

Sacred Dance Tempo 09

Collection of works

4,5 & 6 October

TAPAC, Auckland

Review by Sarah Gavina Campus (13 Oct 09)

So what's sacred about our dance here in Aotearoa? I went along to immerse myself in a programme designed to initiate a shift in consciousness.

This year's Sacred Dance programme offered an eclectic mix of physical and metaphysical dance that traversed through emotional and environmental landscapes in search of expansion and expression.

First up was Dee Landon's work 'Persephone', performed by Sassy Niven. Niven dances in homage to the Greek fertility myth of Demeter and Persephone's journey to the Underworld. Resplendent in pink and white, Niven exemplified the Isadora Duncan style of dance – free flow, bare foot, expressly feminine.

Sassy did a great job in emotionally exposing the tale, particularly and clearly through her facial expression. Gestural movements and a flattering draped pink and white costume spoke of delicate flowers, earthly abundance and added an archetypal female signature to the piece. Invocation in arms and footwork deftly wove wave like patterns emphasising circles and arcs, continuity and female cycles of birth, growth, renewal and change. Niven dances with assurity and definition, reflecting the tradition of Isadora with a clear sense of timing and rhythmic and lyrical flow.

Jumps were precise and a welcome counterpoint to her floorwork. My sense was that Landon attempted to portray both characters of Demeter and Perspehone, speaking through the dancer's body their relationship to the underworld and eachother. Two performers may have been a more fitting choice in order to clarify the theatrical dynamics of this ancient myth. Sassy performed both roles with commitment and an awareness of the shifts in state needed to profile each character.

Next up was Jennifer De Leon, in a brave and self-reflexive piece of work entitled 'The Light Came Through The Window' (2008), exploring her total dedication to dance following major hip surgery. Revival, resurgence and regeneration emerged as primary feeling tones, as did portrayal of plummeting sorrow, grieving and loss that physical injury can have on a dancer's career and passion.

Jenny danced with conviction and fortitude, opening her vulnerable self to the audience. She combines her history in modern and balletic dance with contemporary sensitivity to the space around her, softening her body at times to yield to forces of gravity and momentum.

The exposure of Jenny's open chest to the sky added another heart felt depth and sense of intimacy to the work. Falling and spinning into the backspace combined with strong limb extension provided dynamic balance and showed Jenny's willingness to embrace current contemporary movement genres. A repeated series of rond de jambes appeared to reference the location of her injury; evocative of the ordeal her body has experienced.

Music by Leonard Cohen was the perfect sonic accompaniment to support themes of sombre loss, purposelessness turning to purposeful, the rekindling and picking up pieces of broken anatomy, and an uncompromising ferocity to stand tall in the face of adversity.

A free standing split leg balance displayed De Leon's physical skill and ability to control her form. Her prowess as performer and technician emerged strongly, and I encourage her to continue to find stability in her work, both physically and in live performance. Jenny appeared to be breaking some of her own habits in dance by committing her body to move in a ruthless and tender pursuit of her own journey.

Monisha Kumar presented 'Natraj Dance', a potent mix of polarity in response to the deity Lord Shiva. Kumar cuts a stunning figure of Indian graciousness, speed, charm and precision. She energises a direct line to her audience, which captivates our hearts. Monisha communicates to each audience member, allowing us to witness her passion and commitment to her sacred dance.

This dance revered Lord Shiva through a series of continuously morphing and fluid images that explored 'feminine' and 'masculine' aspects. Movements alternated between articulate traditional finger, head, arm and foot patterns more evocative of a feminine essence in classical Indian dance, to explosive and dynamic whole body expressions that propelled her directly and speedily through space and with 'masculine' energy and force in limbs, eyes and torso. This provided a real winning combination for the viewer. An extended sequence of 'on the spot' turns displayed Monisha's ability and expertise in this dance form.

Musicality comes naturally to Monisha, evident in the marrying of her superb footwork with the beats of both traditional contemporary rhythms and contemporary music which accompanied the change of states from 'feminine' to 'masculine'.

I delight in watching Monisha dazzle with costume and a face that so expressively lights up the space around her. She appears effortless in her ability to hold contradictory rhythms in

her body with animated power and one pointed focus and attention to detail, whilst dancing with such joy!

Benny Ord's solo presence on stage is unmistakable. Mixing fluid precision with a length in his limbs that seem to wrap themselves around the entire stage, Benny also exudes calm and serene stage energy. Ord epitomises the 'cross-over artist' – equally masterful in both camps of contemporary and classical form.

'Peter' (2003), choreographed by Mary-Jane O'Reilly, was originally commissioned for St Paul's cathedral in collaboration with the Auckland Choral Society. Ord eloquently embraces the moodiness and turmoil demanded by this piece. He appears instinctively in command of both melancholic qualities and technical virtuosity - who can forget those leg extensions! Benny is rapidly coming into his own as a mature male dancer, able to portray the inner world of the solo dance character. He captures in movement the poetry and sensitivity needed to dance this journey in a modern ballet style.

Ord's lines sear through the space. He appears like a sea bird in the wind – highly articulate, delicate and powerful in a masculine style. Although classically trained, Ord's body owns a contemporary sense of weight and momentum that strikes the space in a lightning like manner. He sets and conveys the story with honed focus and commitment to each moment to ooze a simple looking body whilst dancing complex choreography.

Benny's next challenge is to bring his quirky and unique dancing signature to his face and allow his mask to generate aliveness and expression so natural to his body. This will enrich and add whole new layers to his charismatic presence.

The stand out highlight of the evening for me was 'Siva Aitu', the new 30 minute work by emerging company Ura Tabu, choreographed by Charlene Tedrow. This strong band of women is a potent force to be reckoned with – a posse of young bodies grounded in earth, in sensual stage presence and in their relationship to each other. The mix creates a performance synergy that ignites the space with reverence to cultural and spiritual homelands.

'Siva Aitu' was broken into 5 parts or rites of passage, each beginning with film footage dedicated to various components of Pacific living. Geography, environmental disasters, history, colonisation, cultural artefacts, artifice and community spirit is touched upon and explored in a rich soundscore composed of natural sounds of bush, birds and animals.

The dancers of Ura Tabu are totally committed to this work. Hands appear so softly to touch the earth in respect for themselves and for the environment of Pacific peoples. Fingers trace

simultaneously delicate air patterns in the sky whilst pumping bare soles lay claim to the earth inside their blood.

Choreography presents a mix of traditional, contemporary and hybrid forms, each appearing as an exploration of primarily ensemble formations. The women are so tuned to each other that this format works very well for them. A dynamic sensitivity between each performer creates a palpable tension and longing for reunion and symmetry when one dancer departs to solo or duet.

Costumes cloak and/or reveal the body in simple lines and combinations, fleshing sensuality and honouring traditional and current fashion. The 'mix and match' approach further conceptually developed could create a fresh mark on the dance scene in this country. These women offer a point of difference. They are not afraid to show us their wildness and abandon, their sexual integrity, their love of their people united through time and geographic distance, and their sacred relationship to nature and cultural practice.

With a narrative hung loosely around departure from a shared point, navigating outwards to locate new knowledge from Pacific lands, and re-emerging with new forms, Ura Tabu presented a dance fitting to the recent turmoil in Samoa. Touching upon environmental themes allowed audience members to realise the preciousness of the Pacific and the fragile environment in which it sits.

Film images of faces and people in action coupled with live drumming and singing reinforced the communal elements vital to the conservation and preservation of Pacific ecology and rituals. Images were skilfully woven to impact the overall choreographic texture. With further artistic development these could become a powerful symbol to inspire and clarify a cohesive choreographic voice.

Each dancer embodied the entire movement range required by the dance - from wild head and hip movements to earth pounding plies and foot rhythms, and fantastically focussed eyes channelling the lineage and spirit of Pacific peoples. My own mind and body is steeped in kinaesthetic and visual memories of dextrous fingers dripping through pockets of air created by rippling, curvaceous, sensual arms.

In all the works of the Sacred Dance programme, my spirit was moved – someplace, to a new place, to a place I had never been. Only by the performers embodying their own sense of the sacred could I be opened to my own experience. Well done everyone. Let's hope you continue to define and redefine the sacred in your dance and to share in skill and celebration.

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