

## The Making Of Gotham

### *A Most Amazing thing*

By Kathleen Watt

ON FEBRUARY 27, 2004, American Composers Orchestra will launch its new music series, *Orchestra Underground*, designed especially for state-of-the-art Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall. One of two world premieres commissioned by ACO for the event is Michael Gordon's *Gotham*, a 35-minute multimedia work that takes the city of New York as both its subject and its leading lady. Growing out of the notion of New York-as-hometown, *Gotham* is a personalized portrayal of this particular place—its back streets and its minutiae, its dreams and its detritus—seeking to reclaim New York for those who live and work here. In so doing, *Gotham* becomes a map of the urban inner landscape for any city-dweller of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

“Every commission comes with a set of parameters that involves compromise. Never does someone come to a composer and say ‘write anything you want for any combination of instruments, and tell me exactly what you would like the concert situation to be like’...,” said composer Gordon, co-founder and co-director of Bang on a Can new music group, in a 1999 online interview.

Then American Composers Orchestra did just that. Of his ACO commission, for which Gordon proposed a collaboration with New York's Ridge Theater, he now laughs, “It's about as close to [perfect] as you're ever going to come.”

The *Gotham* project reunites Gordon with Ridge Theater filmmaker Bill Morrison, visual artist Laurie Olander, and director Bob McGrath. The same team created *Decasia*, the spectacularly successful 2001 multimedia experience now acclaimed from Basel to Edinburgh, to BAM and Sundance. *Gotham* is structured along the *Decasia* model, incorporating projections, re-edited archival film, multi-tiered sets, and musicians who sometimes seem actually to inhabit the projected environment. The prospect that the team may do with the theme of New York City what they have done in *Decasia* is exhilarating, and, in some ways, harrowing.

“I wanted people to feel an aching sense that time was passing and that it was too beautiful to hold onto,” said filmmaker Bill Morrison. One critic compares *Decasia*’s “shimmering dreams and fantasies” to “Etienne-Jules Marey’s experiments in chronophotography...radically transformed—their beauty fully intact—in [the] Surrealist collagesMax Ernst [made of them].... A complex allegory for human experience ensues: knowledge is pursued, machines achieve manic ascendance, seduction spawns violence, disasters rain down...life begins anew.”

All the team members agree that *Decasia* broke new ground for them. “With *Decasia* we moved away from being responsible to anything other than our creative idea,” explained Gordon. “There’s no pressure for us to deliver anything that anybody in the world can exploit.” He added, “It’s sort of our fantasy....”

By all accounts this foursome has discovered a formula for artistic collaboration that avoids the notorious acrimony of close collaboration, unlocks the potential of each collaborator, and magnifies it exponentially. Happy creative marriages throughout history are far outnumbered by cantankerous partnerships among musicians, architects, librettists, city planners.... How do the *Gotham* collaborators account for their success?

Composer Gordon has lamented elsewhere that “people think artists pull down their inspiration from another world, maybe heaven, [which] is pure and uncorrupted...And this purity somehow is contained by the artist him or herself....” Still, listening to this team try to distill the essence of their fruitfulness, one senses a bounty of preternatural gifts—maybe from heaven—and something like a divine authenticity.

“The main thing is, we all really like each other,” says Ridge Theater Artistic Director Bob McGrath, “and we’re all really good at what we do. We respect each other. We don’t get in each other’s way. And if we do disagree, we find a way to work it out.”

In fact, the artists on the *Gotham* team admire each other’s work unequivocally. Asked about the thunderous *visual* impact of *Decasia*, filmmaker Bill Morrison says,

“Let’s be clear: it’s the music that is the driving narrative of these works...Michael Gordon’s incredible score...holds the emotional dynamics of the piece.”

“We each have *different* jobs to do,” explains visual artist Laurie Olinder, to which Morrison adds, “Laurie made a very beautiful film for a score by Julia Wolfe [*Believing*]...”

“We all bring our toys to the sandbox...” says Gordon, “...and work on the same sandcastle,” agrees Morrison.

Gordon adds, “The thing that’s so much fun about working with Bill and Bob and Laurie is that the [end] result is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.” Of American Composers Orchestra, Gordon says, “This group is incredible...[ACO] was willing to dedicate huge amounts of time to put this together. It’s almost unimaginable [for a composer] to have that kind of experience...”

McGrath reiterates, “I just respect these other three artists so much—it’s an honor to work with them on each and every project.”

Every marriage should be so sanguine. But what about the nuts and bolts? There is, in fact, a procedural scaffolding, on three distinct tiers, and it all begins with—what else? A meeting.

The difference, says Morrison, is that “other collaborators have tons of meetings and nothing gets done. We have very few meetings and a ton gets done. Our meetings are always very efficient. Especially our creative ones...”

“And not too many meetings,” echoes Olinder, stressing that “if you hold onto your ideas too tightly...” She trails off, confirming with her earnest expression that budding ideas can be ineffably fragile.

“We come together on an aesthetic,” says Gordon, a sort of Uberkonzept that arises out of an initial jam session, and excites each artist individually.

In this instance, in the afterglow of *Decasia*’s reception at festivals around the world, the four found themselves reflecting on the city which, on September 11, 2001, had itself

become symbolic of that film's profound meditation on decay, death, and rebirth. "*Decasia* seeks to show cycles," Morrison had written, "...the birth of a new type of being, separate from the old one...spiritual rebirth...souls waiting to re-enter new bodies..." They wonder as a group, and to a man, at the peculiar coincidences between the work—which both immerses and streams through the artists—and the condition of the city environment where they were doing the work, in September 2001. Thus the broad concept of "hometown New York" emerged, and *Gotham* was conceived.

So goes the first meeting, where the broad strokes are laid in. Then the artists retire to their solitary studios, where the true collaboration begins. For these particular artists, perhaps, collaboration is a natural impulse. Facing the materials of their respective disciplines, they cast wide and gather up the bits and pieces of visual montage, found film and sound pastiche. Image upon image, color and light, natural element upon fabricated form, tone upon sound, design upon discovery, time upon space—a colloquy is engaged.

Symphonic film, filmic symphony—thematic sound and images without actors or dialogue—has been on offer to new music audiences for over twenty years now. A solid language of new music is now established, so the "new" in new music is no longer freighted with suggestions of the merely difficult, the truculent, the uncivil. It is not as "new" as it once was, perhaps. But as contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it remains a treasure of unplumbed depths, yielding to those who learn its vocabulary, as these artists have. Over a decade of working together, they have developed a fluency that ensures transparent communication, and the trust so critical to any collaboration, freeing each to work independently, within a governing aesthetic.

On their second collaborative tier, the team will convene to share the seeds of each other's creative process. Each artist gingerly bares a fledgling design. These meetings are both tender and bracing, characterized by much kindness, deference, and mutual awe.

Morrison explains, "[Bob] will say, 'How could you make a film that somehow relates to this?' Or, 'Remember that idea you were talking about, the evolution film? Don't you think that would work here?'"

“I spew out my two cents’ worth,” answers McGrath. “If it’s helpful, good, and if it’s not, ignore me! There may be tiny bits of friction,” he grants, “but we just work it out. It all kind of just flows, like a river to the ocean....it just kind of goes....”

In the Ridge Theater production of *Jennie Richee*, for example, Olinder’s view of the lead character as a “violently disturbed man,” seems at odds with playwright Mac Wellman’s view of the “profound moralist.” Asked about this potentially incendiary disparity, Olinder answers, “The subject of [*Jennie Richee*] is so vast....In our little microcosm, my opinion and Mac’s do not cancel each other out. I don’t disagree with Mac, [and Mac] can’t say that [the subject] isn’t violent.”

To this Morrison exclaims, “It’s the inherent contradiction that’s so compelling.”

Olinder and Morrison erupt in a riff about scrim and scrim within scrim. They all mention magic. “We love that magical quality,” says McGrath, “of making the audience feel that they have x-ray eyes, that they can see through the image into the orchestra or the performer. ..” And they talk easily about spirituality, which threads like a theme through the titles in their collective resume. “There’s been a type of spirituality [in] the ones we choose, the ones that choose us,” reflects Morrison, “spirituality at all costs, defying logic....”

Certainly this team defies a logical expectation of clashing egos. How then have they escaped the logistical disasters that run so many collaborations aground?

“We’ve made disaster the theme of our projects,” laughs Morrison.

So continues the collaboration. In infrequent meetings the artists come together to keep their course true, with long rich periods of creative gestation and hard work in between. The team eschews the suggestion either that A.) it imposes design upon nature, or that B.) design happens by accident in their process. Instead they imply an artist’s intuition about beauty—it’s there all the time. You know it when you see it. You see it when your internal instrument is in tune, and tuned in. So in separate studios the artists tune in, and the work grows in all its inevitable dimensions toward the day it will be assembled.

“Working with Bob and Laurie is like walking on air. We never know if it’s going to come together until tech week. And then miraculously it does, and sometimes in the most uncanny way,” muses Morrison. “You know, John Lennon said when he was a Beatle he felt like he was part of a single mind....”

McGrath adds, “It is a *pure* thing. It feels very natural, very organic when we work.”

When the group brings their new work for orchestra and projections to Zankel Hall they will be embracing a new collaborator—the venue itself—more intimately than ever before. Olinder’s visuals and Morrison’s film will be projected not onto the multiple scrimms that they typically favor, but onto the walls of the hall. Offered a choice of two possible projection surfaces—both of them rectangular—Olinder and Morrison started looking for ways to turn a limitation to their advantage. Olinder brightens as she explains the capacity of digital technology to custom fit her images to projection surfaces, rendering them perceptually one.

“I start to see [limitations] as the Form,” says Morrison, and all together they hail the “good fortune” of Zankel’s beautiful blonde walls, as though the walls themselves had been designed for *Gotham*.

There will be other new elements in *Gotham*. Gordon’s orchestration calls for amplified instruments for the first time. How well Zankel will accommodate amplification remains to be heard, writes music critic Terry Teachout. “Amplification is an art, not a science,” to be arrived at over time, and not by technology alone.

Then there’s the matter of Manhattan’s subway trains. Just nine feet of bedrock stand between their seismic roar and Zankel’s underground audience.

Gordon crows, “No one’s gonna hear the subway!” True to the hard rock heritage of its generation, the group bursts into a paean to volume. “I’m into visceral music! I like to feel it! It’s gotta be loud!”

The third and arguably most crucial stage of the collaboration is the presentation of the work to the audience—which, for this team, means an invitation to the audience to become the final collaborator.

McGrath puts it this way: “We really gravitate toward things that are kind of open-ended in nature—either images or ideas or sound—so that interpretations by the audience can be grafted on. So a lot of the conception of the piece goes on within the mind and psyche of each individual that watches it.”

“I love talking to the audience after a performance,” Olinder interjects. “I find out so many things I hadn’t known about the piece!”

“Audience members say, ‘That was the most amazing thing...what was it about?’” confesses Gordon. “But there’s room for that. The more tangible the thing you’re involved in, the less room there is for you to use your own imagination...”

Morrison says, “With *Decasia*, I have...given myself the liberty to stretch out, examining each frame, and giving the viewer space to get lost in the images. Ultimately I would like to combine both [the long and the short] forms, giving the viewer someone to walk them through the piece (a function the music serves in *Decasia*) while allowing them the freedom to explore on their own as well.”

McGrath reflects. “The answer to why it works is kind of a mystery. The times have kind of demanded this. We try to make art that we would like to see, [and] we are of an age where we wanted to put visuals on music. It’s just a natural progression of things in the culture, and we’re just responding to it. We’re leading it, and we’re responding to it.”

One thing seems clear. *Gotham* will not be fully accomplished until we’ve heard it, seen it—and brought *our* experience to it, our collaborative contribution. They’re serious about this. On February 27, 2004, American Composers Orchestra will launch its new music series, *Orchestra Underground*, featuring the world premiere of *Gotham*, Michael Gordon’s multimedia collaboration with the artists of Ridge Theater—and us.

It’s sure to be “a most amazing thing.”