

Eastern Blocheads

Vagabond Opera's world is like ours, but with more consonants

OPERA | What qualifies opera as "vagabond"?

"I like to think of it as opera distilled," says classically trained tenor Eric Stern. For five years, his sextet has blended sounds from around the globe, spanning the worlds of folk, pop and classical music. On Saturday, they come to Millennium Stage.

"The show is a cabaret but not in the jazz-hands, modern cabaret sense or in [the sense of] the musical 'Cabaret,' for that matter," Stern explains. "More the cabaret of old Warsaw."

"We're taking the operatic voice

and putting it at the center of something that's not necessarily in the opera tradition," Stern continues. "We're doing a lot of stuff that comes from the Eastern European musical palette, if not further beyond — Arabic music, Turkish as well."

The recipe wasn't exactly written down. "There's not necessarily a rhyme and reason to everything in life," Stern explains. "There are just things that resonated deeply within me — Bulgarian accordion music, odd-metered music."

Vagabond Opera's set list is, as you'd imagine, multilingual. From the mainstream operatic tradition come French and Italian. "We don't do anything German," Stern says, "but we do Yiddish, Russian. We do a song in Ukrainian, one in Mace-



The Vagabond Opera uses multiple languages, include "Oshtal," which it made up.

donian. How many is that?"

There's also Spanish, as well as Ladino, the tongue of Sephardic Jews. "There's a nonsense language we make up called 'Oshtal,'" Stern continues. "Back in the day, Mel Brooks and Sid Caesar, they would make up Italian and French with each other, but neither of them spoke it. So we do that in an Eastern European vein." He launches into a manic mélange that suggests a dubiously insistent Soviet Bloc radio editorial.

There's also English. A tribute to Marlene Dietrich tips its top hat to Kurt Weill, though Stern admits he prefers the composer's German output to the work he did for American audiences.

The Vagabonds share the current fascination with the Weimar spirit. Stern hesitates to speculate as to why the bow-lipped, fiddling-before-Rome-burns style sounds so right today, except to say, "I think in that period, that was sort of the high cabaret tradition, and why not hearken back to that?"

GLENN DIXON

→ Kennedy Center, 2700 F St. NW; Sat., 6 p.m., free; 202-467-4600. (Foggy Bottom-GWU)

Everything Happens at Once

In 'Too Much Light,' the Neo-Futurists must learn to act fast

STAGE | Decades since its reign over television, the variety show finally suffered an ignoble death with the cancellation of "The Wayne Brady Show" in 2002. (A good James Brown impersonation can go only so far.) Any resurgence would have to take a radically different approach to the format.

Enter "Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind," Chicago troupe the Neo-Futurists' madcap across-the-spectrum attempt to perform 30 plays in an hour. After selling out through the Capital Fringe Festival last year, the group has brought its rapid-fire show to the Woolly Mammoth.

The setup: Hung from a string above the stage are 30 numbered pages, each corresponding to a spe-



QUICK CHANGE: The troupe culls stories from the personal, political and absurd.

cific play. A timer at the front of the stage ticks its way toward the hour mark as cast members whip through the plays, the order determined by whatever number they leap up and

rip from the rope first. When the buzzer sounds, that's it — whether the play is done or not, no matter how many are left.

The structure of the show guar-

antees one thing: energy. Whether members are dancing weirdly or dragging audience members up onstage or simulating sex or riding bikes up and down the aisles, there's never a dull moment.

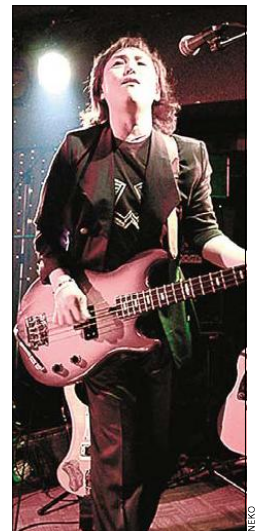
That's great for the humorous bits — and there sure are a lot of them — but make for awkward sea change when things instantly get sad, personal or political. (The Neo-Futurists base all their plays on events in the cast members' real lives, too, making these moments that much heavier.)

Of course, if you find yourself uncomfortable or confused or feeling otherwise unenthused about what's onstage — hey, just wait a minute or two. Now that's variety.

CHRIS MINCHER

→ Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 641 D St. NW, through Jan. 13, \$25, 202-393-3939; woollymammoth.net. (Archives-Navy Memorial)

TRIBUTE | THE FAB SHI



J-POP: There are Beatles tribute bands, then there are the Silver Beats, four mop-topped Japanese kids with a taste for the "Yeah, yeah, yeah." Scream along with them on Friday night as they storm the 9:30 Club.