

SUMMER PREVIEW

50 SHOWS WORLDWIDE

MUSIC

Northern Soul

HUEY COPELAND ON ALICIA HALL MORAN

AS THE ARREST OF HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. on the steps of his own house made clear, the dynamics of racialized subjection are particularly vexed in ivory-tower towns like Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the one hand, black bodies are continuously surveyed and assessed as either “hood,” “Harvard,” or “homeless”; on the other, the city and its environs play host to a range of the most visible African-diasporic cultural institutions and practitioners anywhere. Yet there are, of course, much-needed escapes from these specular extremes of life lived black.

It was just this kind of phenomenal experience—of solace and sublimity, communion and catharsis—that Alicia Hall Moran conjured into being for an intimate crowd in February at Cambridge’s Regattabar, a jazz venue in the upscale Charles Hotel. A classically trained soprano, Hall Moran has increasingly come to work within the spaces of the art world, collaborating with conceptualist Adam Pendleton on his 2007 performance *The Revival* and unfurling one of her song installations—a series of site-sensitive vocal interventions—at a *soirée musicale*, curated by artist Whitfield Lovell. Migration across locales and audiences also undergirds her *Motown Project*, reprised here after first being presented in December 2009 at the Kitchen in New York. Aptly described by musicologist Guthrie Ramsey as a kind of “Schubertian song cycle,” the *Motown Project* primarily mixes 1960s Motor City classics with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century operatic hits.

In the age of the mash-up, Hall Moran’s conceit might sound jejune, but what her arrangements achieved was less a conjoining of opposites than an embodied recombination of musical traditions that somehow yearn for

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each other across lines of race, class, and nation. Accompanied by an equally brilliant and worldly ensemble—operatic baritone Steven Herring, guitarist Thomas Flippin, bassist Tarus Mateen, *taiko* drummer Kaoru Watanabe, and Hall Moran’s husband, jazz musician Jason Moran, stepping in for harpist Adan Vasquez, on piano—she wended her way through an hour-long set that moved effortlessly among affective registers while pursuing the shared motifs of desire and infatuation that

unite the genres: Mozart meets Marvin Gaye.

Hall Moran’s navigation of these traditions was as striking as it was clever: After singing the refrain from the Four Tops’ “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch),” which was then taken up by Herring, she launched into “*Non So Più Cosa Son*,” an aria from *The Marriage of Figaro* about male helplessness in the face of womanly charms. While the rendition of the former tune initially brought appreciative chuckles from the audience, Hall Moran performed both classical levity and pop sweetness with fierce vocal commitment, inexorably pulling in her listeners. In the process, she not only united the two songs and alluded to their unspoken trajectories—the Four Tops later recorded a version of their single in Italian—she also deftly turned them out: The irrationality of opera transformed the clean mechanical sensibility of Berry Gordy, even as Motown’s sure melodic pleasures were inflected to fit opera’s demands for hyperbolic feeling.

These fissures created space for both tenderness and signification. Sitting at the piano, Hall Moran began to sing an English translation of “*Sono Andati*” from Puccini’s *La Bohème*, a declaration of a love more expansive than the sea, before segueing into “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” first recorded by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell. At that moment, Jason Moran began to shadow her movements and then assumed her position at the instrument, allowing the artist to rise and face Herring as she resolved the chorus of the duet. Through such performative recastings of Motown, an especially familiar and commercialized form of black musical expression—remember the *Big Chill* sound track—Hall Moran restored the style’s affective potential through her stunning operatic range.

Savvy stagecraft and intertextual play, however, only begin to describe the corporeal impact of her performance, which variously elicited laughter, tears, hoots of joy, and the occasional “Amen,” reactions infrequently encountered together within the provinces of “high” culture, regardless of hue. She brought down the house with her piercing renditions of “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” and “(Love Is Like a) Heat Wave,” in the latter case start-



Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran performing at the Regattabar, Cambridge, MA, February 15, 2011. Photo: Gregg Conde.

ing slowly, her phrases crisp, then building to a medium tempo until she was swaying in place and owning the stage. Hall Moran’s ability to command should come as no surprise: She received degrees from Columbia University and the Manhattan School of Music and trained with the late Betty Allen, among other luminaries. Indeed, the diva who appeared at the Regattabar that night—toned arms, elegant gown—brought to mind the composure of Michelle Obama, while her occasional interjections of haute girlfriend banter suggested the mien of Sandra Bernhard.

Ultimately, however, the term *diva* does not quite say enough, for Hall Moran is an artist who plays on rather than accedes to such gendered conventions. In remixing what might otherwise be the canned expressiveness of opera, she elicited an intensely felt response that swept through and revived the bodies in her thrall. At the same time, she maintained a perfect inscrutability, evoking a long lineage of cultural practitioners bound by social injunction to hide their compulsions and critiques yet nonetheless able to telegraph their dissent. As theorist Fred Moten has argued, “the history of Afro-diasporic art” is “the history of the keeping of this secret even in the midst of its intensely public and highly commodified dissemination. These secrets are relayed and miscommunicated, misheard, and overheard, often all at once, in words and in the bending of words . . . in the names of people you’ll never know.” These lines speak eloquently to Hall Moran’s name and work and revelatory voice: I, for one, left her performance feeling newly comfortable in Cambridge and in my own skin, however the gaze might fall. □

HUEY COPELAND IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY IN EVANSTON, IL.