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"The Inchoate Incarnate: After a Drawing, Toward an Opera, but before a Libretto Even Exists", by Frances Stark, is featured in Stark's theater piece, "I've Had It! and I've Also Had It!" showing Wednesday at Aspen's Wheeler Opera House.
Jason Dewey

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ASPEN — In “I’ve Had It!”, a musical that debuted at the Wheeler Opera House in 1951, a Hotel Jerome bellhop watches as his girlfriend falls for an Aspen Music Festival composer, who is in Aspen working on a new piece of music. With the help of his bartending friend, the bellhop exposes the pomposity and pretentiousness of the composer by demonstrating, for a room full of critics, that the new composition is actually a familiar pop song, played backward.

It's a simple, screwball comedy of class warfare. But as Los Angeles artist Frances Stark revisits the work Wednesday at the Wheeler, as part of the Aspen Art Museum's Restless Empathy group exhibition, simplicity doesn't seem to be part of the formula. Retitled “I’ve Had It! And I’ve Also Had It!”, the reworked version introduces Stark's thoughts on art criticism, symmetry, the divide between high and low art, opera, and the frustrations the artist has encountered in her career.

The production, presented in collaboration with the Aspen Music Festival, features two string trios and back-up dancers; a costume — titled “The Inchoate Incarnate: After a Drawing, Toward an Opera, but before a Libretto Even Exists,” and created by Stark before she conceived of “I’ve Had It! And I’ve Also Had It!” — and Stark herself in her first performance piece.

When she visited Aspen last November to begin work on her Restless Empathy project, Stark, who had made two trips here earlier in her life to visit family friends, zeroed in on the 121-year-old Wheeler. “Because in the Wheeler, you get the whole history of Aspen,” she said.

Stark, a 43-year-old Southern California native who lives in Los Angeles and often uses text in her visual work, went to the Pitkin County Library and quickly found an out-of-date brochure detailing the history of the Wheeler. When she saw a mention of “I’ve Had It!” she knew the old, forgotten musical would be the foundation of her own piece.

Stark was aware that several prominent visual artists — including Denmark's Olafur Eliasson, who has exhibited work in Aspen — had recently ventured into opera. And a friend of Stark's, looking at Stark's recent series of large-scale drawings, likened the work to a libretto, and gave the series the alternate title, “Notes to a Pedagogical Opera.” Stark had already made a costume that looked like an outfit you'd find in a modernist stage production. And when she read the title of the 1951 musical, she saw the stars align.

“I couldn't believe the title,” Stark said. “‘I’ve Had It!’ — I’ve said that over and over.” She also noted that tweaking the title, making it “I’ve Had It! And I’ve Also Had It!” is a neat play on the “empathy” theme. (The Restless Empathy exhibition, which runs through July 18, also features benches around Aspen inscribed with quotes by the late Hunter S. Thompson, an installation near the Aspen Center for Physics, a large-scale photograph at the base of Aspen Mountain, and works at the Aspen Art Museum.)

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Stark said the high art/low art divide spotlighted in the original “I’ve Had It!” has been a theme in her past work. “In my writing, I definitely address that. It’s the issue of pomposity and fraudulence.”

Criticism, too, is an idea raised in the 1951 musical that interests her. “It’s about a work’s reception: The bellhop thinks [the composition] is crap; the critics are supposedly duped by hype,” Stark said. “So the reception — and production — of work is a big theme that runs through my practice.”

Stark also engages in a narrative of self-reflection. The performance has her showing slides, commenting on them, and looking at her own career and her work: “Why I’ve had it, and what I’ve had it with,” she said. “A subtheme is, ‘Why can’t I write?’” Part of her libretto is a quote from the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz: “Instead of marching forward and erect like the great writers of all time, I’m revolving ridiculously on my own heels.”

Perhaps the most obvious, and prescient angle of the original “I’ve Had It!”, the theme of class warfare in Aspen, gets underplayed in the new production. Stark said she doesn’t want to ignore the theme, but notes, “I’m really walking on eggshells about that.”

Instead, Stark has a perspective that reveals the visual artist in her. The heart of her interpretation is the various layers of symmetry. “Really, the most compelling aspect of the play is the formal symmetry of it,” she said. “There’s the song, and it’s played backward and forward. There’s the two string trios. There’s a complete binary aspect to understand.

“I think what I’m trying to do is set them spinning so you don’t know what’s front and back. Spinning is definitely the subtle motif in this work.”