

JOHN ADAMS' *I WAS LOOKING AT THE CEILING AND THEN I SAW THE SKY*:
EXAMINATION OF AN EARTHQUAKE/ROMANCE

A Thesis by

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Submitted to the Department of Music
and the faculty of the Graduate School of
Wichita State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degree of
Master of Music

May 2013

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Music, with a major in History/Literature.

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DEDICATION

To Julian Rodescu, whose guidance played an integral role in my musical journey

And to my father, Anthony J. Pirilli, for blessing me with his love and support

Life is far too short to spend another day
at war with yourself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Linda Starkey and Aleks Sternfeld-Dunn, for their careful consideration. Thanks are due to my mother, Linda, and my sister, Amanda, for their unconditional faith and support. I would also like to thank Sarah, Katie, and Aaron for their encouragement and friendship through all the stages of this project. I also want to acknowledge Boosey & Hawkes for allowing me to utilize copyrighted material during my research. Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to my advisor, Dean Roush. Thank you for being an inspirational teacher and mentor, and above all, a friend.

ABSTRACT

In 1995, John Adams, Peter Sellars, and June Jordan collaborated on the contemporary opera/musical *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*. Based around the 1994 Los Angeles, California earthquake, the work follows the struggles and daily lives of seven diverse twenty-somethings. This paper examines the creation of the work and compiles all available information about professional performances and recordings. An exploration of musical content in relation to characterization is supported by a stylistic description of every piece. There is also a more detailed analysis of three ensemble numbers. The conclusion is a discussion of the dramatic connotations of the earthquake and how the work fits into the paradigm of Shakespearean comedy.

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Biographical Information on John Adams

John Coolidge Adams was born on February 15th, 1947 to Carl, a clarinetist, and Elinore, an amateur singer. From a young age, Adams studied clarinet with his father and performed in musical theater productions with his mother, where he would often spend hours in the pit following the score and absorbing many standards of the new American vernacular.¹ As a teenager, Adams performed in a community orchestra and frequently accepted opportunities to practice conducting. He eventually attended Harvard to study composition under renowned composers Leon Kirchner and Roger Sessions.

In his autobiography *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams reminisces about the summers he spent as a child performing onstage alongside his mother, Elinore. One of his first performances was in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. During the 1950s, the music of the Gershwin brothers, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and Richard Rodgers was sweeping the country. That generation's "intuitive sense of harmonic balance, ... piquantly sustained dissonance, ... [and] urbanity and sophistication" clearly influences Adams' personal musical style.² Adams admits that he "lost touch" with the works of these momentous musical theater composers when he began college in the age of experimentalism and electronic music.³ However, "the notion of writing a Broadway-style music-theater piece lingered in the back of [his] mind."⁴

¹ John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 210.

² Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 211.

³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Adams is an acclaimed American composer and one of the most frequently performed and well-known voices of recent years. He is particularly renowned for his vocal and operatic stage works that address social and contemporary issues and situations. While his style is certainly rooted in minimalism, Adams has a facility for creating entrancing, fast-paced harmonic rhythms and patterns that attract the ear and build lasting interest. The demonstrative, striking quality of Adams' music captivated director Peter Sellars at the Monadnock Music Festival in 1981.⁵

1.2 Collaboration between Peter Sellars and John Adams

Peter Sellars, born September 27, 1957, is an American stage director widely known for his untraditional and enticingly controversial ideas. In the 1980s, Sellars updated many Mozart operas to more modern backdrops; *Don Giovanni* became a street battle between drug dealers, *Così fan tutte* took place in a tacky yet inviting neon-friendly diner, and *Le nozze di Figaro* relocated to an apartment block in New York City. Each production received both critical acclaim and reproach, and allowed Sellars to establish himself as one of the most creative and respected contemporary directors of opera.

At his arrival at the Monadnock Music Festival of 1981, Sellars was already interested in Adams and the wide variety of music he was offering as a contemporary composer. Here, Sellars heard Adams' *Shaker Loops* (a four-movement string work), which he found "thrilling, because ... [the] music was genuinely dramatic."⁶ In a 2005 interview with Thomas May, Sellars describes the initial excitement he felt upon hearing the piece: "*Shaker Loops* builds up these incredible sweeps of tension and then goes into

⁵ Thomas May, and Peter Sellars, "Creating Contexts: Peter Sellars on Working with Adams," *The John Adams Reader*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 238.

⁶ May and Sellars, "Creating Contexts," 239.

astonishing release and then adrenaline-inspired visionary states: that is absolutely what you hope for in theater. I realized that this is theater music, which has the ability to build and sustain tension.”⁷

The eclectic director then approached Adams and asked his opinion about collaborating together on an opera about Nixon’s iconic trip to China in 1972. According to Sellars, Adams politely declined. Adams claims that he was “jazzed by the idea of working with [Peter].”⁸ The composer appreciated Sellars’ enthusiasm and felt the collaboration would be a “shared voyage of discovery.”⁹ Regardless of their conflicting accounts of that first meeting, about a year later Adams contacted Sellars to express his growing interest. Thus, the inventive collaboration began in the early 1980s with work on *Nixon in China* (which premiered at the Houston Grand Opera in 1987). Sellars suggested Alice Goodman, a colleague from Harvard and an established writer, as the librettist.¹⁰ Although *Nixon in China* received mixed reviews, Adams and Sellars resolutely began work on their next project, *The Death of Klinghoffer*. The opera addresses the 1985 hijacking of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*. Goodman also wrote the libretto for this opera, which premiered in New York City.

Adams enjoyed writing operas, and since he grew up with musical theater it “seemed only logical” to him that he would someday compose a musical.¹¹ When Adams began toying with the idea of writing a vocal work in the musical theater idiom, he did not consider Goodman as a librettist, despite their successful creative relationship. As a literary voice, Goodman’s great poetry “require[d] contemplation and effort to

⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁸ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 127.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ May and Sellars, “Creating Contexts,” 240.

¹¹ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 212.

appreciate,” and Adams believed her work was not conducive to American musical theater.¹² He briefly considered partnering with Thom Gunn (1929-2004), the famous San Francisco-based poet.¹³ However, Gunn wanted to write about Jeffrey Dahmer, an infamous murderer and cannibal. This subject was not “quite what [Adams] had in mind.”¹⁴

1.3 June Jordan

Subsequently, Adams and Sellars both started reading the work of June Jordan, an esteemed poet and activist. Jordan was born in 1936 in Harlem to Jamaican immigrant parents. She experienced a difficult childhood under the auspices of her father, who was “determined to see his daughter excel in a world of white ... hostility ... [and thus] treated her harshly in hopes of making her tough and resilient.”¹⁵ In her own works, Jordan admits that her father “was the first regular bully in [her] life.”¹⁶ Despite her troubles, Jordan began writing poetry at age seven and attended prep school before beginning a degree at Barnard College. Jordan ultimately felt dissatisfied with the “predominantly white, male curriculum” and left the school before graduation.¹⁷ After experiencing further racial tension when she married a white man (which ten years later ended in divorce due to considerable opposition), Jordan continued to pursue her passion for writing through journalism, book reviews, poetry, and even children’s books. Over the course of many years, Jordan developed into “one of the country’s most impassioned

¹² Ibid., 220.

¹³ Ibid., 213.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Poetry Foundation, “June Jordan,” accessed February 10, 2013, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/june-jordan>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

and eloquent essayists with a range of concerns that touched on almost every social and political hot point” confronting the country.¹⁸ She became widely known for her “fierce commitment to human rights and progressive political agenda.”¹⁹

1.3.1 Collaboration between Adams, Sellars, and Jordan

By the time Adams and Sellars met Jordan in the early 1990s, she had relocated to Berkeley, California and was working as a professor of African American Studies at the University of California.²⁰ At the University, Jordan founded and developed a significant activist program entitled Poetry for the People as a way of spreading the freedom and expression of poetry to community members of all ages and races. Although initially met with condescension by Jordan’s fellow academic literary community, her project survives today and continues to successfully engage people in the beauty and self-liberation of poetry.

Jordan’s poems intrigued Adams “because they spoke with the authority of personal experience, yet they were full of humor, warmth, and a generous eroticism.”²¹ Additionally, she was known for using conversational, vernacular language to address a wide variety of topics. This style of writing was certainly befitting to musical theater and the type of work Adams and Sellars wished to conceive. The two men approached Jordan with the hope of enticing her to join the project. Soon afterwards, they were regularly gathering in Jordan’s California home to share ideas and “evolv[e] a theatrical story that would become” *Ceiling/Sky*.²² Adams does not recall how the Northridge, California earthquake of 1994 arose as a strong potential topic, but it was Jordan who shared a

¹⁸ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 213.

¹⁹ Poetry Foundation, “June Jordan.”

²⁰ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 213.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²² *Ibid.*

“spacious and alluring” survivor’s quote from a newspaper: “I was looking at the ceiling and then I saw the sky.”²³ The many possible themes and issues that could be addressed by this loaded quote appealed to all three creative minds.

1.4 The Northridge Earthquake

The legendary Northridge, California earthquake occurred at 4:31 a.m. on January 17, 1994, lasting roughly forty seconds. The quake registered at a magnitude of 6.7 on the Richter scale and caused widespread costly destruction due to the location directly under the urban area of greater Los Angeles.²⁴ Significant damage primarily befell the San Fernando Valley, but areas to the west (Simi Valley), east (Glendale), and the south (western and central Los Angeles) also felt the most severe effects of the quake.²⁵

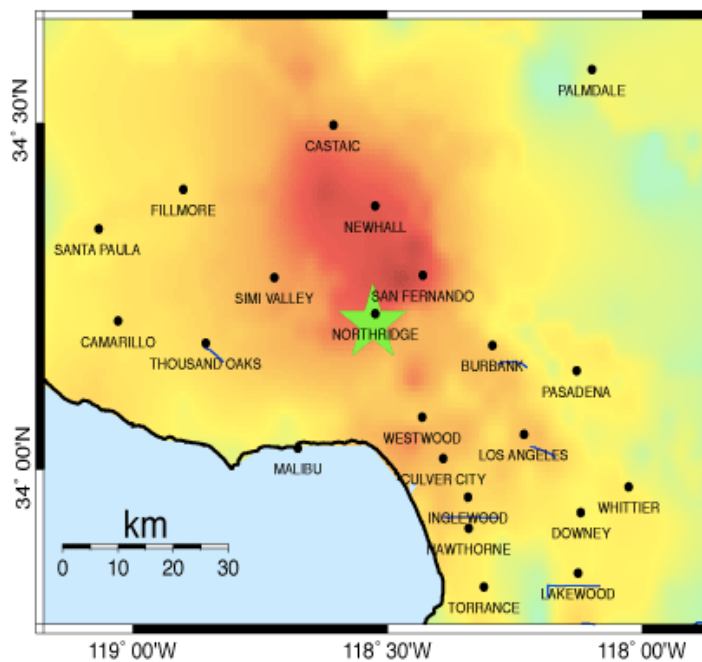


Figure 1.1 - Map of the affected area. The star over Northridge indicates the epicenter of the quake. The shaded areas represent the intensity of the shaking. (From ‘Earthquake Monitoring,’ USGS.gov, <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/learn/eqmonitoring/eq-mon-3.php>.)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ U.S. Geological Survey, “USGS Response to an Urban Earthquake -- Northridge ‘94: Introduction,” January 10, 2013.

²⁵ U.S. Geological Survey, “Historic Earthquakes: Northridge, California,” November 1, 2012.

The death toll amounted to 57 people, which was surprisingly low given the intense damage inflicted by the earthquake. The small death toll was attributed to the early morning hour as well as the fact that it was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day; besides striking before the height of the morning rush hour, many commuters that would normally be on the road were still at home. Therefore, the highways were fairly empty when the earthquake hit and many roads started crumbling. Although the death toll was low, an additional 11,800 people were injured and 22,000 were displaced from their homes as a result of the disaster.

The earthquake occurred on a blind thrust fault, which is a previously unknown fault line that does not show signs on the earth's surface.²⁶ The "rupture never spread to the earth's surface, but stopped some way below it."²⁷ As a result of the quake, seismologists were able to identify several other hidden fault lines and better prepare for subsequent quakes of similar or greater magnitude. Several structures and roadways in the Los Angeles area were reevaluated and rebuilt in a safer manner in hopes of withstanding future inevitable earthquakes.^{28 29}

As previously stated, the earthquake as a topic intrigued Adams, Sellars, and Jordan. Although they were "California transplants" (Adams from New England, Jordan from Harlem, and Sellars from Pittsburgh), "each had found something privately

²⁶ The scientific definition of a blind thrust fault earthquake holds many intriguing dramatic connotations that will be explored in the second chapter of this paper.

²⁷ Shirin Elahi and William Petak, "The Northridge Earthquake, USA and its Economic and Social Impacts," (paper presented at the EuroConference on Global Change and Catastrophe Risk Management, Laxenburg, Austria, July 6-9, 2000).

²⁸ U.S. Geological, "Historic Earthquakes."

²⁹ The scientific definition of a blind thrust fault earthquake holds many intriguing dramatic connotations that will be explored in the second chapter of this paper.

meaningful about his or her West Coast experience.”³⁰ The idea of writing about the area in which they lived was appealing and seemed a fitting tribute for the plethora of experiences and opportunities offered to all.

1.5 Creative Process of *Ceiling/Sky*

In a 1994 interview for BOMB magazine, Jordan reveals several important facts about the creation of *Ceiling/Sky*. First, Jordan states that she had only just arrived in California when the significant 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake struck. She was touched by the peoples’ response to the devastation and decided to stay in California permanently. Before the conception of *Ceiling/Sky* even began, earthquakes held a symbolic and personal meaning for Jordan. Additionally, “love was in the foreground for the authors, as June Jordan wrote in an article for the programme book of the first performance, explaining that they were agreed on love as the first and principal focus of the work.”³¹ When the creators decided to focus on the earthquake and the main theme of enduring love, Jordan drew on her belief that any romance is like an earthquake. Great romance comes into a person’s life and shakes up their world, crumbling realities and redefining a new way of living. Jordan describes it as “coming out of yourself, really. It’s a deeply appreciative and enthusiastic awareness of somebody else.”³² Jordan wanted to embrace this notion when designing the plot for the opera (or as she originally called it, an “earthquake/romance”). She struggled for some time on how to present the impact of the quake within the story without appearing kitschy or melodramatic. During a brainstorming session, Sellars referred to the section of the Koran about earthquakes,

³⁰ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 214.

³¹ Keith Anderson, liner notes to *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, John Adams, Naxos American Classics 8.669003-04, CD, 2005.

³² June Jordan, (librettist), interview by Josh Kun, "June Jordan," *BOMB Magazine*, Fall 1995.

which states “that when an earthquake occurs, every atom of evil will be known and every atom of good will be known.”³³ Jordan decided to “aim for ... a kind of denudation [that] would take place between and among people, ... a natural catastrophe [that] would coerce or make possible.”³⁴ Therefore, there are multiple earthquakes present in *Ceiling/Sky*; each character experiences the physical quake, which acts as a *deus ex machina* for their own personal lives.³⁵ The prevailing message of the opera is that one should never lose faith in love and the ability to completely understand and embrace other people.

Jordan also played the most integral role in designing the basic plot and brainstorming the characters for the show. As a professor at the U.C. Berkeley, she interacted with many diverse people on a daily basis. Each of the characters in the opera is based on her students (as well as colleagues) and the struggles and challenges they faced as young people growing up in an urban area. Jordan felt that Los Angeles was an appropriate setting for the opera because “it’s the most heterogeneous city in the United States and demographically probably represents the forecast for the country.”³⁶ She believed that the extreme diversity present throughout the area would provide a valuable lesson for unfamiliar audiences. However, Jordan did not want to present her young characters in the usual negative context “drenched in cynicism or nihilism.”³⁷ She “saw it as an opportunity to present Americans under 25 years old through a completely different

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The physical quake metaphorically represents personal ‘earthquakes’ in the lives of each character. This idea will be explored in further detail in the second chapter of this paper.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

prism, one which is realistically hopeful.”³⁸ Although all of the characters in the opera are struggling with serious issues, the overall underlying theme is love. Each character certainly reacts to his or her predicament with an optimistic view on love and hopeful aspirations for the future.

1.6 Brief Character Descriptions

Within the show, there are seven main characters. David, the black Baptist preacher, is a confident persistent womanizer who most recently has set his sights on Leila. A black graduate student, Leila also works at the Planned Parenthood clinic frequented by Consuelo. Consuelo is an undocumented immigrant refugee from El Salvador; death squads murdered the father of her four-year old boy. She also has a newborn baby girl with Dewain, a young black man who has continuously gotten in trouble with the law for minor offenses. He is trying to straighten out his life so he can provide for Consuelo and the children. Dewain is consistently monitored by Mike, a white rookie cop for the LAPD. Mike feels a lot of frustration with Dewain, since he has continuously tried to help him get on track. Mike is also confused about his sexuality, which affects his relationship with Tiffany, a white crime-as-news/entertainment T.V. reporter.³⁹ She frequently rides around with Mike in his cop car, and the two have very different ideas about the nature of their friendship. Although she only has eyes for Mike, Tiffany has a secret admirer in Rick, the newly appointed Vietnamese lawyer who defends Dewain in court.

Jordan wanted equality for each character and strove to give all the same amount of solos and stage time. Although Consuelo and Dewain emerge as the principal love

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Peter Sellars, who was more familiar with the crime-as-news trend, devised the character of Tiffany; the rest of the characters were Jordan’s visions.

story, the rest of the characters are adequately featured and the work mostly comes across as an ensemble piece. She also made a conscious effort to portray the atypical facets of her characters, relating back to her new concept of portraying twenty-somethings in a positive, hopeful light. While discussing the roles, Jordan states, “You think you know who this person is and then you realize you don’t.”⁴⁰ Each character within the show has some unexpected plot twist or personality trait that breaks stereotypical boundaries and pushes the limits of societal comfort. Dewain struggles with his criminal tendencies, Consuelo is more than just an immigrant, Mike is gay, David is a womanizer, Leila and Tiffany (although strong women) only want to be loved, and Rick grapples with confidence and self-worth.

1.7 Social Issues

In addition to the main theme of prevailing love, *Ceiling/Sky* tackles many social issues. According to Adams, “they include racial conflict, relations with the police and authority in general, the persecution of immigrants (so large an issue in Southern California), and sexual identity,” as well as homophobia, sexual harassment, gender, discrimination, and violence.^{41 42} From the beginning of the collaboration on this piece, Adams looked to three specific works that influenced him in both musical treatment and thematic content. He conducted a performance of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s *Mahagonny-Songspiel* in 1993, and found appeal in the “skillful mixing of period jazz, cabaret songs, and the “new” music of composers like Hindemith and Stravinsky.”⁴³

Adams appreciated that Weill and Brecht created intriguing characters and innovative

⁴⁰ Jordan, Kun, *BOMB*.

⁴¹ John Adams, “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky,” last modified 2010, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://earbox.com/W-ceiling.html>.

⁴² Specific issues will be explained and explored in the second chapter.

⁴³ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 212.

music to say “something deep and troubling about the human condition” and the decline of the social classes.⁴⁴ He also commended the ability of the characters “to maintain a defiant humanity in the face of life’s most brutal obstacles,” an idea that definitely materializes in *Ceiling/Sky*.⁴⁵ Additionally, Adams found inspiration in Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*; that musical “convinced [him] that this particular theatrical form could actually attain the level of genuine art.”⁴⁶ Adams also looked to George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* as a model. The racial controversies and discriminatory issues within both shows manifest clearly in *Ceiling/Sky*.

During the creative period, Adams, Jordan, and Sellars carefully monitored the plausibility of the written scenarios, and hence learned more about the harsh realities of their subjects. Adams did not believe that the INS would actually kidnap children to use as bait (the unfortunate situation that befalls Consuelo in the opera), but Sellars and Jordan insisted that this was standard operating policy. While brainstorming Tiffany’s character, Jordan revealed that she “didn’t know such a thing as crime-as-news existed.”⁴⁷ Sellars introduced her to various television programs to help familiarize her and inspire her writing. Dewain’s tricky situation of incarceration after three victimless felonies was inspired by the recent California ballot initiative that “instituted an arbitrary ‘three strikes and you’re out’ law.”⁴⁸ Adams states that “the themes of the show were timely, perhaps uncomfortably so;” the issues presented in the opera were very poignant for the original audience.⁴⁹ Years later, the messages still resonate in the face of several

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Adams, “Ceiling,” earbox.com.

⁴⁷ Jordan, Kun, *BOMB*.

⁴⁸ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 217.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 218.

recent natural disasters, such as the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti or the massive 2011 tsunami in Japan.

1.8 Premiere Production

Table 1 and Table 2 are complete lists of professional performances and recordings of the work, respectively. *Ceiling/Sky* received financial support from many organizations and premiered at the Zellerbach Playhouse at the University of California, Berkeley (Jordan’s place of employment) on May 13, 1995. The production team, in addition to the three creators, included Grant Gershon musically directing and conducting the Paul Dresher Ensemble, sound design by Mark Grey, costumes by Dunya Ramicova, and sets and graffiti backdrops by Gronk and several other L.A. graffiti artists.⁵⁰

Table 1 - Professional Performance History^{51 52}

Dates	Company/Festival	Venue	Location
May 11-21, 1995	Cal Performances	Zellerbach Playhouse, UC	Berkeley, California
May/June, 1995	Festival de Theatre des Ameriques		Montreal, Canada
July 11-16, 1995	“American Visionaries”, Serious Fun!	Lincoln Center	New York City
August 14-19, 1995	Edinburgh Festival	Royal Lyceum Theatre	Scotland
August 27-31, 1995	Helsinki Festival	Helsinki City Theatre	Finland
September 27-October 15, 1995	Festival d’automne	Bobigny Theatre	Paris, France
October 22-November 11, 1995		Thalia Theatre	Hamburg, Germany

⁵⁰ Adams, “Ceiling,” earbox.com.

⁵¹ Information gathered from various sources including the ‘Performance Search’ function on www.boosey.com. Blank spaces in the table indicate unavailable information.

⁵² In 2001 and 2002, two high schools in the United States, one in Oregon and one in Michigan, performed *Ceiling/Sky*. These amateur productions are not included in the table.

Dates	Company/Festival	Venue	Location
July 31, 1997	Ensemble Diagonales (Rene Bosc)	Salle Pasteur, Le Corum	Montpellier, France
January 27, 1998		Theater Gera	Gera, Germany
October 30-31, 1998	dir. Caroline Sharman	Southwark Playhouse	London, UK
November 17-18, 1999	Sharman/Southwark Playhouse	Lawrence Batley Theatre	West Yorkshire, UK
March 3-4, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	Royal Opera House	London, UK
March 8, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	Playhouse Whitley Bay	Newcastle, UK
March 19, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	Oxford Playhouse	Oxford, UK
March 30, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	Corn Exchange	Cambridge, UK
April 11, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	The Anvil	Basingstoke, UK
April 14, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	Leisure Centre	Mansfield, UK
May 14, 2000	Sharman/Southwark	Brighton Festival	Brighton, UK
July 31-August 4, 2002	Lyric Opera Cleveland	Drury Theatre, Cleveland Playhouse	Cleveland, OH
January 17-February 7, 2004	Young Opera Company Freiburg		Freiburg, Germany
October 28, 2006	Holst-Sinfonietta		Freiburg, Germany
July 2-17, 2010	The Barbican – 'Blaze'	Theatre Royal Stratford East	London, UK
*June 11-19, 2012 (upcoming)	Opera du Chatelet	Theatre du Chatelet	Paris, France

Table 2 - Professional Recordings

Date	Type	Company	Conductor	Label
December 1996- May 1997	Highlights	Original Cast	John Adams	Nonesuch
September 12, 2000	Four songs: Bad Boys, Sermon, Leila's Song, Earthquake	Orchestre Philharmonique de Montpellier	Rene Bosc	Musicales Actes Sud
2005	Complete recording	Holst-Sinfonietta, various soloists	Klaus Simon	Naxos American

The original costumes were not what one would expect of L.A. inner-city young people. Adams states that “Peter’s extreme sense of delicacy and respect for ... ethnic backgrounds ... prevented ... the bawdier and raunchier” costumes from materializing.⁵³ All of the characters “dressed as if they were turning out for a job interview or to canvass for their favorite congressman.”⁵⁴ The set, according to Sellars’ vision, consisted of a series of dozens of colorful graffiti backdrops that changed with each song.⁵⁵ For a self-proclaimed “mind-boggling” reason, Adams required every performer to use a hand-held microphone in order to evoke the styles of rock and jazz.⁵⁶

After the production finished in Berkeley, the second act was revised and the ensemble members were given body microphones due to the awkwardness of the hand-held mics. The show moved on to Montreal’s Festival de Theatre des Ameriques, premiered in New York as part of the “American Visionaries” series in Lincoln Center’s Serious Fun! Festival, and then traveled overseas to Hamburg’s Thalia Theater, Paris’ Bobigny Theater as part of the Festival d’automne, and the Helsinki and Edinburgh Festivals.^{57 58}

⁵³ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 218.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 221.

⁵⁷ Richard Dyer, “Adams, Sellars Think Smaller in New Opera (I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky),” *The John Adams Reader*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 350.

⁵⁸ Jesse Hamlin, “What’s Shakin’ With Adams And Sellars? / Composer and director team anew - this time with poet June Jordan -- an earthquake-inspired love story / ‘I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, sec. Entertainment, May 07, 1995, accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/What-s-Shakin-With-Adams-And-Sellars-Composer-3033911.php>.

1.9 Reviews

The eclectic work has received mixed reviews throughout its existence. Sarah Cahill of the *East Bay Express* (an alternative weekly newspaper), favorably reviewed the original production on May 19, 1995. Cahill (also a writer for *Oxford Music Online*) referred to the piece as a “youthful, exuberant creation that will get fans of classical opera and MTV to comingle.”⁵⁹ She praised Adams’ “natural and fluent” musical response to Jordan’s libretto, and remarked that it sounded as if Adams spoke the text repeatedly until he found the natural rhythm and contours of the speech.⁶⁰ ⁶¹ Cahill also compares certain pieces from the show to other works by Adams. Although she acknowledges the simplicity of the final message of the unifying force of love, she proclaims that it is “conveyed with such passion and optimism” that it inspires listeners to believe.⁶²

From a completely opposing viewpoint, the esteemed critic Martin Bernheimer of the L.A. Times wrote on May 15, 1995 that the show was “a mess,” and certainly not a piece that could carry the title of an “opera.”⁶³ He criticizes Adams for hiding behind new styles of music and only showing his “minimalist roots” in the overture and proclaims that Sellars does “nothing” with the “tale of elemental strife and contemporary desperation” provided by the libretto.⁶⁴ Bernheimer is not a fan of the simplistic message

⁵⁹ Sarah Cahill, “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky,” *The John Adams Reader*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 345.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁶¹ Interestingly enough, with this comment Cahill pinpoints Adams’ compositional process. On page 223 in his autobiography *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams describes how he speaks a text line by line before setting it in order to internalize “its inner rhythms.” He spoke Rick’s courtroom solo like a “rap artist” and then “notated the rhythmic contours of what [he] had just improvised.”

⁶² *Ibid.*, 349.

⁶³ Martin Bernheimer, “Opera Review: Sellars, et al, on the Fault Line: New Song-Play Barely Registers on Richter Scale,” *Los Angeles Times*, sec. Entertainment, May 15, 1995, accessed April 1, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-05-15/entertainment/ca-952_1_opera-review.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

of the piece and maintains throughout his review that the show is “very dull and very easy.”⁶⁵

Both viewpoints are valid, although it is clear that Cahill and Bernheimer approach the work from very different directions. As a seasoned critic, Bernheimer expects a level of precision, artistic elegance, and probably familiarity from a piece in order to review it favorably. Cahill views the show as a new and exciting opportunity to reinvent the theater and potentially engage younger generations. Her specificity in citing Adams’ other works and her insightful realization of his compositional process, as well as her experience writing for *Oxford Music Online*, certainly increases her credibility.

1.10 Additional Productions and Reviews

The next production to stir a notable amount of interest was a collaboration between the Barbican Centre and the Theatre Royal Stratford East in London in July 2010, directed by Kerry Michael and Matthew Xia with musical direction by Clark Rundell.⁶⁶ The production worked with the British Red Cross to help raise money for a Disaster Fund affecting the victims of recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, and included many updates and changes to certain aspects of the original show.⁶⁷ First, cinematic artist Tal Rosner was contracted to create a video projection that would run throughout.^{68 69}

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The opera did not go completely unnoticed during the fifteen-year span between 1995 and 2010. Although there was only one professional performance in America (at the Lyric Opera Cleveland in 2002), the work received several performances across Europe and inspired some recordings. Refer to the Professional Performance and Recording History tables on pages 14-15 for more information.

⁶⁷ The Barbican, “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky,” last modified 2010, accessed March 20, 2013, <http://www.barbican.org.uk/music/event-detail.asp?ID=8869>.

⁶⁸ Rosner, Tal, “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky,” Opening Sequence, Web, <http://talrosner.com/projects/ceiling-sky>.

⁶⁹ The opening sequence of Rosner’s video projection is viewable on his website listed above. It shows flashing geometric shapes that are synced to the music with the Los Angeles sky and a highway overpass in the background.

The directors intentionally searched for performers in the style of recording artists rather than opera singers, and the music director “re-thought Adams’s score, releasing it from its strait-laced politeness. [He] beefed up the rhythm section, and allowed his team of jazz and session musicians to make the music their own, to play real funk when Adams tries to write it, actual hip-hop when the composer gets down with the kids, and proper pop balladry when the score demands it.”⁷⁰ One reviewer claimed that the music did not sound like Adams, “in the best possible sense.”⁷¹ These rejuvenations provided hope for positive reviews and a renewed interest in the work. Several critics favorably reviewed the cast and production team. Michael Coveney of *The Independent* praises the young cast “bursting with richly voiced talent.”⁷² Edward Lukes of *The London Magazine* claims that “[the] directors ... see the strengths of this fascinating piece and seek to address some of its more intimidating tendencies.”⁷³ However, many reviewers criticize the actual story and music and Adams’ attempt to write in a more contemporary/pop idiom. Tom Service, a blogger from *The Guardian*, complains that “*Ceiling/Sky* has one of the most impossibly irritating ear-worms ever written.”⁷⁴ Fiona Maddocks, from the Sunday publication *The Observer*, declares that “those seeking a play will want more

⁷⁰ Tom Service, “John Adams’s Earthquake Musical Gets a Welcome Shaking Down,” *The Guardian*, July 07, 2010, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/tomserviceblog/2010/jul/07/john-adams-musical-jazzed-up>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Michael Coveney, “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky, Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London,” *The Independent*, sec. Arts and Entertainment, July 16, 2010, accessed March 26, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/i-was-looking-at-the-ceiling-and-then-i-saw-the-sky-theatre-royal-stratford-east-london-2027752.html>.

⁷³ Edward Lukes, “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky at the Theatre Royal Stratford East,” *The London Magazine*, July 08, 2010, accessed March 27, 2013, <http://www.thelondonmagazine.co.uk/Going-Out/Reviews/I-was-looking-at-the-ceiling-and-then-i-saw-the-sky-at-the-Theatre-Royal-Stratford-East.html>

⁷⁴ Service, “Earthquake Musical,” *The Guardian*.

words and character; those hoping for opera will feel short-changed.”⁷⁵ Finally, esteemed British theater critic Lyn Gardner harshly states that “it’s easy to see why in 1995 some turned up their noses at a score that owes more to pop than contemporary music ... the tediously earnest book and lyrics lack narrative clarity and impetus.”⁷⁶

1.11 Adams’ Response to Reviews

Nonetheless, Adams is not quite surprised by the mixed reviews and criticisms the work has continuously acquired due to its controversial themes and his dalliance in a new, though not wholly unexpected genre. In *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams discusses the issues he faced upon revealing the show.

Of all my stage works, *Ceiling/Sky* took the most lumps upon its initiation and has had the hardest time establishing itself. People who might normally be disposed to like it felt its politics were too close to the surface ... as I soon learned, fending off charges of political correctness is a futile task. ... Once you’re stuck with a tag, your only recourse is to wait it out. The more conservative critics saw the show as an affront to moral decency ... For them, *Ceiling/Sky* made light of serious issues of law and order ... and instead of condemning these lawbreakers, we ... appeared to be letting them go scot-free.⁷⁷ ... To a lot of otherwise willing enthusiasts, *Ceiling/Sky* may have felt overly hectoring and issue-driven.⁷⁸ ... Some thought that my notion of composing pop songs was bound to misfire since I ... was only taking a tourist dip in the waters. Others felt ... that although the story was about young, hip inner-city kids in their twenties, the music I’d composed for them was hardly the kind of cutting-edge stuff they would actually be listening to.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Fiona Maddocks, "I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky; Icarus at the Edge of Time; Don Giovanni," *The Observer*, sec. Culture, July 10, 2010, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jul/11/ceiling-sky-icarus-edge-don-giovanni-review>.

⁷⁶ Lyn Gardner, "I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky," *The Guardian*, sec. Culture, July 08, 2010, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/jul/08/looking-at-ceiling-then-saw-the-sky-review>.

⁷⁷ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 218.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

He continues on to compare the show to *Rent*, a musical with similar themes that “wisely kept the musical language more consciously contemporary” and thus became widely popular with younger audiences.⁸⁰

1.12 The Label of ‘CNN Opera’

Some critics had labeled Adams ‘and Sellars’ previous collaborations as “CNN operas”, and originally it seemed as if *Ceiling/Sky* would suffer the same fate. In a September 2005 interview with Thomas May, Sellars discusses the label and why he finds it so acutely inappropriate. He emphatically claims that the stories within the operas are “a million miles away from anything you would ever see on CNN!”⁸¹ This is clearly visible in *Ceiling/Sky*; the audience sees the human, vulnerable side of a criminal (Dewain), an illegal alien (Consuelo), and a supposed man of God (David), just to name a few, as opposed to the strictly illicit facts presented in the media. It is possible that critics and audiences were uncomfortable with *Ceiling/Sky* because here we see precisely what we never do! These characters are humanized, humble, and struggling, as opposed to simply being the criminals, promiscuous individuals, and silly young people we expect. Sellars quite wisely says that “in the Age of Information we are strangely under informed about what is going on and what is at stake.”⁸² As for the message and struggles surrounding the characters within these ‘real’ operas, Sellars states that “exactly what art doesn’t do is pretend to answer anything ... [rather, it] brings things up in a way that questions must be asked and debated.”⁸³ Thus, analysis of any truly operatic, all-encompassing work of art is meant to be debatable and highly personal, which many

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ May and Sellars, “Creating Contexts,” 241.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 243.

contemporary critics seem to misunderstand. Sellars' productions often receive a lot of negative press for innovative materials such as video or unique backdrops. He feels that music critics attack "the very thing that is opening the art form to the future for a new generation."⁸⁴ This opinion is very logical; music critics tend to focus strictly on the music and the sounds rather than the work as a whole, which may have aspects that appeal to younger audiences. Through all of the criticism, Sellars remains steady in his view and his mission to educate and inspire: "one of the most important reasons to do these operas was to say precisely that we aren't getting the actual history of our times."⁸⁵

As previously stated, the work gained huge success in parts of Europe (specifically France, Germany, and the U.K) although it was poorly received in America. Adams finds this ironic since the piece focuses social and political themes that are particularly poignant in American culture. The composer was very bothered by the show's European popularity "because [he] suspected that it was construed there as a Brechtian indictment of American society," chiefly what the creative team was attempting to avoid.⁸⁶ Jordan stated that halfway through the writing process, she "realized that Brecht was no longer [her] mentor ... [She] self-consciously positioned [herself] in antithesis to Brecht: to the extent he was cynical and despairing, [she] would be grateful and hopeful."⁸⁷ One can certainly understand why Adams was disappointed with the misconstrued viewpoint that popularized the work in Europe.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 245.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 241.

⁸⁶ John Adams, liner notes to *The John Adams Earbox*, John Adams, Nonesuch B00001SID1, CD, 1999.

⁸⁷ Hamlin, "What's Shakin'," *San Francisco Chronicle*.

1.13 Conclusion

Overall, *Ceiling/Sky* is a complex work with many musical and dramatic controversies that will be explored in detail in the next chapter of this paper. Adams himself states that he has “no idea how the future will treat this work.”⁸⁸ Hopefully, it will “summon up a peculiar time and place in our culture’s history.”⁸⁹ According to recent trends, this is unlikely to happen unless more theaters commit to stage the work and critics attempt to view it through less cynical eyes. While vocally and dramatically the show is a fit for independent student productions, the complex score and unique rhythmic demands mandate that this ‘songplay’s’ fate will likely remain in the hands of professionals.

⁸⁸ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 224.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO

MUSICAL AND DRAMATIC ANALYSIS

2.1 Characters: Societal Roles and Issues

Before beginning musical analysis, it is important to fully understand each of the seven characters (three women, four men) and the specific issues they face within the show, as well as how they relate to each other. Several of the characters identify with specific common archetypes according to the Jungian model.⁹⁰ This allows the characters to function as an ensemble and interact and relate to one another. Many also succumb neatly to typical societal roles. However, the main purpose of following the lives of these characters is to emphasize that they do not fit quite as tidily into society's expectations as one would assume. As Jordan perfectly states, "you think you know who this person is and then you realize you don't, and that's true for all the characters."⁹¹ This notion compellingly complies with Sellars' insight that the media does not supply an accurate representation of the news and the world around us.

As previously stated, Consuelo and Dewain emerge as the primary love story. They each have two solos (more than any other character) and together they sing two love duets. They bond over their shared status as victims of the penal system. Consuelo's past is quite complicated. Although she is only in her early twenties, she has two children. One is a toddler who was born in El Salvador. El Salvadoran death squads, political insurgence groups aimed at targeting opponents of the government during the

⁹⁰ Carl Golden, Soulcraft, "The 12 Common Archetypes," accessed April 04, 2013, http://www.soulcraft.co/essays/the_12_common_archetypes.html.

⁹¹ Jordan, Kun, *BOMB*.

civil war, murdered the child's father (her previous lover).⁹² Consuelo ended up fleeing the country and illegally immigrating to America in order to escape and avoid her own death. This suggests that her former partner, and perhaps herself, were influential political figures in El Salvador. Throughout the show, Consuelo struggles with her status as an illegal alien. The INS kidnaps her older child and holds him hostage as a way of forcing Consuelo to turn herself in.⁹³ At the end of the opera, Consuelo decides to return to El Salvador because it is her home. She feels that in America, she "has no rights standing under the sun" (Act 2, No. 22 – "Este Pais"). Her situation is complicated further through her relationship with Dewain. They have an infant child together and she does not want to leave the country without him. Dewain is a young black man who continuously gets in trouble with the law. Although this is never addressed in the show itself, the description given by Adams explains that Dewain and Mike (the cop) have previously worked together to try to build a program that provides support and encouragement for young teens to go down the right path. As a reformed gang leader, Dewain himself continues to stray from this path and commits minor crimes that eventually get him landed in jail (due to the three strikes law previously discussed). His latest crime consists of stealing two bottles of beer from a convenience store on his way to help Consuelo with her oldest child's kidnapping. Dewain wants to change his ways so he can provide for Consuelo and their child. He has an idea that he will go to law school after he gets out of jail as a way to give back to the system. However, when the time

⁹² Edgardo Amaya, interview by Carola Mittrany, "Death Squads a Concern in El Salvador," *Comunidad Segura*, February 07, 2007, April 11, 2013, <http://www.comunidadesegura.org/?q=en/node/34724>.

⁹³ On page 218 in *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams states that he was reluctant to believe the INS would actually kidnap children, but Sellars insisted this was a normal method of policing the border. Adams received confirmation of this process years later through various news sources.

comes he decides not to flee the country with Consuelo; running away from his sentence would be another crime that he is not willing to add to his long list. Consuelo portrays many characteristics of the Jungian archetype of ‘the Innocent.’⁹⁴ She is certainly a dreamer who wants to avoid doing wrong (even when that is impossible) and just wants to find happiness. Dewain possesses some character traits of ‘the Rebel;’ he wants to live his life as he pleases, and he often falls victim to crime.⁹⁵ However, his epiphany at the end moves him away from this label.

Mike, the white cop, is another complex character in the show. He certainly embodies the archetype of ‘the Hero;’ through his job as a police officer, he protects the community and values strength, courage, and authority.⁹⁶ His greatest fear is that people will view him as weak or incompetent. Mike struggles with his sexual identity due to this angst, since as a strong manly individual he feels he cannot relate to the concept of homosexuality. Jordan describes his character quite well: “what I was looking at there, was to show somebody who is in love with the idea of being a man, which most people are.”⁹⁷ If he embraces his sexuality, Mike thinks that he will lose his identity of being a man. Mike’s personal issues also affect Tiffany, the white news reporter. She wants nothing more than to sleep with Mike, an attraction that builds as they ride around in his patrol car day after day. As a reporter, she is extremely manipulative and will do whatever it takes to secure a ‘good story.’ She cannot understand why her persuasive tactics do not affect Mike, and thus translates his rejection into a personal issue. Tiffany thinks “there must be something the matter with [her], something only [she cannot] see”

⁹⁴ Golden, Soulcraft, “Archetypes.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Jordan, Kun, *BOMB*.

(Act 1, No. 1 – Introduction). Tiffany exhibits characteristics of Jung’s ‘Ruler,’ a selfish type that craves power and control.⁹⁸

Rick, the Vietnamese American lawyer, seems inconsequential upon first listen of the opera. His primary role is in the courtroom; first, he defends Dewain and tries to convince the judge not to sentence him for the minor crime of stealing two bottles of beer. Then, he interviews Mike and Tiffany on the witness stand, and shows a particular interest in their personal relationship (which infuriates Tiffany and leads her to use racially offensive comments towards him). Rick’s next significant appearance is after the earthquake, when he conveniently materializes as Tiffany is realizing that Mike is gay and decides she would rather be with Rick instead.⁹⁹ Although not the most important character, Rick provides plot interest and also helps address the issue of racism. He embodies the Jungian archetype of ‘the Regular Guy’ (originally ‘Orphan’), desiring strong relationships with other people and placing value in hard work and the rules of society.¹⁰⁰

The last two characters within the work are Leila, the black Planned Parenthood counselor, and David, the black Baptist minister (who is partially based on New York City politician and pastor Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.).^{101 102} Leila takes on the role of ‘the

⁹⁸ Golden, Soulcraft, “Archetypes.”

⁹⁹ In Jordan’s original libretto, published before the premiere of the opera, Rick has another solo after the ensemble ending where he poignantly sings “what about love?,” lending him significance as he reinforces the main theme of the entire work. This last song was present in the original production (evidenced by commentary on the specific piece in L.A. Times critic Martin Bernheimer’s May 15, 1995 review), but does not appear on any recordings and is not included in the current score.

¹⁰⁰ Golden, Soulcraft, “Archetypes.”

¹⁰¹ Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 216.

¹⁰² Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was a Harlem congressman active from the 1940s to the 1970s. He was also a pastor who inspired a large following due to his anti-racial views. Powell lived a flamboyant lifestyle that evoked controversy and discontent in the media. Therefore, it is easy to

Caregiver,' offering support and guidance to others through her job at the clinic.¹⁰³ She attempts to guide Consuelo when she visits the clinic, and she also stands up for Dewain and tries to prevent his arrest when he steals the bottles of beer. Although Leila strives to care for those around her, she craves love and nurturing. She wants real love from David, rather than just being another woman he toys with for a few days. David certainly embraces the role of 'the Rebel,' seducing any woman he pleases and ignoring common decency and respect for women. His archetype is the most intriguing, since as a minister society expects him to act in a reserved, inspirational, holy manner. David spends the entire show trying to get Leila to sleep with him, using smooth lines such as "I gotta get my disc to match your drive" (Act 2, No. 16 – "Three Weeks"). Once she agrees to their rendezvous, the earthquake interrupts them and kills Leila. David reflects on how his lewd behavior may have led him to this punishment.

Within *Ceiling/Sky*, there are many societal issues in the various lives of the characters that help define and personalize them. The archetypes that help them interact and the fact that they do not strictly adhere to their labels emphasize the idea encouraged by the creators that the world is not always what it seems. In addition to Jordan's libretto, Adams' music aids in characterization, which is apparent in the opening number and further explored after Table 3 on page 37.

2.2 Musical and Dramatic Analysis of Opening Number

The opening is an ensemble piece named after the title "I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky." Intended as a prologue where the mindset is in the

see how David is based on him: a charismatic man in power whose personal life does not coincide with societal expectations.

¹⁰³ Golden, Soulcraft, "Archetypes."

future, the piece acts as a sort of soliloquy for each character before the real drama begins.

This specific piece is primarily diatonic with shifting tonal centers. It is beneficial to think in terms of diatonic or modal scales rather than specific keys. Adams utilizes pandiatonicism and emphasizes separate sections in different parts of the scale. He disregards traditional scale degree functions to create a modern, exciting sound. The number begins with an extended prelude that aptly displays Adams' typical minimalist tendencies. The orchestra (a clarinet, an alto saxophone, three keyboards including a synthesizer, electric guitar, bass, and percussion) plays primarily quartal harmonies that center on the note E flat. Measures 1-22 offer an E-flat Ionian scale (missing the note G). At measure 22, there is a modal shift to E-flat Lydian (essentially the Ionian scale with a raised fourth; in this case, A natural). The first 105 measures belong strictly to the instruments and continuously alternate between E-flat Ionian and Lydian scales with a wash of shifting, shimmering patterns with rhythmic layering, syncopation, and polymeter.

2.2.1 Solos

Measure 106 introduces the voices with a solo for each character before they join for the ensemble chorus. The entrance of the voices musically provides tension and dramatic effect, and dramatically introduces the innermost thoughts of each character after they experience the earthquake. The characters are assigned varying ranges and their accompaniments are sometimes noticeably different. Often, a particular character will slip into a new key area or experience a new modal quality.

Consuelo (the illegal immigrant and refugee) begins the procession of soloists at measure 106. Her lyrics are:¹⁰⁴

I thought everything was over and I had lost my lover
I thought my life was permanently out of order
I thought everything was over because my world lay on the wrong side of
some arbitrary border

The accompaniment consists of a shimmering ostinato eighth-note pattern of E-flats and B-flats, alternating between leaps of a fourth, an octave, and a fifth in one of the keyboards. Her melodic line is quite lyrical and spans a range of B-flat3 to C5, consisting primarily of steps and employing some leaps for dramatic effect. Consuelo's melody is G-centric, which is especially significant since the G has not been present in the orchestra. In this segment, we learn that Consuelo was depressed before the quake hit. She was mourning the loss of Dewain and felt that she had no home, since she was unwelcome in both El Salvador and the United States.

After Consuelo, Dewain (reformed gang leader with three strikes) proceeds with these lyrics:

I thought that love and all the freedom of the air
would only last awhile before they had to disappear
I thought that I was preordained to fail and that
I'd never manage to stay out of jail

Dewain's vocal range spans an octave from E-flat3 to E-flat4. Dewain's first phrase is similar to Consuelo's in terms of lyricism, step-wise motion, and G-centricity, and the accompaniment remains the same (subtly representing their intimate connection to each other). In the first section, he sings about how he thought he was bound to lose Consuelo.

¹⁰⁴ All lyrics written are presented in their original poetic form from Jordan's published libretto: June Jordan, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky: earthquake/romance*, (New York: Scribner, 1995).

In the second line, another keyboard (electric piano) enters and introduces more notes in the E-flat Ionian scale, D and G. Dewain's vocal line starts to skip around (many thirds and sixths) as he sings about his fear of staying in jail permanently.

Next, Rick (the Vietnamese American lawyer) sings about Tiffany:

I thought she'd never give me anything much
but still I was dreaming about the weight
and the temperature
of her possible touch

Rick's entrance causes the first highly noticeable change in the accompaniment. The original shimmering E-flat ostinato that connects Consuelo and Dewain disappears, and another keyboard (a synthesizer) enters with an eighth-note pattern of G and D. Rick's section embodies a G-minor quality, reflecting his self-thought unreachable lust for Tiffany. His vocal range spans D3 to D4 and slowly rises as the line continues, once again representing his building angst. On the word "dreaming," the clarinet begins an agile, hopeful phrase outlining an E-flat triad.

Leila (the Planned Parenthood counselor who is begrudgingly attracted to David) then appears, saying:

I thought he would never settle down
from chasing women all over town

Leila's vocal line is reminiscent of Consuelo's melodic G-centric melody for the first phrase. Her range spans E-flat4-D5. The accompaniment remains consistent with Rick's G-minor harmonic center, but changes metric placement on the downbeat of her first measure (mm. 154). At her second line, the accompaniment shifts to a B-flat quality, reinforced by Leila's sustained B-flat on the word 'town.' Leila is expressing how she felt about David before the earthquake, due to his womanizing nature. The emphasis on

B-flat lends a wistful feeling to her line, showing that although she believed David would continue to be unreliable, she wished otherwise.

David (the Baptist preacher) appropriately sings after Leila, stating:

I thought I'd end up old and lonely because
one or another female wanted to be my one and only

As David begins to sing, the dreamy ostinato in the clarinet fades out. The tonality shifts to C minor, with an ostinato pattern alternating C and G with octave displacement in Keyboard 1. Keyboard 3 begins playing a staccato pattern on the offbeat (C-D). David's vocal line ranges from G3-F4, with significant emphasis on G and E-flat. The scarce, sharp accompaniment represents David's self-disappointment that he usually hides behind his confidence, and also his shallow nature. David's line primarily consists of stepwise motion and leaps of a third. He is explaining that before the earthquake, he could not imagine settling down because he would never find a companion comfortable with his wandering eye.

Tiffany (the crime-as-news reporter) follows David, singing:

I thought there was something
the matter with me
something only I couldn't see

With this phrase, Tiffany refers to the confusion she felt over Mike's refusal to respond to her sexual advances (before she realized he was gay). Her accompaniment remains consistent with David's, perhaps indicating her similar feelings of self-doubt and disappointment and her shallow character. Her range spans an octave from B-flat3 to B-flat4, and contains a lot of jumps with emphasis on both the upper and lower notes (further representing her inner turmoil). The end of her line focuses on A, a previously unemphasized note. This lends an appropriate air of confusion to her sentiment.

Lastly, Mike the cop states:

I thought love was strictly extracurricular
to what's important!¹⁰⁵
And that sex
in general
is not particular!

The accompaniment changes drastically before and during Mike's solo. After Tiffany sings, there are four measures of orchestra before Mike begins. Adams introduces an E-natural, which is very unusual considering the E-flat-centricity of the piece. The four measures also incorporate alternating clustered arpeggios, creating a wash of wobbling uncertainty. One measure before Mike sings, the modality shifts back to E-flat and the majority of the orchestra begins playing, creating the densest accompaniment experienced thus far. Mike's vocal range spans C3-D4, and his line has no clear melodic shape. He is reflecting on his thoughts before he acknowledged his homosexuality; he figured he was not interested in pursuing Tiffany because he was trying to ignore his untypical urges by focusing on work. The puzzling accompaniment and random vocal line represent Mike's self-denial and confusion over his sexual identity.

2.2.2 Ensemble

After Mike's solo, the accompaniment settles slightly and resembles the minimalist patterns found in the introduction. The keyboard settings and ostinatos create a shimmering effect that emphasizes B-flat. A few measures before the ensemble enters, the centricity moves down a semitone to A in order to prepare for the modal shift to F that occurs with the voices. It is beneficial to notice the exclusion of the fourth scale degree; Adams does not specify B-natural or B-flat, providing an ambiguous sense of F.

¹⁰⁵ Jordan does not use punctuation until Mike's line. This perhaps represents how emphatically Mike feels about saving his personal identity.

In the accompaniment, the shimmering patterns continue along with the addition of percussion (hi hat) and chordal duplication of the chorus. The melody (sung by Leila and Consuelo) centers on F. The first phrase is as follows:

I was looking at the ceiling and then I saw the sky!

Adams identically sets “I was ... ceiling” three times before finishing the phrase, and repeats the entire line twice. Dramatically, this emphasizes the strength of the metaphorical ceiling experienced by each character, and the power of the freedom of the symbolic ‘sky.’

Every person in the work is a victim of two types of ceilings: one self-imposed and one inflicted by societal norms and expectations (though some are clearer than others). After the quake, they find that their metaphorical ceilings have been torn down, in some cases for better and in some cases for the worse. Consuelo represses herself by investing her future happiness in her relationship with Dewain, and her status as an illegal immigrant (although she fled her country due to dangerous conditions) certainly hinders her rights in American society. After the earthquake she decides to go back to El Salvador to build a better life for herself and her children, regardless of Dewain’s plans. Dewain hurts his reputation by continuously committing mild felonies rather than straightening himself out, and society stifles him with the label of a hardened criminal. When the earthquake breaks down the walls of his jail cell and gives him another chance, he makes a conscious decision to live his life more honestly. Rick (the lawyer) impedes himself by placing so much faith in the legal system (which we learn can unfairly incarcerate people for small offenses) and by refusing to express to Tiffany his feelings and society racially profiles him since his parents came from Vietnam. In aftermath of the

earthquake, he rushes to Tiffany's apartment to confess his love. Leila crushes herself under her infatuation for David (although she does try to fight the attraction) since she feels expected to practice what she preaches, so to say (practicing safe sex as a counselor at Planned Parenthood). Leila's situation is unique; she succumbs to her desires before the quake, and her 'ceiling' breaks by her subsequent death. David certainly hurts himself through his lascivious behavior, which he must slyly engage in due to society's expectations of a minister and 'man of God.' The earthquake provides a reality check for David as he sings that he has been "crushed by the rock [he's] been standing on." Tiffany restricts herself by paying so much attention to Mike, while society labels her as cold and stern due to her job as a crime-as-news reporter. After the earthquake, she realizes that Mike is gay and that Rick has been the one for her all along. Lastly, Mike stifles himself by ignoring his sexual identity as society places pressure on him to be the atypical law enforcement officer: strong, powerful, and straight. The earthquake shakes up his self-identity and forces him to acknowledge his inner turmoil.

The next line is:

I was miserable and aching
at the way the news kept breaking
I was looking at the ceiling and then I saw the sky!

The modality of this phrase shifts to F Lydian (with the inclusion of the B-natural), with a definite feeling of A minor. The B-natural, previously unheard, provides impact and draws attention to the text. The accompaniment becomes more stern and rigid to emphasize the words "miserable and aching." The "news" in this lyric represents more than just the literal news; it also symbolizes the uncontrollable events that occur in each

of the characters lives. The repetition of “I was ... sky” reinforces this central message (the most significant line in the entire work!).

The third phrase reads:

I felt broken into compromise
with nothing left to hope or prize
(I was looking at the ceiling and then I saw the sky!)¹⁰⁶
I was searching for a reasonable reason for my smile

The first section (“I felt ... or prize”) experiences a noticeable shift in modality. The overall scale impression of this phrase is D major due to the inclusion of C-sharp. This change increases the intensity and dramatically emphasizes the discontent and hopelessness felt by each character. “I was searching ... smile” has an overwhelming sense of A minor with an added F-sharp.

The fourth phrase is as follows:

I was finding what I want washed out completely in denial

The modality shifts back to F Lydian (with the raised fourth this time) as the characters admit their initial naivety. After this, Adams sets “I was looking at the ceiling” four times, foreshadowing the return of E-flat in the second solo section.

2.2.3 Solos, Part Two

In this passage, the accompaniment remains fairly consistent with only slight changes as different characters sing. The soloists are presented in a slightly different order: David is last as opposed to singing right after Leila. Consuelo sings a melody reminiscent of her first G-centric phrase over E-flat ostinato patterns, stating more about her feelings that she did not belong. After Consuelo, most of the characters’ vocal lines lack fluidity and melodic shape and seem to jump all over the place. Dewain reflects on

¹⁰⁶ Adams omits the restatement of this line in the music.

his foolish behavior as the orchestra shifts to emphasize G. Rick explains his feelings of alienation due to his Vietnamese heritage, and halfway through his statement the orchestra becomes very sparse and moves back to E-flat. The accompaniment seems to sparkle in this brief moment, perhaps indicating the positive outcome Rick experiences. Shortly before Leila enters and sings about her romantic vulnerability, a short, staccato gesture appears in Keyboard 3. This is evocative of a similar figure that previously accompanied David, emphasizing Leila's strong attachment to him. Tiffany sings next in an exact replication of her first entrance. Her accompaniment remains fairly similar to Leila's, linking the two women and their similar relationship problems. Mike comes next, singing a line that outlines a natural C minor scale. The accompaniment is slightly denser and mixes E-flats, A-flats, and B-flats as Mike sings about his sexual confusion. Halfway through his line the orchestra shifts back to G. As previously stated, David sings last with a quintal E-flat and B-flat emphasis in the accompaniment and a restatement of his first melody. One significant word changes; in his first solo, David says "I thought I'd end up old and lonely." Here, he states "I swore I'd end up old and lonely," indicating the immense guilt he felt after the earthquake over Leila's death that he wished he could spend his life with her.

2.2.4 Ensemble, Part Two

There is a short interlude before the second chorus where the accompaniment shifts back to F Ionian modality. The second chorus is practically identical in the voices, with additional occurrences of the main line of text ("I was looking ... the sky"). The accompaniment is slightly more active, with many wide-ranging arpeggios and eighth-note lines in the woodwinds. The final phrase (the last statement of "I was looking ... the

sky”) settles at the end back to an F tonality inflected with E-flat in the bass via a quintal chord construction. In review, Adams begins the work with a clear emphasis on E-flat, and moves strongly to F when the ensemble starts to sing together. The combination of the two primary modal areas in the final phrase rounds out the piece yet also creates a sense of ambiguity and leaves the listener hanging in anticipation.

2.3 Musical Genres and Styles

Table 3 – Musical Styles

Track/Title	Genre/Category	Characters	Notable Features
Act 1, No. 1 – I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky	-contemporary musical theater -classic Adamsian ‘post-minimalism’	Ensemble	-layering -metrical dissonances -rolling ostinato patterns -solos alternating with chorus
Act 1, No. 2 – A Sermon on Romance	-gospel shuffle ¹⁰⁷	David, Leila	-syncopation -extreme vocal range -improvisatory
Act 1, No. 3 – Leila’s Song of the Wise Young Women	-contemporary musical theater -80s pop	Leila, Consuelo	-rock, jazz, and gospel evocations -Leila: punchy vocal line -Consuelo: lyrical
Act 1, No. 4 – Dewain’s Solo in Sunlight	-groovy urban blues ¹⁰⁸ -hard rock blues	Dewain	-syncopation -active bass -vocal leaps
Act 1, No. 5 – Donde estas?	-contemporary musical theater -minimalist tendencies	Consuelo	-lyrical vocal line -emphasis on guitar and vibraphone
Act 1, No. 6 – Mike’s Song About Arresting a Particular Individual	-contemporary musical theater -rock	Mike	-rhythmically driven -minimalist patterns -declamatory

¹⁰⁷ Hamlin, “What’s Shakin’,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Track/Title	Genre/Category	Characters	Notable Features
Act 1, No. 7 – Tiffany’s Solo	-Big band bebop ¹⁰⁹ -sultry jazz	Tiffany	-rhythmic dissonances and syncopation -walking bass -“bop” style improv. piano
Act 1, No. 8 – Song About the On Site Altercation	-hard swing -contemporary jazz	Dewain, Tiffany, Mike, Leila	-declamatory -rhythmic repetitions -syncopation -modal mixture (jazz)
Act 1, No. 9 – Song About the Bad Boys and the News	-musical theater -contemporary spiritual -gospel praise	Leila, Consuelo, Tiffany	-opens with a chorale -rhythmic -walking bass -swinging vocal lines
Act 1, No. 10 – Your Honor My Client	-hybrid minimalist funk	Rick, Dewain	-declamatory -repetitive motifs -rhythmic intensity -slap bass
Act 1, No. 11 – Consuelo’s Dream	-contemporary musical theater -world music (pan flute synthesizer)	Consuelo	-delicate, exotic percussion -sultry, passionate -lyrical vocal line
Act 1, No. 12 – Rick’s Cross Examination of Tiffany and Mike	-musical theater -minimalism	Rick, Tiffany, Mike	-rhythmic patterns in beginning – 3/2 clave -declamatory vocal line
Act 1, No. 13 – Song About Law School as the Natural Follow-Up to Jail	-jazz/swing fusion	Dewain, David	-exotic percussion -repetitive patterns
Act 1, No. 14 – Leila’s Song	-smooth jazz ballad	Leila	-soulful -chromatic harmonies -rich vocal line
Act 1, No. 15 – Song About the Sweet Majority Population of the World	-1960s style musical theater -swing/jazz	Dewain, Mike, David, Rick	-contemporary instrumentation and harmony -scat singing -cyclical harmony
Act 2, No. 16 – Three Weeks and Still I’m Outta My Mind	-Motown rock -cusp of disco	David, Leila	-swinging vocal lines -improvisatory sax solo
Act 2 – Earthquake Sounds	-recorded sounds		-literal sounds of the quake

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Track/Title	Genre/Category	Characters	Notable Features
Act 2, No. 17 – Earthquake Music	-80s rock -homage to “Eruption,” Van Halen	orchestra	-intense drum solo -squealing guitar -improvisatory -repetitive patterns
Act 2, No. 18 – Crushed By the Rock I Been Standing On	-1980s style musical theater	David, Leila	-electric guitar rock solo -low bass contrast with high keyboard arpeggios -new vocal styles
Act 2, No. 19 – Duet in the Middle of Terrible Duress	-combination rock, musical theater ballad, minimalism	Tiffany, Mike, Rick	-gradually building intensity -mixture of styles -declamatory -most operatic (form)
Act 2, No. 20 – Dewain’s Song of Liberation and Surprise	-musical theater ballad -gospel epiphany ¹¹⁰	Dewain	-calm, serene feeling -shifting harmonies -solo keyboard and saxophone
Act 2, No. 21 – Este Pais / This Country	-world music (pan flute evokes Peru)	Dewain, Consuelo	-sultry guitar -syncopation -exotic percussion
Act 2, No. 22 – One Last Look At the Angel In Your Eyes	-musical theater ballad	Dewain, Consuelo	-emphasis on keyboard -love duet
Act 2, No. 23 - Finale	-contemporary musical theater -classic Adamsian ‘post-minimalism’	Ensemble	-repeats the introduction -vocal layering

2.3.1 Analysis of Table 3

Table 3 assigns a musical style or genre to every piece within *Ceiling/Sky*. A close investigation of these labels and notable features reveals how Adams utilizes the music as the primary method of characterization.

Each character generally sings in a specific style. These individual traits also appear in the ensemble numbers during solos.¹¹¹ Each character sings in a typical musical theater style at some point during the show.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

David, the preacher, is usually assigned gospel or jazz music. These genres enhance his status as a clergyman in the black community. Although some may view this as stereotypical, he does sing the type of music one would hear in a church of his denomination. An extreme range, improvisatory passages, and syncopation define David's vocal style (as apparent in Act 1, No. 2 and Act 1, 13). His vocal characteristics display great confidence and arrogance, magnifying his womanizing nature.

Leila, the Planned Parenthood counselor, sings in a gospel style during her first duet with David (Act 1, No. 2) and in a smooth jazz during her solo number (Act 1, No. 14). Leila's vocal lines also have quite a wide range, and she sings with a combination of swinging rhythms, punchy style, and rich, fluid melodies. Her extensive range strengthens her romantic connection to David, as the two sing in similar styles. Leila's melodious lines also exemplify her role as a caregiver, showing deep emotion and sentiment that enables the audience to feel for her during her quest for true love. She also sings in several numbers where her vocal lines are strict, declamatory, and rhythmically energetic (such as in her duet with Consuelo, Act 1, No. 3, or her defense of Dewain, Act 1, No. 8). This shows the other side of her caregiver personality that attempts to put on a brave face for the sake of those around her.

Consuelo, the illegal immigrant, emerges as the musical theater heroine, although she is anything but typical. Consuelo rarely sings in anything other than musical theater style, although much of her music contains colorful, unusual elements. Consuelo's music is characterized by the use of exotic percussion, sultry guitar melodies, and slow tempos. Her vocal lines are the most lyrical within the show, and her sweet, expressive soprano

¹¹¹ Section 2.4 discusses the ensemble numbers in more detail.

delineates her as the ‘innocent’ ingénue, enabling sympathy for her situations and an overwhelming affinity for her struggles.

Dewain, the reformed-but-still-a-petty-crook gang leader, sings in many styles, including jazz, swing, and blues. He also acts as the leading man to Consuelo’s leading lady, singing often in the musical theater style. Some defining and connecting characteristics of most of Dewain’s music include rhythmic intensity and active bass lines. His vocal lines span from lyricism (connecting him to Consuelo) to jazzy phrases with leaps and syncopation. Dewain’s musical versatility characterizes him as a complex and multifaceted figure, emphasizing his dilemma between his social status as a criminal and his deep desire to become a better person. His romance with Consuelo also lends him sensitivity and compassion.

Mike, the cop, sings primarily in musical theater or rock style with some dalliance in jazz. Regardless of his participation in ensemble numbers, Mike’s vocal line is always declamatory. His music contains rhythmic intensity and many repetitive patterns. His speech-based declamation and the strict rhythms and patterns in his music characterize him as a stiff, rule-abiding citizen. This supports his societal role as a police officer and emphasizes his desired image as a strong, all-around manly man.

Tiffany, the reporter, sings primarily in jazz and swing styles. Adams defines her solo (Act 1, No.7) as “big-band bebop”¹¹² with a definite feeling of sultry jazz. Tiffany’s vocal range is the lowest of the three female characters, and her lines are typically swinging or declamatory. Tiffany’s low range and jazzy style highlight her manipulative personality and her quest for power. Her declamatory lines usually appear when she is with Mike, representing her desire to connect to him.

¹¹² Hamlin, “What’s Shakin’,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Rick, the lawyer, is primarily contained within contemporary musical theater style. His music also involves elements of funk and rock. His vocal lines are declamatory and his accompaniment is comprised of a lot of repetitive patterns (evident in the courtroom scene, Act 1, No. 10). The predictability of Rick's music portrays his determined yet slightly meek personality and his naive inclination to rely on society and the legal system. In his trio with Tiffany and Mike (Act 2, No. 20), Rick sings more lyrically, revealing a previously unseen romantic and optimistic side of his personality.

Overall, throughout the opera, Adams uses vocal ranges and styles as well as musical genres to characterize and emphasize the personalities of each protagonist. This subconsciously aids the audience in connecting and sympathizing with the characters.

2.4 Musical Characterization in Act 1, No. 9 and Act 1, No. 15

As previously stated, Adams uses the music as the primary method of characterization in *Ceiling/Sky*. Besides the opening and the finale, there are two other ensemble numbers in the show, one for the women and one for the men. In Act 1, No. 9 ("Song About the Bad Boys and the News"), Tiffany, Consuelo, and Leila lament about their personal troubles but revel in their love for the opposite sex. In Act 1, No. 15 ("Song About the Sweet Majority Population of the World"), David, Dewain, Rick, and Mike wax poetic about the female sex. Although both pieces are ensemble collaborations, the characters retain their individuality through lyrics and notable musical traits specific to each person. The numbers serve to briefly pause the action and unite the contrasting characters.

2.4.1 Act 1, No. 9

The women's song begins with a three-part *a capella* chorale in the style of a contemporary worship spiritual. Musical theater influence is also prominent, due to the simplicity and beauty of the harmonies. The piece begins with all three women lyrically singing:

For days I been dreaming about changing the news
For days I been dreaming about changing the news
but sometimes the news ain' something you choose

Adams chooses to set the first line three times, although it appears only twice in the libretto. Although it is not typical for him to work with traditional keys, this more conventional passage is definitely in the key of E major, with cadences on IV, V, and I. The "news" within the lyrics is metaphorical; the women are stating that they are unhappy with certain events in their lives, but they understand that everything does not always unfold as planned and one cannot completely decide his or her own fate.

The text of the next verse is:

My mind is a camera and my body's a clock
(I say) my mind's like a camera and my body's a clock
But feelings invade me and leave me in shock

Once again, Adams repeats the second line to create a four-line block of text, and writes in the key of E major. Tiffany sings the first two lines as a solo, as the text holds poignant meaning for her.¹¹³ She is consistently working and on the watch for a good story, but she was unaware until recently that romantic feelings could disrupt her life and cause her to feel so confused. Consuelo and Leila join Tiffany in singing the third line and the last line.

¹¹³ In Jordan's original libretto, she states that the text is a trio for the three women. She does not specify which characters sing certain lines. Thus, the solos in this section are of Adams' volition and show his careful awareness of characterization.

The next phrase reads:

Political nightmare all over the place
I'm running relentless a circular race
*Political nightmare all over the place [added by Adams]
And sometimes it scares me to see my own face

Consuelo sings the first two lines of this passage. The text is a clear reference to her status as an illegal immigrant. Her “circular race” is the danger she encounters whether she stays in El Salvador or attempts to make a life in America. Societal oppression causes her to fear her intuition and her possibility of a future. Following a similar pattern as the last verse, Tiffany and Leila enter for the last two lines. Adams repeats “and sometimes ... face” with a cadence on a G-sharp major chord in order to transition to the next section.

The middle of the piece significantly changes in mood and style. First, Leila solos on the words:

But then there's the bad boys (the bad boys)

Consuelo and Tiffany join for:

But then there's the bad boys
And when there's the bad boys
Bad news can't do nothin' bad to me!

Adams assigns Leila the solo due to her intense relationship with David, who is certainly a ‘bad boy.’ After this soulful section of finger snaps and keyboard chords that gradually builds in intensity, the orchestra enters in full-force. The music is intensely rhythmic with a walking bass and swinging, improvisatory vocal lines, evoking a jazzy praise style.

The women continue to swoon over various aspects and body parts of their lovers, including passionate kisses, strong legs, and “the pen on the pillow of sperm.” When singing about the most erotic appendage, Adams writes in a gospel worship style (beginning at the first mention of the “Absolute Sleeper”), lending an air of humorous

holy reverence to the topic. Prior to this, however, there are several moments where the women's individuality appears due to musical characteristics, although they are singing a trio. Leila sings "I'm looking at his legs, honey!" and "He Run like a God, He do more'n that like a God" with a wide range and a sassy attitude, reminding the listener of her tough facade and fresh, brazen nature apparent throughout the first act. In the next section, Tiffany sings:

(And) then there's his shoulders and then there's his smile
Then there's his voice and then there's my smile

The orchestra retains the walking bass and the overall feeling of an upbeat spiritual. When Tiffany begins to sing, the simple harmonies gain a sultry, jazzy edge. The accompaniment is reminiscent of her solo (Act 1, No. 7) and reinforces her musical identity.

Eventually, the women return to a restatement of their chorale in the reverent spiritual style:

For days I been dreaming about changin' the news
My mind is a camera and my body's a clock
But feelings invade me and leave me in shock¹¹⁴

Adams writes a low keyboard pedal to support the voices, starting on E and following the harmonic language. The text then restates the existence of bad boys preventing bad news from affecting the women. Adams remains in the key of E major and ends the piece on a first inversion E major chord.

2.4.2 Act 1, No. 15

The quartet for the men remains in the same swing/jazz style throughout. The piece also contains characteristics evocative of mid 20th century musical theater (almost

¹¹⁴ Here, the libretto reads "Political nightmare all over the place." Adams changed the line in order to keep the rhyme scheme consistent for the actual song.

similar to a barbershop quartet). However, Adams writes contemporary instrumentation and harmony. The use of soft percussion, chordal accents, and cyclical harmony conjure a sultry, sensuous mood that aptly displays the men's admiration of women.

Jordan's text is much more abstract and scarce for the men. The song mostly contains the repeated lyrics:

The Sweet Majority Population of the World

This verse begins the piece with the men vocalizing in harmony. Throughout, various characters sing the line as a solo. The rest of the lyrics are almost humorously skimpy, consisting of many grunts, syllables, and ambiguous sexual sounds. Jordan's writing perhaps represents the stereotypical trouble men have when expressing their emotions.

In this piece, the men all sing in the same vocal style, involving scat singing and syncopation. The lyrics provide individuality and reinforce the personality traits of the characters. Dewain sings:

That incredible
That lovely
Fifty-one percent
To me seems
like no accident

Although he speaks of the "fifty-one percent," the words "incredible" and "lovely" seem to refer to his specific lover, Consuelo. Conceivably, it may seem "like no accident" to Dewain that he met Consuelo and had a child with her. Next, Mike solos with:

That puzzlement
That mystery
To me seems
like love's history

At the end of the show, Mike realizes that he is gay. It comes of no surprise that here, he sings of "puzzlement" and "mystery" when referring to women in a sexual manner. Also,

in several instances of the chorus (“Sweet ... the World”), Mike does not enter until the last three words. Intriguingly, he spends much of the song in silence. Rick’s solo is quite befuddling:

That - - - -
That - - - -
Seems to me
like - - - -
I dunno!

This bewildered attempt to explain his feelings for women matches his meek efforts to express himself to Tiffany (and, in a way, justifies why he would be attracted to someone who talks down to him). Lastly, David speaks graphically:

That agitation
That ultimate palpitation
- - - -
- - That infinite itch

David’s thoughts in this phrase are thoroughly apparent, and definitely align with his identity as a womanizer.

The end of the piece restates the central phrase several times and gradually fades out as the harmony progresses upwards.

Within the show, these two numbers function as a break from the action and as a moment for the radically different women and men to unite. The trio and the quartet allow the women and the men to maintain their individuality while emphasizing the basic twenty-something connection of the overwhelming force of love and passion.

2.5 Dramatic Connotations of the Earthquake

As previously stated, the earthquake that occurs in *Ceiling/Sky* significantly affects the lives of every character and encourages some significant change or personal realization. The dramatic and analogous connotations of the earthquake are poignantly

touched on in an article from the Los Angeles Times the day after the event: “No one,” said psychologist Robert T. Scott, a consultant for the American Red Cross, “could walk away from this one saying, ‘No, that didn't affect me.’”¹¹⁵

Scientifically, the earthquake occurred on a blind thrust fault (a previously unknown fault line) and never broke the surface. Whether or not it was intended, this type of earthquake holds many intriguing dramatic connotations for the action within the opera. Each character is dealing with their everyday lives when the earthquake strikes and opens their eyes to the truly important issues. The quake seemingly comes out of nowhere, exposing ‘previously unknown’ revelations: Mike’s sexual identity crisis, Rick’s love for Tiffany, David’s epiphany, and Consuelo’s and Dewain’s realization that they must part.

After the devastating event occurred in Los Angeles, roadways and structures were rebuilt using safer, more secure designs in an attempt to prevent similar tragedies in the future. Scientists benefitted from the quake, which allowed them to pinpoint where other blind thrust faults exist and prepare for future earthquakes. Metaphorically, the earthquake in the show acted in a similar manner for the characters. Experiencing the turmoil of their shaken reality helps each character rebuild their lives and focus on what they truly must do in order to find happiness and personal safety.

2.6 Similarities to Shakespearean Comedy

Adams personally describes *Ceiling/Sky* as a “polyphonic love story in the style of a Shakespeare comedy.”¹¹⁶ The plot structure contains many similarities to the basic

¹¹⁵ Sheryl Stolberg and Glenn F. Bunting, “A Rush of Fear, and Even the Lucky Are Left Shaken,” *Los Angeles Times*, sec. Local, January 18, 1994, accessed April 03, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-01-18/news/mn-13032_1_home-safe-leaving.

outline of a Shakespeare comedy. First, and most poignantly, the main action in most Shakespearean comedies is about love.¹¹⁷ The characters within the drama must overcome obstacles in order to live in “harmonious union” at the conclusion.¹¹⁸ Frequently, the works would include some sort of fantastic or supernatural element that functions as a *deus ex machina* in the lives of the characters. *Ceiling/Sky* certainly follows this model. The protagonists must overcome the obstacle of the earthquake, which Adams specifically states “acts as a kind of Deus ex Machina that forces inner transformations in the lives of the various characters.”¹¹⁹

In addition to the overlying theme of love, Shakespearean comedies are “about a conflict between two opposite social groups (rulers and subjects, older and younger, wealthy and poor).”¹²⁰ The disconnect between societal groups is apparent in *Ceiling/Sky* in many different contexts. The characters, although all of the same age group, belong to many different social classes. The socially powerful characters clash with those in the lower classes; for example, Mike looks down on Dewain and David tries to take advantage of Leila. Often, the defining social class of a certain character becomes blurry due to how other characters treat them. Tiffany hurls racial comments at Rick, causing him to feel of a lower class than her although he holds a respectable (and certainly more desirable) job. However, the most significant conflict exists between the twenty-something age group and the rest of society, which tends to view them as irresponsible,

¹¹⁶ Adams, “Ceiling,” earbox.com.

¹¹⁷ Debora B. Schwartz, California Polytechnic State University, “Comedy,” last modified 2002, accessed April 05, 2013, <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/engl339/comedy.html>.

¹¹⁸ Schwartz, CPSU, “Comedy.”

¹¹⁹ Adams, “Ceiling,” earbox.com.

¹²⁰ Adam Immerwahr, McCarter Theatre, “Shakespearean Comedy,” last modified 2009, accessed April 06, 2013, <http://www.mccarter.org/Education/twelfthnight/html/7.html>.

silly, and something of a joke. The connective tissue between all the characters is their optimism, ambitiousness, and willingness not to accept defeat in the face of diversity, even though society expects exactly that.

Another typical device in Shakespearean comedies is mistaken identity, usually displayed through cross-dressing and confusing relationships. Although *Ceiling/Sky* does not portray the typical method of mistaken identity, many characters certainly embody the trait; Mike is confused about his sexuality, David is not the holy preacher one expects, and Consuelo is much more than an illegal immigrant. Also, the main idea that each character does not conform to societal expectations certainly expresses mistaken identity.

Lastly, Shakespearean comedies will often contain a “philosophical aspect” that deals with weighty themes, such as personal identity and the importance of love.¹²¹ There are several philosophical issues present in *Ceiling/Sky*, including self-worth, identity, and societal acceptance. Adams’ comparison of *Ceiling/Sky* to a Shakespeare comedy shows how seriously the work’s creators intended to communicate with their audience and how zealously they supported their message, designing a communicative piece meant as true art.

¹²¹ Schwartz, CPSU, “Comedy.”

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