

LES ENFANTES TERRIBLES. A dance-opera spectacle based on the story by Jean Cocteau. Adapted by Phillip Glass and Susan Marshall. Presented by the Arts Festival of Atlanta. Robert Ferst Center for the Performing Arts, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia. 11 September 1997.

Though the notion of a music theatre performance based on a film conjures images of elaborate sets, costumes and sophisticated staging (a la *Sunset Boulevard*), *Les Enfants Terribles* (*Children of the Game*) was a strikingly simple and straightforward production. The climax of Phillip Glass' operatic trilogy based on works by the French artist, poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau, *Les Enfants* was strategically placed as the opening event for the 1997 Atlanta Arts Festival.

The story of *Les Enfants* centers around a pair of siblings, Paul and Lise, left alone by their mother's untimely death, who remain isolated in their room acting out fantasies which they term "playing the game." As their sense of separation from the outside world grows, the two eventually designate the room as their only reality—at times their "stage"—occasionally allowing their friend Gerard to serve as their private audience. The two become increasingly obsessed with the game and are gradually enslaved to their own inflexible reclusiveness. The story ends with Paul's tragic suicide, as neither is able to allow the other to escape the trap that they have created for themselves.



Dancers Mark Dechiazza, Kristen Hollingsworth, Krista Langberg, and John Heginbotham dramatize the multiple personalities of Paul and Lise in *Les Enfants Terribles*. Photo: Noah L. Greenburg

The cast of *Les Enfants* was made up of eleven young singer/dancers and three pianists headlined by Glass. Speaking to the Atlanta audience prior to the performance, Glass noted that the trilogy of works, which include *Orpheo*, *La Belle et la Bête* and *Les Enfants Terribles*, represents the first time that films have been used as source material for operas. Glass felt that to convey the visual and aural textures of film, a new form of musical theatre was needed, so he and choreographer Susan Marshall developed *Les Enfants Terribles* as a “dance-opera.” Marshall was selected to stage the piece because Glass felt that her choreography reflected a “skill in showing intimacy in relationships.” After beginning work on the project in 1995, *Les Enfants* had its world premiere on May 18, 1996 in Zug, Switzerland, and began its United States tour at the Spoleto Festival in June 1997. As Marshall reinforces in the program notes, her goal as choreographer was not to stage the action literally, but to increase the sense of mystery inherent in both the film and the novel. The result was a movement style which emphasized the dialectic between the ephemeral and temporal; a style appropriate for a story written in a mere seventeen days during one of Cocteau’s intense periods of opium addiction.

Les Enfants was performed on an essentially bare stage, with a series of large horizontal opaque screens used for projections of English subtitles. The screens were situated at varying degrees of depth from the front edge of the performance area, and were raised and lowered as needed. Despite the minimalist scenic approach, the production captured the sense of magnitude and scale normally associated with traditional or “grand” operatic productions (e.g. productions at larger North American opera houses, such as the Houston Grand Opera), largely due to its use of montage and multiplicity. The visual structure of the piece was provided by the on-stage performers and the musicians, as both groups were staged to form an inseparable unit. Aside from a narrator, who occasionally spoke to the audience in English, the operatic score was sung entirely in French. The narrator, played by Hal Cazalet, served several purposes, reacting to the events of the story, playing the role of Gerard, performing as a dancer, and at times disappearing completely. Each of the two major characters, Paul and Lise, was portrayed by three dancers and a singer. This unique convention allowed for multiple reactions to the events of the story, which created a more lifelike response according to Glass, since “we often feel many things, but can only portray one reaction.” As with Robert Wilson’s 1984 staging of *Medea* in Lyon, France (which utilized dancers as alter egos), this type of staging brought to mind the early twentieth century art form of cubism, which focused on the multi-dimensionality of forms in space. In this dramatization of *Les Enfants*, the audience was allowed to see the characters “photographed” in many different ways, thus presenting their struggles with often opposing desires. For instance, the singing character Lise

would ordinarily project a neutral reaction to Paul, allowing her three alter egos to present three different reactions. The audience was then able to witness the three “possible” reactions by Lise, who, though ultimately forced to resign herself to one point of view, hinted at other courses of action. In addition to serving as dramatic alter egos for the singers, Marshall’s dancers also achieved a spatial relationship between the projected subtitles and the singers. While the burden of the story rested with the singers, the “text” created by the dancers provided a sense of depth both in terms of characterization as well as a sense of completeness as far as the stage picture was concerned. The placement and movement style of the dancers (not to mention their stage attitudes) formed the visual structure by designating relationships, locales, passage of time, and other incidents.

The movement text evoked many sensations: a sense of mystery, drug-induced dreaminess, and fragmentation of personality. While much of Marshall’s choreography was recognizable as ballet or modern dance, the unique feature of the movement was the effect of montage brought about by the multiple pairs and trios. Marshall managed to create vivid stage pictures, achieving a balance between abstraction and “pedestrian” movement, or the static positioning of characters who mirrored, reacted to or contradicted one another. The movement, music and song remained continuous and, aside from three other elements—a bed which was occasionally rolled on stage to symbolize “the room,” a door at the upstage left corner for important entrances/exits, and a continuous stream of “snow” from above (an obvious opium symbol)—the movement text created the entire sense of time and structure on the stage space. Compared with other similar productions, *Les Enfants* was fairly short, lasting about ninety minutes without intermission. However, the driving, cyclical nature of Glass’s score, combined with the almost non-stop movement and the unrelenting snow from above, engendered a metaphorical opium dream, a performance that seemed to transcend the barriers of time and space. A unique combination of classic and postmodern, young and old, and traditional and non-traditional was created by *Les Enfants Terribles* through the metaphor of children, alienated from the outside world, who resort to playing games in order to define their existence. This type of poetic imagery, indigenous to the story, made the production as poignant as it was simple.

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