

A MIX OF INTRIGUING, INVOLVING AND CONCERNING

[Sacred Dance](#)

Collection of Works

at TAPAC Theatre, Western Springs, Auckland

From 4 Oct 2009 to 6 Oct 2009

[1hr]

Reviewed by Linda Ashley, 5 Oct 2009

Religion is a reality and so it appears is the sacredness of dance to some people. In the series of one hour curated programmes in this year's tempo, *Sacred Dance* captures exactly that sentiment. These one hour slots offer great accessibility of a variety of dance for a wide spectrum of viewers.

The range of the *Sacred Dance* programme is broad spiritually and ethnically. What I found particularly intriguing were similarities, differences and possible overlaps between the sacred and the secular. Where does ritual moving end and daily dance life begin in this programme? You may care to pop along and consider this.

The early parts of the programme are dominated by three female soloists and are reminders of how modern dance historically has often been the progeny of women pioneers.

From within such an old-school meta-narrative, Dee Landon's solo *Persephone* in the style of Isadora Duncan reaches into the depths of the Greek Underworld and female pioneering. The audience are transported back to Duncan's free spirit, so confrontational for some audiences of the early twentieth century. Allegoric of Spring, and so aptly timed for this tempo festival, AUT University Bachelor of Dance student Sarala Niven is Persephone returning to the earth's surface.

The vocabulary is deceptively simple, but to dance it with such innocence and free flow is more demanding than one might think - Niven gives a sensitive rendition. Although the choice of Vaughan Williams' 'Fantasia on Greensleeves' as accompaniment is suitably reminiscent of Duncan's work, it is somewhat overpowering for such a delicate dance. The fragrance of the freesias that are growing in my garden floated on the air.

Jennifer De Leon's *Light Came Through the Window* (2008) celebrates the relief of seeing that dancing is still a viable part of life after a hip replacement. In a flattering costume of delicate orange and cream tones this is a chic look.

The dance offers a lens on the frailty and fragility of recovery from an insider's view. As a mature devotee to dance, De Leon's deep remorse at the possibility of its loss is captured at moments of this lament. Music by Leonard Cohen provides a challenging accompaniment in its omnipresent familiar voice and insistent phrasing.

Natraj Dance, by Monisha Kumar - and by now I'm realising that it would be great to have more biographies in the programme on such occasions. This devotee is of a different order than the preceding one and this sacred dance honouring the Hindu god Lord Shiva presents contrasting emotions of joy and violence.

As destroyer of the universe I fear that Shiva's attack and ferocity are less convincing. Shiva, as lord of the dance, can be a joyful and creative performer and the infectious rhythms and speed of gesture are on the way to catching a very feminine portrayal of this.

The director of tempo festival Mary Jane O'Reilly, who also curated this amongst other programmes, presented *Peter*, danced by Benny Ord. Ord is a highly accomplished dancer who has a body that radiates the classical and the contemporary. This dance has an interesting pedigree, being danced originally as a 2003 commission for Bach's 'St Matthew's Passion', played in St. Paul's Cathedral in Parnell with Auckland Choral Society. First performed by Moana Nepia and later by Ord, we are now before quite a different God, one that demands introspection and reflection on our actions.

The current rendering offers crystal lines such as we may see in stain- glassed windows. This is another technically demanding piece. St Peter's deep regrets in his triple denial of Jesus are captured in motifs of weeping, denial and running away from what matters most. Pulling the audience in to believe such biblical passions is a tough ask.

To end the programme all-female Polynesian dance company Ura Tabu present a *Siva Aitu*: an eclectic mix telling of how four witches travel to four continents and then back home. Their motivation for the journey is unclear but the beauty of the projections of Samoa that ran throughout make it quite clear why a witch would want to return. The slides (Venusi Taumoepeau) depict a variety of mood setting natural scenes, historical depictions of Samoan life and celebration, the national rugby team and Black Grace gets a look in too. This eclectic mix must have taken an age to research and collate, let alone seek permissions for the huge number of images. The slides are used as transitions for the many costume changes and it must be said that the costumes are at times quite stunning.

The live drumming and song (Opetaia Foa'i) add freshness and authenticity. The dancing really sparkles at times but there are also moments of restraint when the witches take on almost a butoh quality and become ghostly creatures of the night. Some of the choreography and rich gestural vocabulary is involving to watch. This half hour show requires considerable editing as the slides become a ponderous and repetitive device and the eclectic mix perhaps a touch rich for some tastes. This group has great potential to produce stunning work and should be encouraged to work on pacing, transitions and performance quality.

The evening unravels as a mix of what I interpret to be professional and semi-professional work. I have to say that lip syncing lyrics is something that some of the dancers really need to be aware of as a distraction from the dancing and perhaps some of the works need more of an outside eye before taking to the public arena.

The impact of some performances could have been sharper and the occasional loss of alignment in travelling, jumping sections caused me concern for dancers' safety - after all they are sacred and cared about by our dance community as we all strive to improve our own dancing lives, be they secular or sacred.