

On the Odder End of the Space-Time Continuum

‘On the Beach’ at Baryshnikov Arts Center

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When “Einstein on the Beach” had its premiere in 1976 at the Metropolitan Opera House, it changed everything, on both sides of the footlights. It redefined what opera could be: forget about narrative, dramatic conflict, arias and conventional orchestration; this was a work about ideas, both quirky and elevated, explored in microscopic detail over five hours.

For Philip Glass, its composer, and Robert Wilson, its director and designer, it opened possibilities that they would not have dreamed of two years earlier but which shaped their later careers. And for listeners, whether they had heard Mr. Glass’s earlier music or were new to it, “Einstein” showed that the Minimalist style he was exploring could achieve huge things.

To celebrate the work’s 35th anniversary, Mr. Wilson brought together several choreographers, visual designers, directors and performing ensembles and worked with them at the Watermill Center, in Water Mill, N.Y., on a reinterpretation of “Einstein.”

They created “On the Beach,” essentially a remix of the opera: a new piece that draws freely on the musical, textual and (after a fashion) staging elements of the original but slices them up, reorders them and weaves new material around them. It opened a three-night run at the Baryshnikov Arts Center on Thursday evening.

Fresh ideas, both profound and silly, were plentiful. In “Metro Repetition,” Jonah Bokaer reimagined the train sequence as a futuristic dance accompanied by an increasingly dense electronic soundtrack and placed in a spare staging by Davide Balliano built around a ladder and a wheel. In the “Knee Play” reconfigurations, by Egill Saebjornsson and Marcia Moraes, you winced through a dialogue about the meaning of life between an actor and a talking rock; but the spirited finale, in which a dancer on a pedestal pulled by a bicyclist hurled a microphone at an electric guitar and dragged it across the strings, made up for that.

Mr. Glass’s music — the dreamlike counting sequences, the frenetic rocket ship figuration and other passages that anyone who has heard “Einstein” even once will immediately recognize — flits through the production.

But in “Letter From the Atomic Shores,” the Degenerate Art Ensemble adds its own live string score, by Joshua Kohl, Jherek Bischoff, Haruko Nishimura and Dohee Lee, to recordings of the Glass score. (Texts, both from the opera and newly written, were presented in English, Taiwanese, Korean and Swedish.)

Other sections — like “It,” by Santiago Taccetti and Manuela Infante, performed by the Brooklyn group nicoykatiushka; and “Blurt,” by Steven Reker, performed by People Get Ready — drew more from the opera’s quirky staging than from its score. The focus here was on stylized, often mechanistic choreography that explored relationships among movement, time and space.

As commentary, mostly by artists who were children (or not yet born) when “Einstein” had its premiere, “On the Beach” is fascinating for its oddness, which often surpasses that of the original.

Missing, though, was the meditative overview that drives “Einstein.” If anything, the show whetted the appetite for the full opera, a production of which is now touring in Europe and will arrive at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in September.