



IONA CONTEMPORARY DANCE THEATRE

Maile Baran portrays Nirvana in a number that lightens the mood of the IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre's "Destiny."

IONA takes charge of emotional 'Destiny'

Review by Nadine Kam

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Monday, June 3, 2002

In producing its first evening-length work in five years, the IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre proves it has indeed outgrown its former Iona Pear Dance Company name, bursting through its old skin to embrace the spectrum of performance arts.

"Destiny," which premiered Friday at Hawaii Theatre, introduces stage and aerial acrobatics, spoken word, drama and video to IONA's repertoire, in a visually stunning, visceral and provocative opera of movement.

The 2 1/2-hour production brings a surreal filmic quality to the stage as it opens with titles projected onto a screen lifted to reveal a fantasy garden of majestic trees, with dancers costumed in a twisted tangle of roots, their limbs turning into branches full of shimmery metallic leaves. A giant spider web adds to the spectacle as Kali (Summer Mie Partlon), the Hindu goddess of creation and destruction, winds her way through the tableau.

The awe over this breathtaking sight dissipates as the audience is then led on a path of violence

mirroring the history of humankind. IONA artistic director and choreographer Cheryl Flaharty draws once again on the imagery of myths and religion to depict Earth's desecration and the subjugation of feminine energy at the hands of man, technology, "progress." In one scene, "The Wizard of Oz's" Dorothy is made to walk down a Yellow Brick Road that is laid out for her by men, one brick at a time.

Flaharty's past works "Mythology of Angels" and "Worshipping Sun" addressed similar themes, but never so many at a multitude of levels. She's abetted in this endeavor by Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's written passages, recited near the beginning and end of the piece, which invite us to imagine what could be achieved and reclaimed with a shift in desires and priorities. Having lost the garden, Flaharty suggests the aim is to find our way back, or at least stop losing more of our forests and oceans.

In many segments, "Destiny" resembles a disjointed and nonsensical dream, reflecting knowledge buried within the subconscious, inaccessible until we awaken our intuitive powers.

Like a dream, there are two to four clusters of characters flitting on and off stage during several numbers, which makes it difficult to keep up with all the elements of the story; it's impossible if you're seated behind someone with a big head.

Throughout the work, female dancers display sensuous, fluid moves contrasting with the men's rigid, angular and staccato steps. Flaharty all but abandons the organic movements of *butoh* in favor of the crisp athleticism of modern dance.

A batch of apples is loosed in the garden, then along comes the devil (Sami L.A. Akuna), and mayhem ensues. Men in priestly white garb struggle to contain the free-spirited temptresses,

eventually walking them off the stage on all fours, grasping their hair like leashes.

Even so, the viewer is led to feel compassion for men, as they are compelled to dance in circles, repeating the same moves that lead them nowhere, until, in a role reversal, emancipated women in apple-red James Bond-style vinyl minidresses and thigh-high boots wield arms against them.

In a clever use of video by Mark Kadota and Sergio Goes, images are projected onto a gauzy scrim with dancers in the background, for a 3-D effect that allows goddesses on screen to watch over and interact with the dancers on stage. The effect is stunning.

In two comic bits meant to break the tension, Maile Baran portrays Nirvana as a 1-900 number charlatan who sets her sights on late-night TV watchers in need of a quick fix of enlightenment, and Akuna, a vision in a red feather boa, returns in a monologue as a makeup-wearing, yoga-practicing, Vegan-eating, massage-seeking New Age convert who envisions a day when women are treated as men's equals, and men can still be men if they hold no power or wealth.

Though in the works long before Sept. 11, "Destiny" takes a strong anti-violence stance, with a mantra that reads, "Violence is a descending spiral," and its ultimate weakness is that it begets hate, the thing it seeks to destroy. In the end, humankind chooses its own destiny, though Flaharty seduces the audience with the notion that we could embrace the planet and each other as golden bodhisattvas. Her finale drew a standing ovation.

At times the message seems redundant, but it is lost on many who run our largest institutions. With this work, IONA has proved itself worthy of the international stage. Let's hope its first stop is Washington, D.C.

Do it!

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