater in New York the week following the *Delusion* production? It would not have been a pretty sight.

Given that Partch's instructions and vision for his works are well documented and easily available, is it possible to stage an authentic production that differs significantly from his concrete instructions? How far can one take the letter of his score and retain the spirit? Does the producer always trump the playwright, or only if he's dead? Could a deliberately "inauthentic" production illuminate hidden aspects of the work, even one we've never seen? When does honoring a work's integrity by realizing and stretching its intrinsic qualities become an irresponsible smash and grab?



The musicians must of course be in costume, and I have a singularly clear idea as to what the costumes should be like as to detail and what they should convey: a sense of magic, of an olden time, but never of a precise olden time. They should certainly not suggest anything that is either Japanese or Ethiopian.

The basic garment of the musicians should be a huge pair of pantaloons, wrapping around the waist in East-Indian fashion. In Act I they should also wear a poncho-like garment—a single, full piece of cloth with a neckhole. It must be completely unadorned, without collages or beads or anything that tinkles in the light. The poncho is discarded at the end of Act I. During Act II the musicians are naked from the waist up.

To compensate for this very simple costume each musician will wear a fantastic headpiece. Each will be different, or frequently different.

In contrast, the three principals would wear more imaginative costumes, and imaginative make-up. Wigs certainly, but no headpieces.

—Harry Partch, Scenario for *Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964

How then did the Japan Society performance of *Delusion of the Fury* match up to Partch's original vision?

“A” for effort, to be sure. The production was professional and clearly the result of hard work, a generous budget, and highly skilled participants. *Delusion* is one of the largest of Partch's ensemble works and certainly the most musically demanding. It was written after a period at the University of Illinois when he had effectively simplified his writing to accommodate ever larger casts of thousands. Away from the pressures of student productions and settled in a Petaluma chick hatchery, Partch could resume his experiments with more sophisticated writing for virtuoso musicians (though he had none at his disposal at the time).

This production also served to put the 1969 UCLA premiere (with its well-known recording and lesser known film version, both on Innova) in perspective. It is always a shock to hear a live performance of a work that you are familiar with only through one recording, and this time was no exception. The notes were the same, but listening in a live setting in an auditorium, the instrumental timbres are more fragile and crystalline than the close-mic setup. You appreciate for the first time what the original Columbia recording engineers did to rebalance the instruments to bring out particular melodic lines. Many of the instruments in their live incarnation have a narrow dynamic range, making it difficult for any conductor to bring out the parts and balance them well, even if—as Drummond was—he were not engaged in playing an instrument himself. Balancing the ensemble thus becomes an exercise in instrument placement on stage, so the quieter ones are nearer the audience and have a greater chance of being heard in *tutti* sections. While the wide spread of the instruments on stage helped the ear distinguish the daemon of each instrument most of the time, the Chromelodeon reed organ and kitharas could have been more prominent at times. One of the kitharas and the Mazda Marimba actually had subtle electric amplification in this production, as Partch had sanctioned during his lifetime, thus allowing instruments to be placed more for visual effect than acoustic projection.

The experience of the Marimba Eroica, however, was superior when “heard”

live. The instrument's tones are so low, you *feel* the vibrations and the pressure in the room rather than hear it with your ears (a “rippling in the backsides by an art form,” as he called this effect). Indeed, the instrument is different in every space, depending on which of the long wavelengths happen to correspond with the depth of the auditorium. This instrument is therefore both a site-specific sound sculpture tuned to its environment and a primal, direct manifestation of what Antonin Artaud strove for in his Theatre of Cruelty.

The fact that the ensemble knew the music well enough to perform essentially without a conductor (apart from a couple of dramatic cues) speaks well of their preparation. It was also an added bonus to the credibility of the drama; the musicians really seemed to be contributing their human presence to the ritual whereas the presence of a waving, directorial conductor would have spoiled that illusion.



The attitude of the musician on stage—what I refer to as *Attitudinal Techniques* in my subtitle—is another failure of music education, and one directly relevant to the age of specialization, the tendency toward even greater purity in the creative arts. *At no time* are the players of my instruments to be unaware that they are on stage, *in the act*. There can be no humdrum playing of notes, in the bored belief that because they are “good” musicians their performance is ipso facto “masterly.” When a player fails to take advantage of his role in a visual or acting sense, he is muffing his part—in my terms—as thoroughly as if he bungled every note in the score.

There is surely some special hell reserved for the player of one of the more dramatic instruments who insists on deporting himself as though he were in tie-and-tails on a symphony orchestra's platform (such as experimental hanging by the gonads on a treble kithara string).

—Harry Partch, *Manual*, 1963

An important part of playing any Partch instrument is how intense and energized you look when you are playing it—the aesthetic quality of your body: “athletic,” “like skilled boxers,” “willing to rape or caress their instruments...” Like *gamelan*, *gagaku*, *pansori*, and Peking opera, the musicians are on stage as live, interactive parts of the action, and therefore should not deny their presence or recede like black holes. Most standard concert ensembles focus on getting the notes right first and see their visual appearance as only a secondary concern. For Partch, this human presence is equal to technical

mastery (the notes, phrasing, etc.) and it takes a lengthy period of encouragement and training to teach players this kind of psycho-physical projection. In the 1980 production of *The Bewitched*, for instance, Kenneth Gaburo spent the first hours of every rehearsal having the performers do mental and physical awareness exercises.



In the Japan Society performance, some musicians were better than others in this regard. Seeing the Bass Marimba player's (Jonathan Shapiro) left hand rise inexorably way up high to the ceiling before crashing down on one of the low blocks, was a thrill, timed to dramatic perfection. Gestures did not need to be exaggerated to be mesmerizing though; the Diamond Marimba player (Bill Ruyle) standing upstage played his fast passages with such casual authority and dynamic balance that you knew this instrument was in capable hands and my eyes and ears were captivated.

In general though, how did the players look? Did they achieve Partch's corporeal ideal? This is where the production fell short. The ensemble sauntered onstage at the beginning, as they might for any concert. What happened to ritual theater, the beginning of spinning a web of intrigue, and ancient magic; the whole point of this activity? It would have been easy to ask them to move in stylized fashion or emerge from the shadows in a simple but intense choral procession (Partch intended them to be the Greek Chorus, after all).

The playing of the first few minutes of string music seemed likewise half-hearted. When the music shifted to the percussion-based instruments stage right, though, the mood took off on a more confident footing. Partch considered the strings to represent the soul and his percussion instruments the body, so the arrival of the dancers on stage was a powerful moment.

This blasé opening and T-shirted costume debacle was apparently the

result of two failures that would have been only too familiar to Partch: a choreographer (Dawn Akemi Saito) who paid no attention to the musicians, and an errant costume designer. These shortcomings had plagued the original production, too (as he made clear to Madeline Tourtelot in 1972 while editing the film of the original production), and make one question the management protocols that allows such blemishes to occur time and time again. Added to that, Dean Drummond's role (the only person on the team with first-hand knowledge of Partch's concepts) was relegated to that of mere Music Director, so bureaucracy determined that he had no influence on anything but playing the right notes. Once again it is shown that decisions made by committee, or with a misinformed boss (even though—having been awarded a MacArthur “Genius” grant—John Jesurun must be one), can lead to mediocrity.

The choreographer's role is usually assumed to be relevant only to dancers, but in Partch's world, everyone is a mover/dancer/actor; the musicians are characters visible on stage and thus demand as much meaningful, intentional, suggestive body movement as anyone else. By ignoring one third of the performers in this production (after the Moving Chorus and the leads), the choreographer (who otherwise did a fine job) should take a 33% pay cut, hang by a treble kithara string, and/or be forced to memorize Partch's extensive writings about “the curse of specialization” in the arts. Partch embeds all kinds of musical interactions between the players and the actors—expressive vocal ejaculations, angry stomping, and mysterious whistling. Without corresponding gestures, these musicians looked straitjacketed. By not paying attention to the movements of the on-stage musicians, the choreographer did both a disservice to Partch and also to the players; she ignored the basic premise of his work and exposed the performers to ridicule.

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For her treachery to the concept the costumer [to the 1969 *Delusion*] should have been tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail...

I did not know, being very preoccupied with the music, what was being contemplated in the costuming and choreographic departments...until the last few days before the performance... Thus the absolute necessity of a period of indoctrination.

—Harry Partch, Letter to Madeline Tourtelot, January 21, 1972

The other tragedy was the fact that the musicians wore basic black shirts and pants—today's casual tuxedo: a suitable uniform for school concerts and waiters but diametrically opposed to everything Partch stood for. Partch railed against “the inhibitory incubus of tight coat and tight shoes” that was the

standard concert attire of his day and insisted on “some visual form that will remove them from the limbo of the pedestrian.” Black T-shirts are the epitome of pedestrian.

There was a reason for this, but no excuse. Apparently the original costume designer (Ruth Pongstaphone) was fired four days before the opening night for producing unsuitable costumes. “Sacred robes for a Thanksgiving parade” was how one musician put it. Even “unsuitable” might have been better than black T-shirts though. Not having seen them, I can’t comment, except that still left four days to find a better alternative. The new costumer was necessarily preoccupied with clothing the lead characters (which she did fine), so someone needed to rise to the challenge and take care of the musicians’ appearance. Partch’s instructions in the score are precise enough: pantaloons, one-piece tunics, fantastic headpieces, and body paint, so when the tops are removed for Act II, the musicians are half naked. None of this happened. Ultimately, body paint with black pants apparently didn’t look right, so the whole idea was abandoned as the clock ran out.

Have attitudes changed that much in 40 years? Are we now in an age of American prudery? Perhaps they reasoned that the original plan might have been all right for California in the ’60s but wouldn’t go over in 21st century New Jersey, where school fees, lawsuits, and parental/student complaints carry more weight than they used to. Has Protestant body shame (Partch’s lifelong nemesis) returned triumphant, even to New York? Is it kosher for the Japan Society to present near-naked Butoh performers one week but anathema for an American drama to do the same the next? Someone is guilty of being over-cautious.

Now surely someone could have figured out in those four days that a hibiscus behind the ear, or bare feet, or a piece of rope tied around the forehead, or a colored shirt could have a similar effect without embarrassing anyone? As it was, the musicians became invisible; their presence as a mystical chorus watching and commenting on the eternal action in front of them became prosaic. More like watching a rehearsal, and not even the dress rehearsal.

In a total art work such as this, all the components make up one whole body; this performance had at least one amputated limb. Directing the musicians, dancers, and actors on stage so they are seen to have mutually supportive interactions is hard enough, but this was a major element jettisoned. Partch was once asked what he thought about “poetry cum jazz.” He felt it needed more “cum.” It did here, too.



There are many fairly long periods where only 6 to 12 instruments are employed, and duets and trios are frequent.

The tacit musicians may thus become actors and dancers, moving from instruments to acting areas as the impetus of the drama requires. For example as court attendants in Act II, bodyguards to the justice.

—Harry Partch, Scenario for *Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964 (Instructions ignored in this production.)

On a positive note, the instruments themselves, their staging, shapes, and materials, were as warm and fragile as ever; giving off a wooden glow, like walking down the corridors of the Queen Mary bathed in rich living wood from around the world. Jeff Nash lit the stage unobtrusively and effectively, balancing visibility of the instruments and the performers nicely.

The Moving Chorus (six dancers moving silently as a group) operates in dangerous territory and can verge off into the forbidden zone of abstract modern dance (Partch's bugbear) at any moment. This group, though, was a model of its kind. With form-hugging tights the young men and women were sensuous, sexy, and engaged; a kind of erotic shadow play that added to the drama and flaunted their lack of Anglo Saxon body shame, which would have been much, no doubt, to Partch's delight.

John Jeserun's video of nature shots (web, moon, bamboo, smoke...) was cleverly projected onto the ceiling of the auditorium. This had the effect of extending the lighting across the proscenium arch and into the audience's airspace. At times, it acted like a multi-media chorus, extending the metaphor of the stage action. The Exordium, for instance, the spinning of a web, featured a web pattern on the ceiling. Or when the hobo lights a small fire to cook his meal, the smoke through the trees is projected overhead. An elegant and appropriate touch that extended Partch's own passion for multi-media.

The main protagonists, like the rest of the cast, were young and multi-racial. In itself, such casting is laudable; Partch was in fact a pioneer of racially blind casting (Odetta nearly played Jocasta in the 1952 *Oedipus*, for example). In this case, it clouded the already confusing relationships between the slayer, the ghost of the slain, and his son. Without benefit of dialog, if you hadn't read the program notes, you might think the story of Act I—instead of enacting the pilgrimage to Atsumori's grave, the appearance of his ghost, the re-enactment of his death, and an act of forgiveness—was simply a white guy wandering around, picking a fight with a black guy who is joined by an Asian tomboy all around the same age, and then they stop. It is critical that the audience knows what is going on in terms of plot for the whole gestalt to work, and at least this was abundantly clear in the 1969 production.

The standout performer of Act I was Mina Nishimura, who played the Son in search of his father's face. Her shoulders moved as though by a hidden force, and she acted as if in a trance possession.

The Japanese theme was stressed as a premise for presenting *Delusion* at the Japan Society. Curiously, this production strayed farther from Noh and Kabuki conventions than had the UCLA one, which featured more traditional stylized motions and heavy face make-up. Partch was interested in American equivalents to world traditions (*The Bewitched*, for example, portrays everyday urban scenes that he thought of as American Kabuki). This Japan Society production fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between being exclusively Japanese

or American. A clear decision one way or the other may have helped clarify the narrative and relationships of the first half. Because of the confusing characterization, the denouement was not as tragic as it needed to be. We are meant to be floored by the spiritual and emotional conflict of these family archetypes, so the resolution will be a cathartic relief and we can move on, having earned the right to the more naturalistic relief of Act II. In short, there was neither delusion nor fury.

SYNOPSIS

It is an olden time, but neither a precise time nor a precise place. The Exordium is an overture, an invocation, the beginning of a ritualistic web. Act 1, on the recurrent theme of Noh plays, is a music-theater portrayal of release from the wheel of life and death. In simplest terms it is a final enlightenment, a reconciliation with total departure from the area of mortal cravings and passions. It is based on the legend of a princely warrior who falls in battle at the hands of a young rival. The act begins with the slayer's remorseful pilgrimage to the scene, and to the shrine. The murdered man appears as a ghost, sees first the assassin, then his young son, born after his father's death, looking for a vision of his father's face. Spurred to resentment by his son's presence, he lives again through the ordeal of death, but at the end—with the supplication "Pray for me!"—he finds reconciliation.

There is nowhere, from the beginning of the Exordium to the end of Act II, a complete cessation of music. The Sanctus ties Acts I and II together; it is the Epilogue to the one, the Prologue to the other. Act II, based on an Ethiopian folk tale, involves a reconciliation with life, not as a separate mental act from that with death, but as a necessary concomitant, an accommodation toward a healthy—or at least a possible—existence. Its essence is a tongue-in-cheek understanding, attained through irony, even through farce. A young vagabond is cooking a meal over a fire in rocks when an old woman who tends a goat herd, approaches, searching for a lost kid. Later, she finds the kid, but—due to a misunderstanding caused by the hobo's deafness—a dispute ensues. Villagers gather and, during a violent dance, force the quarreling couple to appear before the justice of the peace, who is both deaf and near-sighted.

Following the justice's sentence, the Chorus sings in unison, "Oh, how did we ever get by without justice?" and a voice offstage reverts to the supplication at the end of Act I.

—Harry Partch

The other problem with the casting was the mismatch between the lead actors' youthful vocal ranges; while they negotiated the unconventional melodic lines with ease, none of them had the necessary power in their low registers to convey any *gravitas*. This weakness corresponded to the already lightweight choral singing from the musicians (the 1969 choral singing from the instrumentalists was comparatively butch). Partch spent a lifetime setting music to underpin words, retaining and enhancing their natural inflections and intelligibility. When he went beyond words, though, he did so for a purpose; using vocables to convey specific meanings, like some pre-verbal ancient message. He had transcribed Native American music from cylinder recordings in the 1930s and had been told that "the syllables meant something once but no-one knows exactly what any more." Similarly, in the 1950s he was inspired by hearing the voice of Helen Keller, which was expressive even when the literal meaning was incomprehensible. Partch's "nonsense syllables" then must be uttered as if they really meant something.

Seeing syllables written in the score next to a fixed pitch presents the singer with the challenge of how to bring them to life convincingly (without resorting to wobbly opera cliches). At best, there is an animalistic sliding, guttural cry, as much personality as technique: a fantasy mixture of Tom Waits, Chaliapin, Odetta, Paul Robeson, Meredith Monk, Diamanda Galas, and Mei Lan Fang. Vocal maturity is one area where the UCLA recording is superior; the voices are rich and focused (though they cheated in that performance by having trained singers in the pit and the actors miming their words; they too, as it turned out, couldn't find actors who could sing and act equally well.).

Partch lived at a time when cross-disciplinary performers were exotic and rare. The few models for such integrated abilities were typically from Asia or Africa, and few of those performers made it to U.S. shores. Partch's experience was largely the result of attending San Francisco's Mandarin Theater in the 1920s. We have now had many years' more exposure to examples of hybrid arts from overseas and locally; performing academies teach multiple skills; Broadway shows, Stomp, and Cirque de Soleil all require such abilities. So why is it so hard to find such talent for Partch works? Is it just the cost and infrequent nature of the productions? Will we ever see Partch's work routinely performed as intended or will it always be an uphill battle to find suitable vision and talent? Is that the price of being so original and demanding in every aspect of his art, that makes the challenge of producing a Partch work successfully, insurmountable? Though they were few and far between, such productions have taken place, so we wait for such a combination of talent and circumstances to manifest itself again.

Charting an appropriate course for the movement vocabulary is tricky in Partch's works; choreographers are typically afraid to be as literal and potentially hokey as he demands; they usually fall back on abstract modern

dance clichés. Partch, after all, had been an accompanist for silent movies as a teenager and was very familiar with the exaggerated gestural, miming style used in that medium to tell a story. If this production had gone further in that direction it might have clarified the motivations and relationships of Act I more convincingly.



The Sanctus, the compelling instrumental entr'acte, brought out the most spirited music-making of the evening. Even the shattering of one of the Pyrex carboys that make up the Spoils of War—a result of enthusiastic beating or Partch's closing-night message from beyond the grave—failed to dampen the energy (and also, thankfully, to cut any of the dancers' feet).

Because of less abstract production concepts, Act II was largely more successful in dramatic terms than the first; its humor is the counterpoint to Act I's tragedy and shows Partch's potential for biting satire. This was also where the vocal ejaculations of the chorus, the mimetic action to music, and the main characters played off each other most successfully.

A young vagabond is seen cooking a meal outside (he was the slayer in Act I). In appearance, he looked like a scruffy Gen X-er who just lost his job as coffee barista and is temporarily homeless. This seems an entirely fitting update of the hobo archetype: Partch, too, had been a homeless wanderer in the 1930s. An old goat woman appears looking for her lost kid. She seemed about the same age but with an extravagant club-kid hairdo, and she seemed to be hitting on the young man more than seeking her lost goat, but hey, the kid is a Lambchop hand puppet and plenty cute. The woman keeps bugging the young guy, who announces to the world (notably absent in the first recording), "I just want to be a hobo. Why doesn't she just go away?"

Partch doesn't miss a dig at the Establishment: the quarrel ends up in court where a deaf-blind judge assumes they are a hetero couple and the goat is their charming child. "Oh, how did we ever get by without justice?" Indeed. The fury of Act I has morphed into sarcasm by Act II. This is followed by a Zeussian

Nietzsche and Partch

Partch described himself as “a philosophic music-man seduced into carpentry.” Nietzsche might be called “a musical philosopher-man seduced into madness.” Despite their cultural differences they share a few traits in common (and not just the symptoms of syphilis that made their behavior seem occasionally erratic). The Apollonian and Dionysian theme recurs in both cases: Partch’s *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* is a contemporary commentary on the *Bacchae* of Euripides, with plenty of Dionysian action. Partch’s film *Windsong* tells of the attempted rape and transformation of Daphne and Apollo. And *Delusion*’s two-part form exhibits both principles, too. As an unrepressed gay man operating far from conservative mores of his day, Partch—like D.H. Lawrence—railed against prudish attitudes of Puritan body shame and advocated for more liberated instincts (such as those found in ancient Greece) wherever possible.

Both Partch and Nietzsche reviled the herd-mentality (what Partch called “termite psychology”) and created their individual works notwithstanding public incomprehension and ridicule. Each also expressed his ideas in idiosyncratic, passionate language that made academics scratch their heads and all too often dismiss the messages.

Partch’s parents had been missionaries in China prior to the Boxer Rebellion. His father returned apostate, mother a believer in every new religious fad of the day. Partch scorned the whole idea of Christianity and satirized its mumbo-jumbo in several works (such as *Barstow* and *Revelation*). *Delusion of the Fury*, as ritual theater, is a sincere sacred space designed to reveal ancient magic and a holistic humanitarian spirituality. Nietzsche, too, sought to construct a new, more naturalistic morality.

Both men had a love-hate relationship with Richard Wagner; Partch admired the idea of the multi-disciplinary opera-theatre-Utopia at Bayreuth and the notion of bringing together all the art forms to tell a mythical story. He complained, however, that the kind of voice needed to carry over the sound of the huge orchestra destroyed all intelligibility, therefore all narrative. It was also diametrically opposed to the intimacy of one voice and a small ensemble he felt best conveyed his dramatic impulse, at least in his early works.

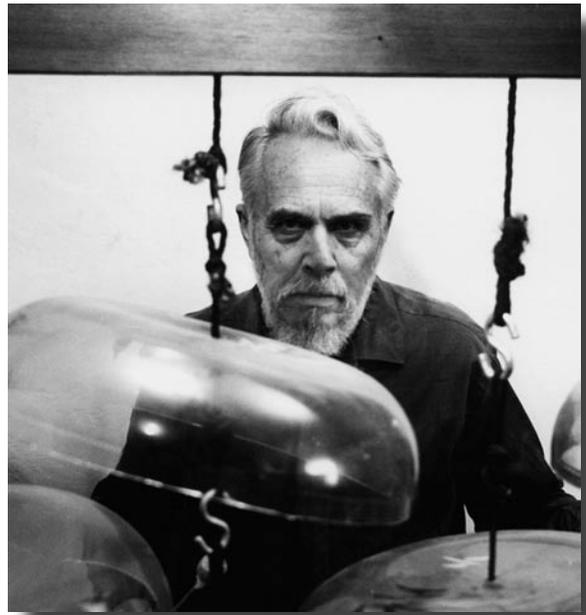
One way or another, both were composers, juggling and synthesizing ideas in novel ways. Nietzsche, like Partch (in *Bitter Music*), wrote monodramas to be spoken over piano accompaniment, and both wrote elaborate statements of faith: Nietzsche his *Miserere* and Partch his *Delusion of the Fury*.

thunderclap and the Chorus echoes the end of the first Act’s “Pray for me” chant. This time it is a general plea—an enlightened Coda moment—to be released from the worlds of regret, death, misunderstandings, do-gooders, idiots, and bureaucrats. Amen to that.

What was gained by seeing *Delusion* as a theatrical production after surviving so long as a sound recording? Some people were just as happy to close their eyes and listen to the music. Perhaps if the production had worked as planned, they couldn’t have taken their eyes away from the action on stage.

Apart from the fatal and telling flaws of a few, the production had much to commend it. Partch's worth as a deeply serious creator of drama was never in doubt. And the Japan Society's gargantuan effort to demonstrate works that bridge Japanese and American cultures was amply rewarded. Now, if we can only see annual productions of Harry Partch's *Delusion of the Fury* and iron out the remaining production wrinkles, we can truly see what Partch's universe is all about and why his efforts are still relevant to us all.

Performance photographs are from a 1969 UCLA production
photos: Danlee Mitchell



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