

CANADIAN THEATRE REVIEW

NUMBER 96

FALL 1998

\$10.50

Opera and Music Theatre

Edited by Grace Kehler
and Harry Lane

Script

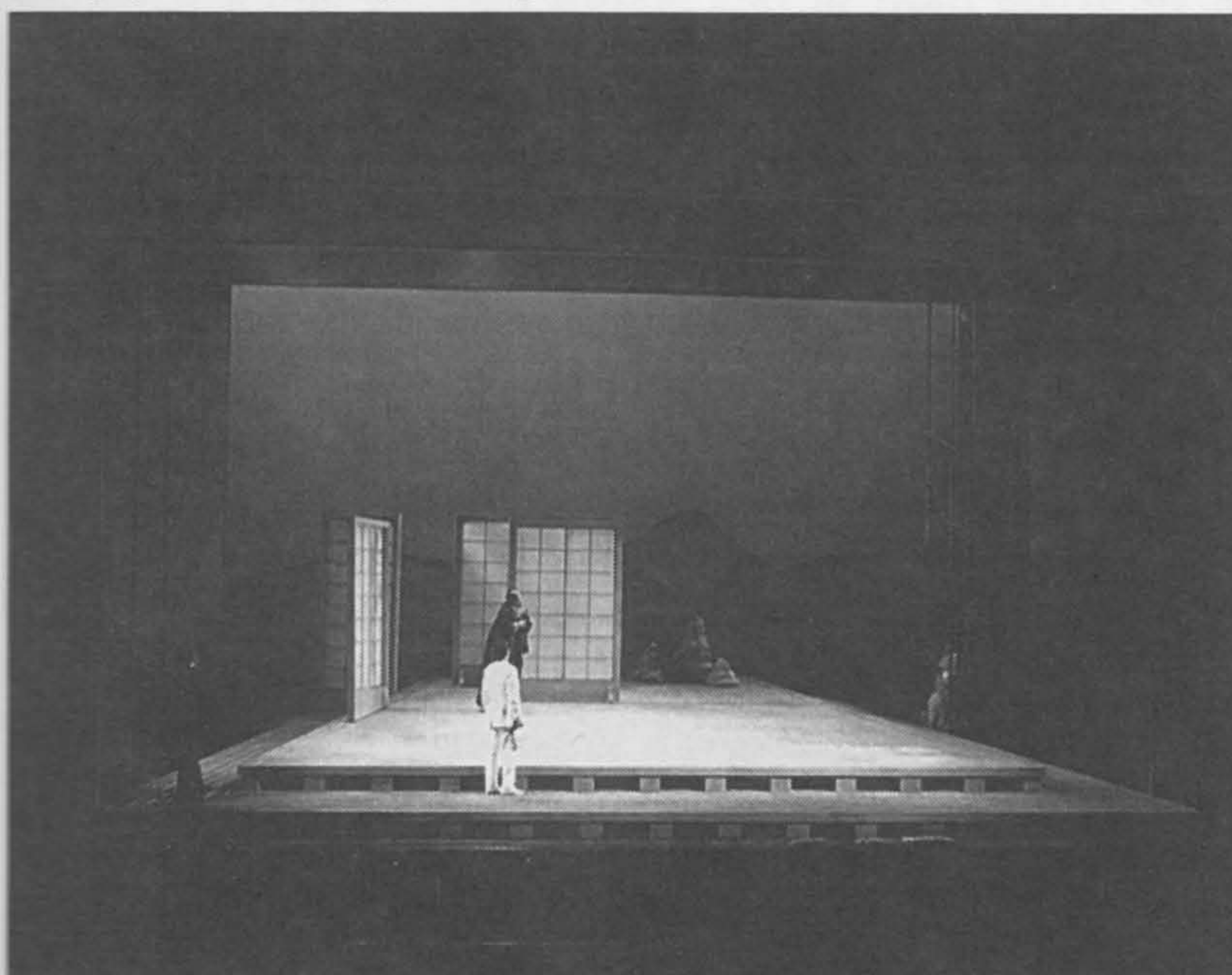
Beatrice Chancy

Libretto by George Elliott Clarke
with excerpts from the score
by James Rolfe



Scenographic Stories: Design in Contemporary Opera Performance

Recent new operas by experimental opera companies and lesser-known works by the Canadian Opera Company attest to a new positioning of opera in the cultural landscape and new visual frameworks in which to see and hear it. Many productions have made use of multimedia design or have invited collaborative efforts by artists in other fields of visual presentation, making it increasingly evident that scenography now has a more developed narrative function, not constrained by earlier concepts of a unified production. Designers are making, in spatial and temporal terms, a contemporary mediation of music and gesture. Scenography is used in this discussion as the critical and inclusive term to observe the perception of space, movement, rhythm and time for performance effected by a collective effort. The details of the visual compositions are understood as performative in themselves and as capable of affecting corporeal presence on the stage, rather than simply illustrating the opera.

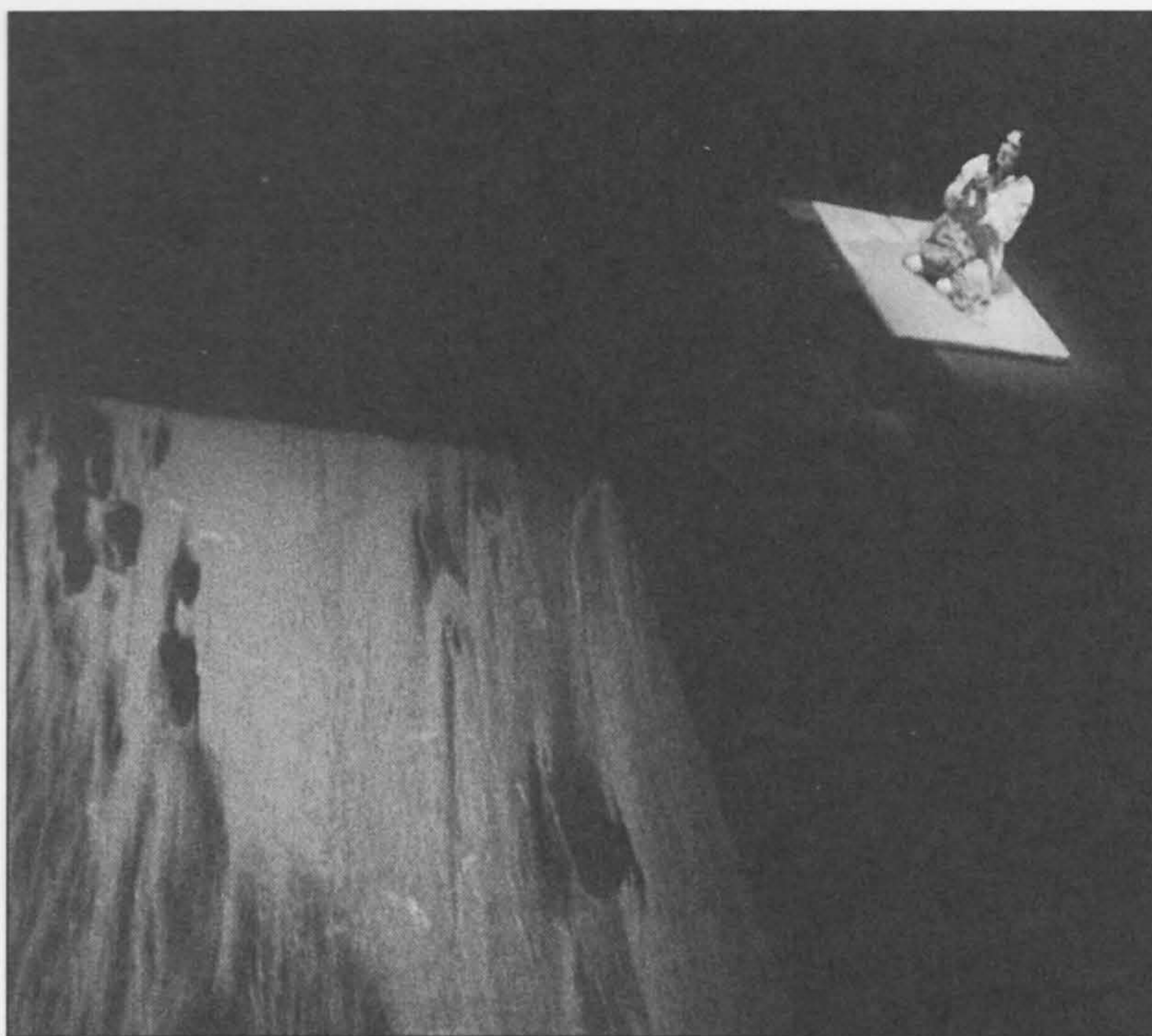


Madama Butterfly, directed by Brian MacDonald, set design by Susan Benson and lighting by Michael Whitfield. The Japonisme of the design referred to the stage of Noh theatres. European realistic illusion was denied by this design, which could be easily reconfigured to suggest another place or another time by the addition of the screens (brought in by stagehands in full view of the audience). PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER

At the Canadian Opera Company (COC) there has been a pronounced effort to come to new terms with the visual and acoustic conjunctions. In 1990, when the COC mounted its production of *Madama Butterfly*, Susan Benson (then head of design at the Stratford Festival) designed the sets and costumes and Michael Whitfield (principal lighting designer at the Stratford Festival and frequent designer for the COC) designed the lights.¹ Their scenography explicitly referred to the performance traditions of Noh theatre and the colour palette of Japanese watercolours. This approach was, in effect, a critique of the romanticization of Puccini's work by realistic settings, and its Japonisme accommodated an intercultural aesthetic. Two years later, the COC mounted what was to become an internationally acclaimed double bill of *Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók and *Erwartung* by Arnold Schoenberg. It was directed by Robert Lepage, with scenography by Michael Levine (set design),² Laurie-Shawn Borzovoy (hologram projections) and Robert Thomson (lighting design). In *Bluebeard's Castle*

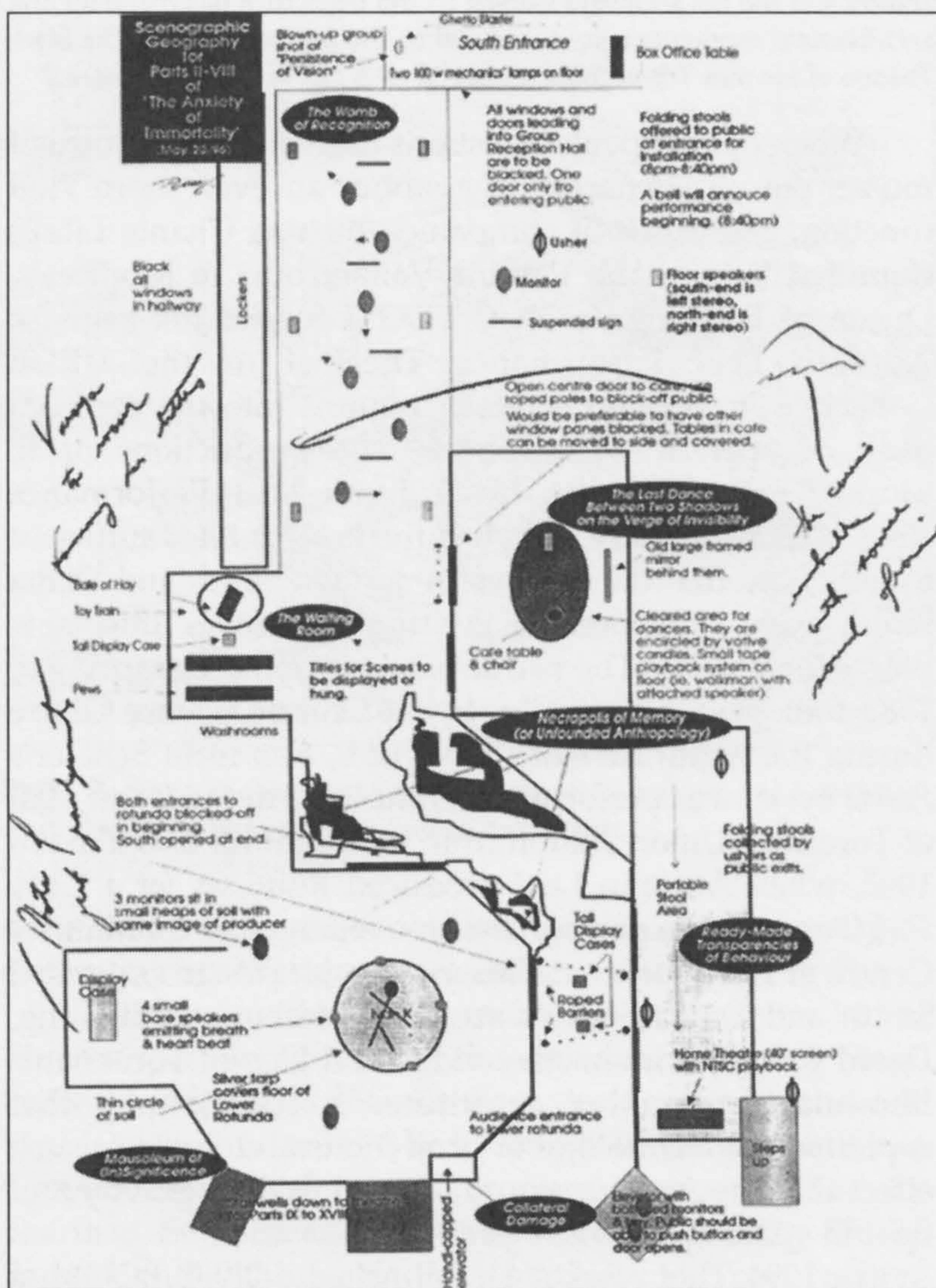


Erwartung, directed by Robert Lepage, set design by Michael Levine, lighting by Alain Lortie. Set within a proscenium arch of golden mosaic tiles, the seemingly solid cinder block wall allowed for a shift in perspective; a choreographic rotation through ninety degrees made the wall into a floor through which stage space could be imaginarily intruded upon. PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER



The visual detachment from the real in *Requiem for a Party Girl* at the du Maurier Theatre at Harbourfront: changing physical proportions and using projections to float the character of Ariadne into space.

PHOTO: ANDRE LEDUC



The floor plan of the "Scenographic Geography" for *The Anxiety of Immortality*. Spectators were gently guided from the south entrance of the ROM to the theatre in the first "act" of the performance. The evening was composed of three segments – this ambulant section which lasted about forty-five minutes, a performance in the theatre (fifty-five minutes) and a communal dinner of perogies at the end of the show.

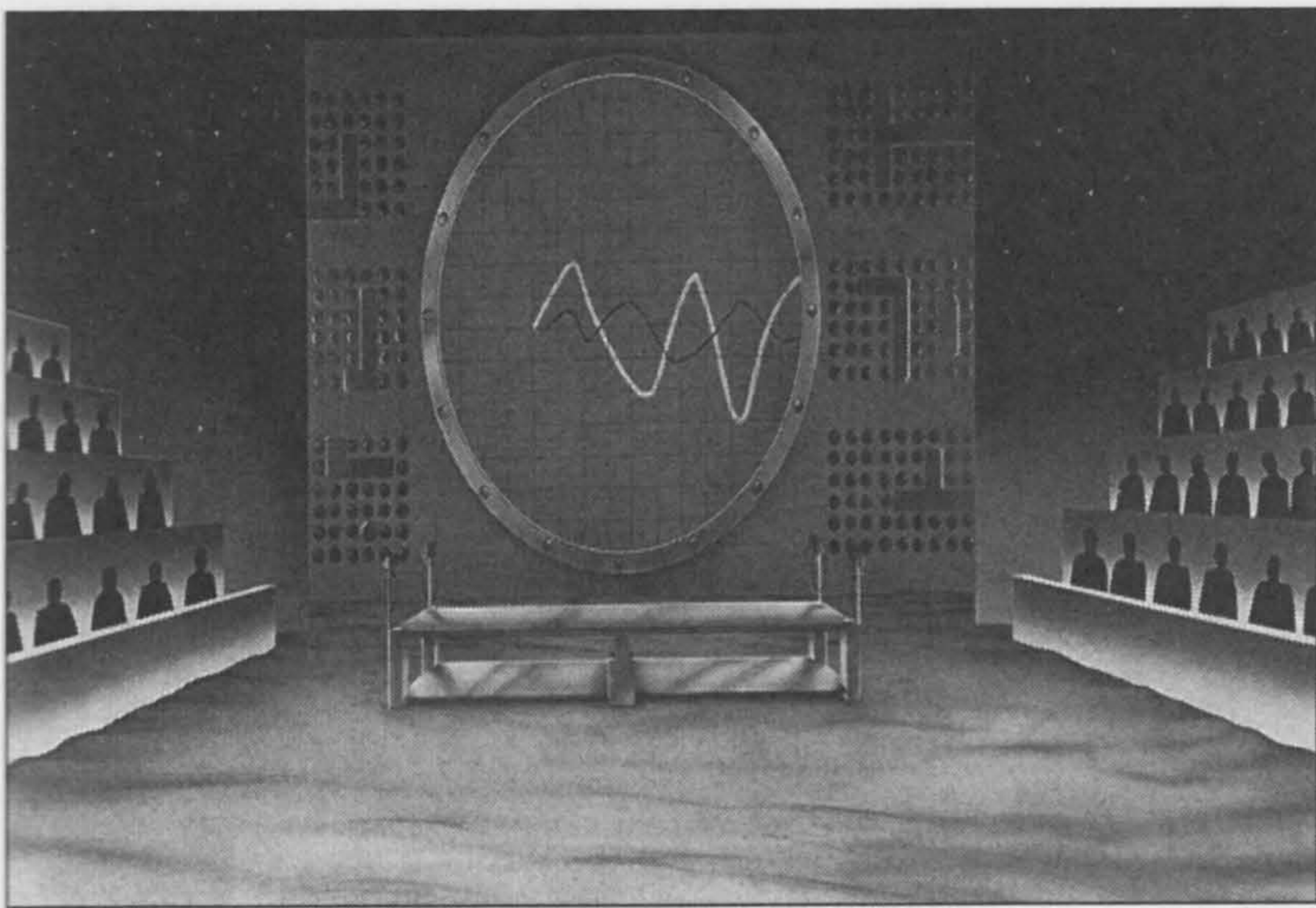
COURTESY OF AUTUMN LEAF PERFORMANCE

Museum, a production written, directed and designed by Thom Sokoloski, with music by Michael White. Sokoloski exploited the connotations of the museum as a repository of history: rather than simply directing spectators to the theatre, he invited them to explore the construction, display and performance of history by creating a gallery installation which took them from the south entrance to the theatre. Seven galleries took the spectators through installations using various media – video, recorded sound, dance and film – which presented parts of the narrative that would be drawn together in the theatre. Created in the style of Jorge Luis Borges, the oneiric atmosphere touched on effects of the famine inflicted by Joseph Stalin on Ukraine in 1933. Sokoloski's story is of the life of a young woman who hosts a Canadian television talk show about food. In the safety of Canada, she manufactures a fictional past in order to obliterate the horrors she survived in Ukraine. Her son, an installation artist who ironically "creates dream rooms," meets the angel of death, who appears to him as a seductive young woman.

In the "Scenographic Geography" created for parts II to VIII (Parts IX to XVII took place in the theatre), the contexts for interpretation were constantly being shifted as the spectators walked through the installation. Instead of an overture played live, they heard live and recorded instrumentation and broadcast singing on speakers placed so as to bounce sound off the walls of the Museum. Spectators were shown diverse exhibits: a "documentary" film of women making perogies in a "factory setting" and telling their stories; puppet/dolls wearing black and white masks made of photocopies of the central characters; a live performance by dancers on a stage delineated by votive candles and set against the backdrop of a mirror which reflected the audience back to itself. Spectators were suspended in a kind of dream time while they passed through this gallery. This experience of the "installation opera performance" posed fascinating questions concerning the way in which contexts for narratives are constructed, and especially in terms of the cultural coherence of a museum.

The combination of the place and the telling of the story has always been particularly energetic in Sokoloski's work. In 1989, when he created *The Vacant Goddess* as an "image opera," it was in collaboration with composer Christopher Butterfield and designer Michael Goodwin. The opera explored the relationship of Helen Keller with Alexander Graham Bell by focusing on Helen Keller's dream world. Rather than presenting a representational place, the scenography was dominated by an image of an instrument that might record brain waves. The screen on the machine that recorded mental activity corresponded to a large circle on the floor, within which the deaf and blind Helen Keller communicated. The images of differing communication systems, including the display of electronic impulses in a human brain, set up a stunning environment for the song, dance, video and sound effects for this workshop production in the Talbot Theatre at the University of Western Ontario.

The URGE collective in Toronto is an interdisciplinary group whose third work, *She Promised She'd Bake a Pie*, played in the du Maurier Centre at Harbourfront in December 1996 and later toured to Calgary and Banff. The collective comprises Fides Krucker, mezzo-soprano; Marie



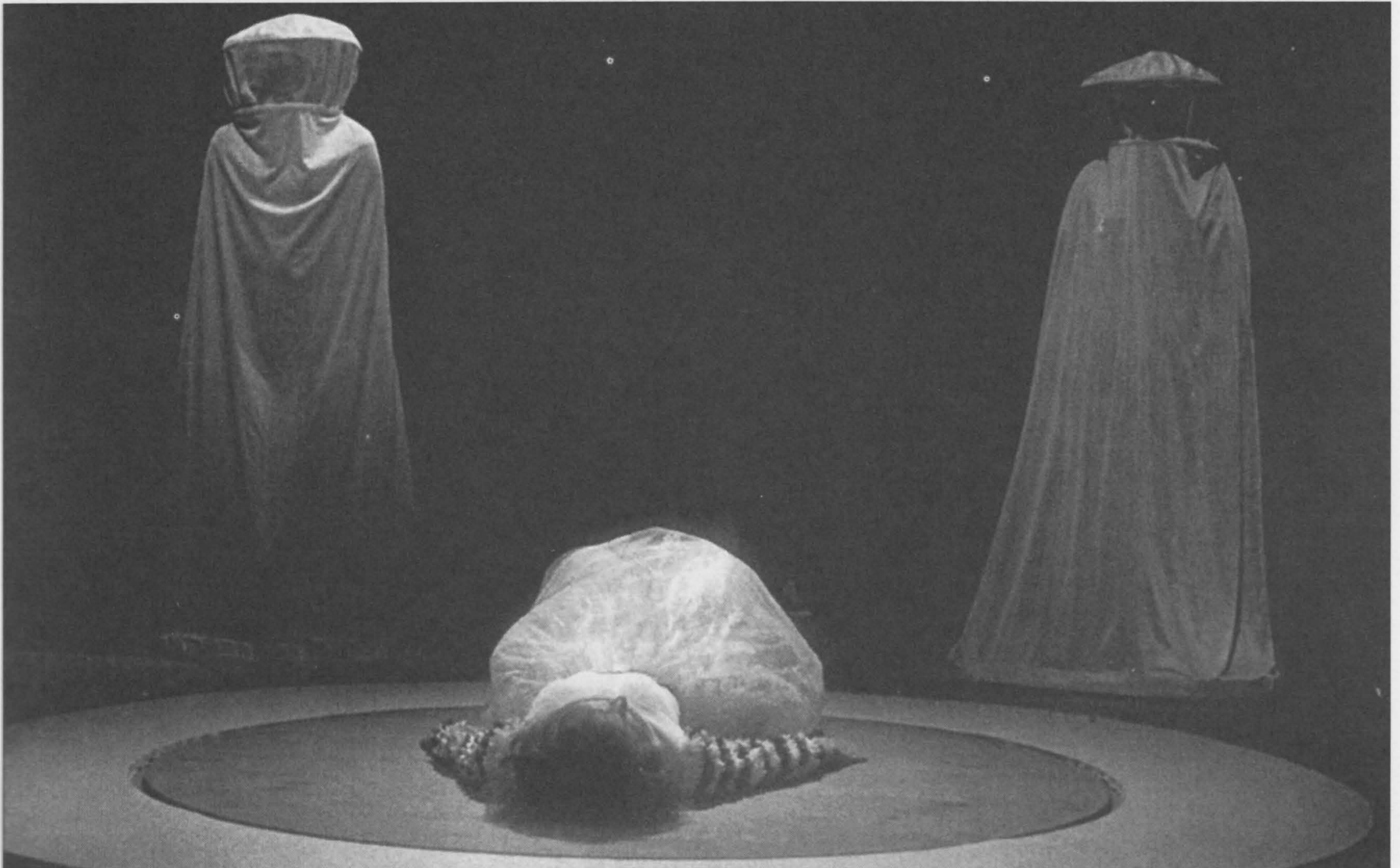
Michael Goodwin's sketch for *The Vacant Goddess* negotiates the technical impression and the human experience by resizing the proportions of equipment to corporeal presence.

DRAWING: MICHAEL GOODWIN

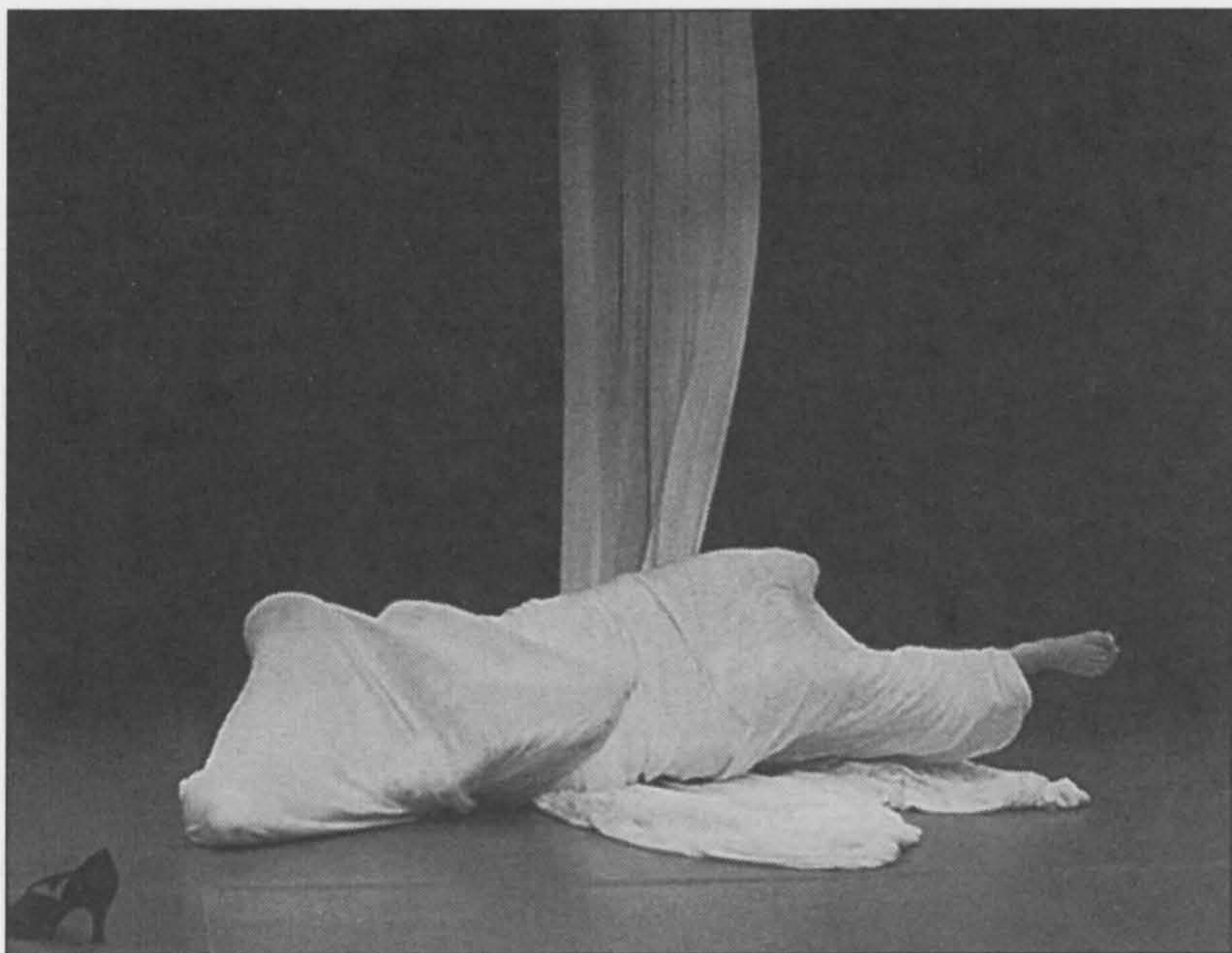
Josée Chartier, a dancer; Katherine Duncanson, who works in dance, music, theatre and experimental video; Anita La Selva, an actor and Spanish dancer; Eve Egoyan, a pianist; Linda Caitlin Smith, a composer; and Joanna McIntyre, the facilitating director. Each of these women works in art forms which understand spatio-temporal relations in very distinct ways. For this performance they were aided by Julia Tribe and Vicki Anderson in the design of the costumes and by Bonnie Beecher with the lighting. Their collaborative effort would seem at first outside the bounds of this discussion, since it is difficult to

classify the performance as opera, but the way in which the collective uses extreme sound to challenge perceptions of opera, while nevertheless contextualizing arias, bears interestingly on the present inquiry. Their sense of design comes from the improvisation with sound that the women have conducted over a period of time. While the structure of the piece was derived from the baking of a pie, it was the experimentation with vocalization that created the performance. Since getting the sound distributed spatially was of crucial importance to the improvisations, they played with kinds of sound, the depths from which sound could be made, but, most significantly, with the proxemic relationships of sound and reverberations through bodies. Their own bodies became the infrastructure of the visual design; a long length of fabric served as the dough, while the steel mixing bowls, wire whisks and heels of their shoes were the only instruments, other than a piano, which accompanied the singing.

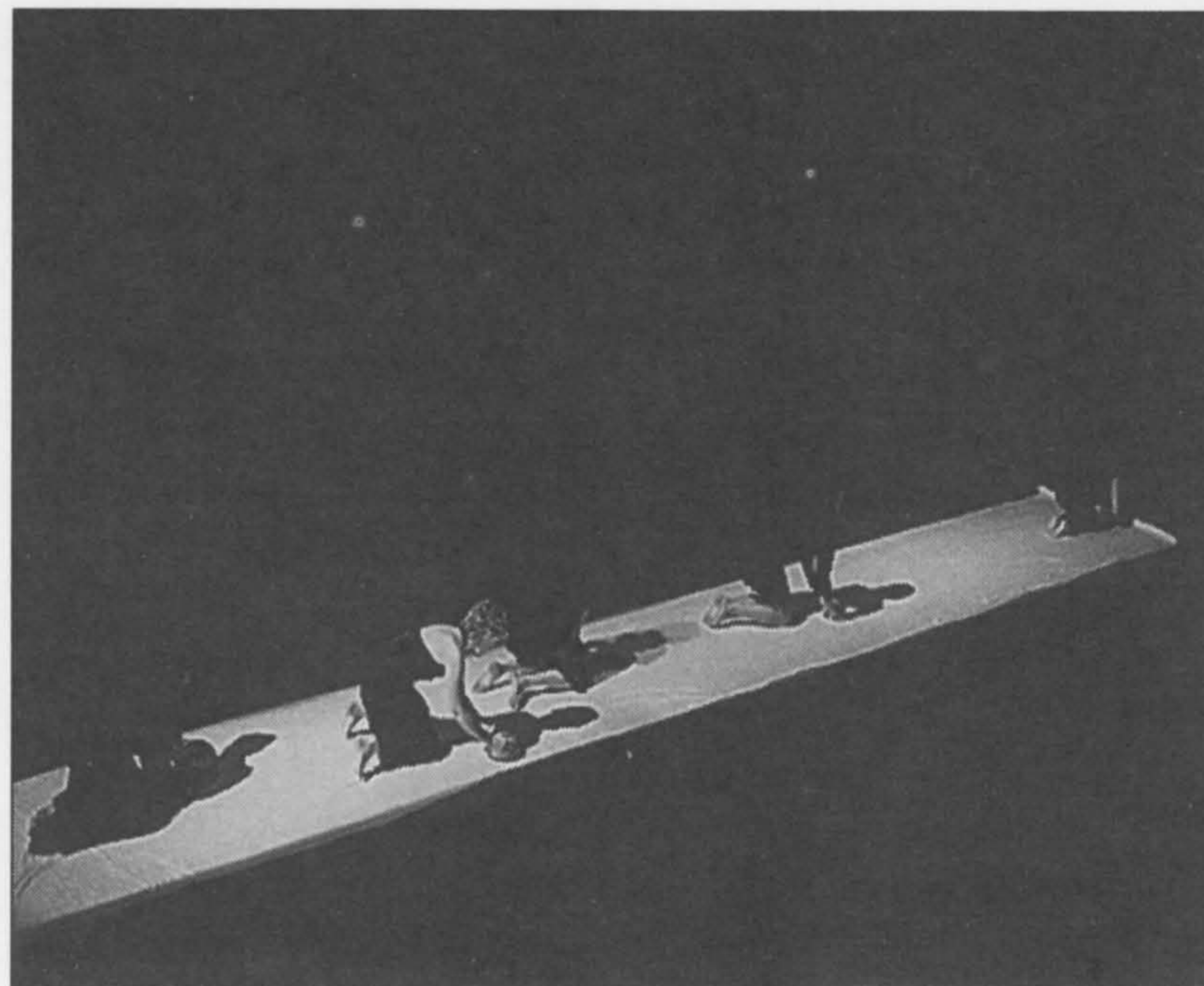
When Marie-Josée Chartier introduces the making of the pie, she changes the scale of the performance and animates a length of fabric draped from the first balcony as the dough, while the other performers add vocalization from the balcony. Chartier creates a clownesque *pas de deux* with the dough, throwing herself into the process of "letting the air in." These wildly entertaining antics stretch the visual perspective. In one stunning creation, Fides Krucker is a perfect Wagnerian diva standing atop a utility cart. Her Walkyrie headdress of coiled wire festooned with miniature fruit is held in place by a headband of red cherries. On the pedestal, she literally creates the pie fill-



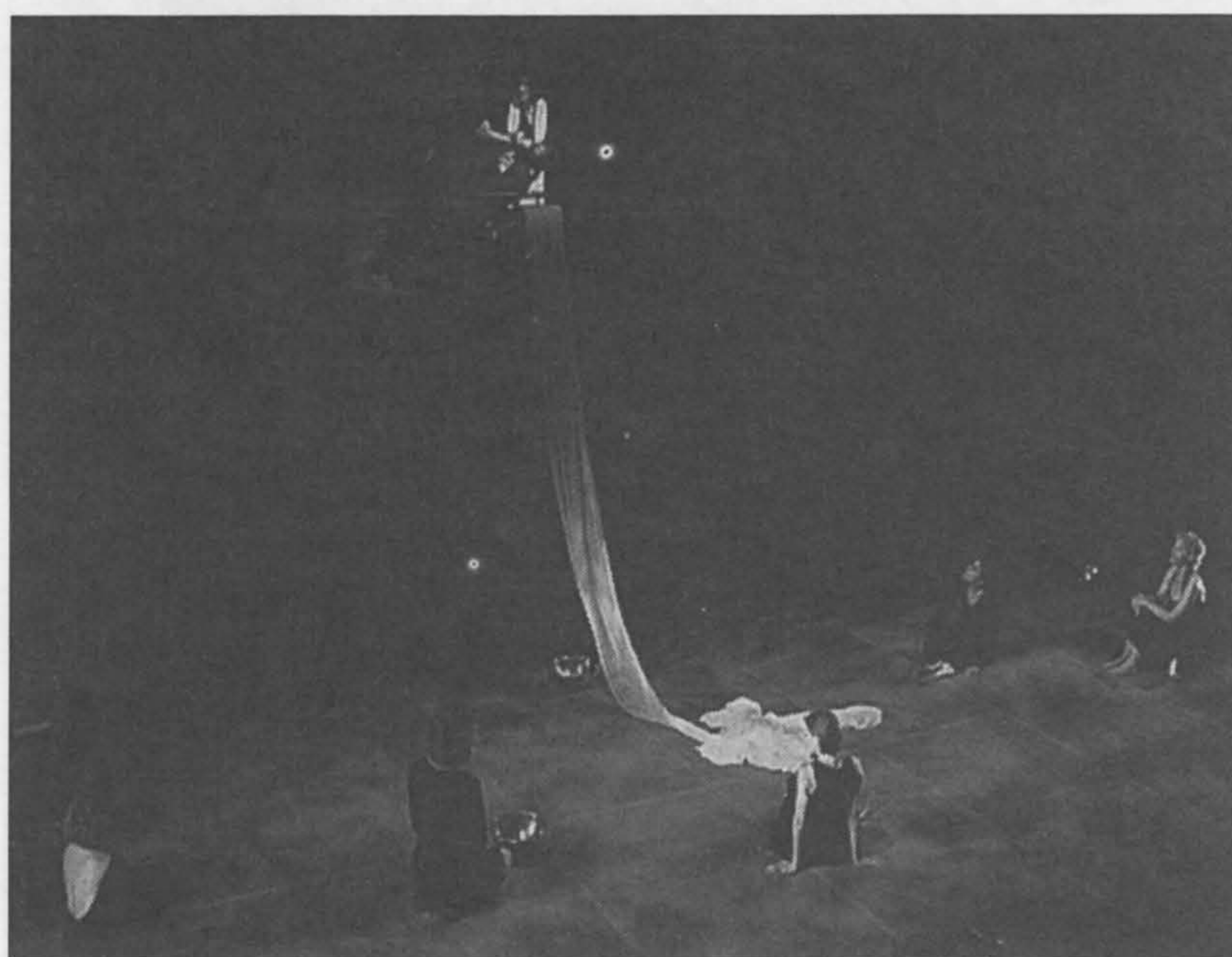
The experience of Helen Keller was rendered in terms of the technology that could record her dreams. Seen here: Helen Keller in a circle that transposed the technological screen into the circle for performance. PHOTO: MICHAEL GOODWIN



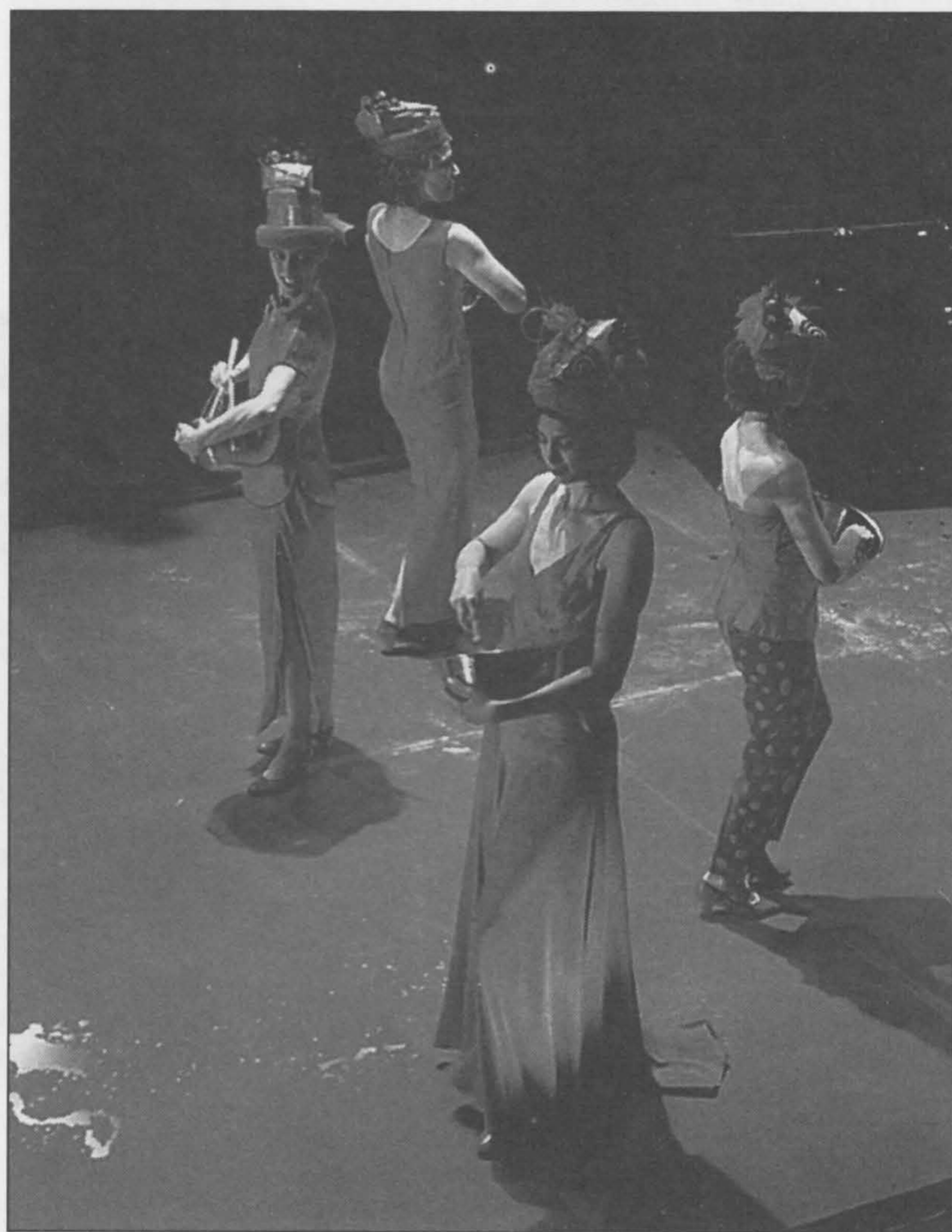
The URGE Collective used the height of the du Maurier Centre in *She Promised She'd Bake a Pie*. While Marie-Josée Chartier prepared the dough for the crust, she literally threw herself into the project. Atop the length of fabric stood the members of the collective, providing a hummed accompaniment. PHOTO: DEAN GOODWIN



In a strong rhythmic scene which the collective entitled "Cookie Cutting," Chartier rolled out the dough, which was then used as a pathway for stamping out the cookies using the bowls. Bonnie Beecher's lighting design acknowledged the constant reconfiguration of the space according to the sound being created and, in this case, seemed to cut away the rest of the theatre. PHOTO: DEAN GOODWIN



Mixing bowls and wire whisks were among the most prominent instruments in *She Promised She'd Bake a Pie*, and here one can see a moment when they are clearly visible and at rest as kitchen objects. Fides Krucker sings as the Cooking Goddess and the dough descends earthward to the awaiting cooks. Significantly, the sound in this scene played with the meeting of the music between Krucker on the balcony and the other women on the floor (from left to right: Marie-Josée Chartier, Anita La Selva, Linda Catlin Smith, Eve Egoyan and Catherine Duncanson). PHOTO: DEAN GOODWIN



The finale. The cast of *She Promised She'd Bake a Pie* whipped cream in the bowls to a strong flamenco beat, creating a wall of sound that contrasted wonderfully with the musical range they had introduced the audience to during the performance. All that was left was the mechanical beating of the topping. So as not to lose the image of the pie, each woman wore a hat adorned with a slice of pie. PHOTO: DEAN GOODWIN

ing, drawing fruit from her concert dress, all the while improvising the lyrics to a Chinese folksong. As the peels fall, they cover the "dough" cloth spread under the cart, so that by the end of her aria the peeled fruit has marked not only effort but time, and the singer is imaged as the small porcelain bird that one inserts to allow the steam to escape during baking.

The finale once again brings together the imagistic with the actual, only this time the stakes are higher. The social texts of proper behaviour and culinary ability coincide in a visual extravaganza, and the fact that these women are not to be contained, either by bel canto or by the baking of a pie, is clearly evident from the spatial arrangement of the piece. Whipping cream is poured into the large steel mixing bowls that the women have used throughout the performance, and as the women beat out a strong Flamenco beat, choreographed by Anita La Selva, they whip the cream. The cream splatters onto their individualized cherry-red costumes, narrating an inner urge, a female desire to challenge, to not remain neat and tidy, to disrupt the stage etiquette. All the while the women wear their hats adorned with large slices of pie that have descended from the hat-box ovens in the flies.

Examined together, these examples suggest that the new relationships being forged challenge a hierarchy of signifying systems for opera in performance and, in its stead, introduce complexities of simultaneity. The attention being paid to the materiality of the design encourages spectators to consider the details, not merely generalized representational connotations, and thus the production of meaning takes place metaphorically as well as by the estrangement occasioned by the identification of specific materials. The technology introduced into these performances opens the possibilities of changing the rhythms of time and space in the spectator's perceptions and thus affects the perception of the music. Such scenography opens up new and vast territories of emotional experience for opera in Canada. □

Notes

- 1 This production was successfully revived in 1994 and in 1998. The morally bracing effect of the design became evident when, in a letter to the *Toronto Star*, 15 Oct. 1990, a patron complained that the Japonisme destroyed the "fairy tale like atmosphere and tender mood" and cited this aesthetic approach as making Cio-Cio-San's house into a construction site.
- 2 Michael Levine had designed critically acclaimed set and principal costumes for *Idomeneo* (1987) and set and costumes for *Wozzeck* (1990) during the artistic directorship of Lotfi Mansouri.
- 3 Michael Levine has designed internationally - working with Canadian-born director Robert Carsen - at the Vienna State Opera, the Welsh National Opera, De Vlaamse Opera in Antwerp, the English National Opera, the Opera Bastille, Geneva Opera Company, the Santa Fe Opera Company, the Scottish Opera Company and the Metropolitan Opera since their initial collaboration at the COC on *Mario and the Magician* in 1992.
- 4 Alain Lortie has lit shows for such companies as Operama in Munich, Carbone 14, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal and La La La Human Steps, for Peter Gabriel's 1993 U.S. tour and for numerous singers, and is also involved with urban lighting projects in Montreal.
- 5 Phillip Barker is an award-winning filmmaker and was the production designer for Atom Egoyan's recent films, including *The Sweet Hereafter*. His film-based events and installations have toured Canada, Holland and Spain, including the Canada pavilion at Expo 92 in Seville.
- 6 Paul Mathiesen has designed lights for many productions of new opera and for many theatre productions. He received the G.E. Edison Award in 1993 for his work on the S.R. Perren Gem and Gold Room at the ROM. He has designed lights for various museums, among them the Museum of Civilization and the Textile Museum, and created such site-specific light installations as *Light Planes*, at Harry's New York Bar, and *Heliocamera: Light Apparatus to Produce and Record Shadow (Equals History)* on a *Cartograph*, a light installation for the "Heliotropic" group show at the Mercer Union.

Natalie Rewa is a former associate editor and editor of CTR. She teaches at Queen's University in Kingston and is currently working on study of scenographic design in Canada.