



Posted on Fri, Feb. 08, 2008

Free at last: Störing Dance Theater scores stellar success with work on Underground Railroad

By PAUL HORSLEY
The Kansas City Star

Dance can be an ideal way to deal with subjects so potent we can't look them in the face without flinching.

Störing Dance Theater's "Underground," which received its premiere Friday at the Lyric Theatre, is a two-hour choreographic treatment of slavery, brutality, faith and the work of the Underground Railroad.

But it is neither sensationalistic nor exploitative of the senses, and it tells its story with an eye for historical accuracy.

It is without doubt one of the most vivid, heartfelt and theatrically astute pieces of dance theater ever to grace a Kansas City stage, and it's an ideal testament to what a small local company can achieve with talent, imagination and lots of hard work.

More than two years in the making, it is fundamentally an intimate story that follows the lives of Jed and Sari, slaves who escape their brutal plantation owner with the help of Quakers whose faith compels them to fight the evils of slavery.

Mona Störing-Enna and her co-choreographer, Tobin James, tell the story with dance and theater, displaying a knack for stagecraft and drama equal to any choreographer I can think of.

After the big plantation number in Act 1, for example, we need an intimate solo to work through the tragedy we've just seen. So we're given James' big explosive scene in which she mourns her husband with Martha Graham-like histrionics.

There are hints of Alvin Ailey, too, whom it was hard not to think of during the moving and witty church scene of Act 2.

Ballet was never far from the surface, either, especially in the beautifully gauged large-ensemble numbers like the opening scene — an ingenious, layered tableau with women picking cotton in unison and men breaking the earth like unearthly human machines.

The lead dancers exuded personality. James as Sari is a consummate dancer who wrapped us around her character, and Marc Wayne had a charisma that was both harrowing and uplifting.

Courtney Kierl-Bourman brought groundedness to her portrayal as Hannah, the Quaker who risks her life to lead the slaves to freedom. Her trios with James and Wayne, which grow increasingly passionate and hopeful as they near their goal, were among the highlights.

The spare sets included a pair of large panels that doubled as a storefront or, when flipped, the church interior. Six simple benches were pews, which were "danced with" stylishly.

There were remarkable moments throughout: When learning of the death of Sari's husband, the slaves must keep serving at the ball through their grief, intermittently breaking out in unison shivers.

A whole miniature history of the Underground Railroad is compressed cleverly in a few scenes. We see the slaves guided by signals like lamps in windows, or escaping slave-hunters by hiding under a quilt being sewn by a quilting circle.

Jay Pfeifer's score combined Philip Glass-like cascades with spirituals, folk dance, choral singing, African drumming and a host of other things. It felt surprisingly organic, though: In fact it was so good that I found myself wishing he'd orchestrate the synthesized parts for real instruments.

The finale of "Underground" some might question: The cast comes out in modern dress and dances in jubilation at how far we've come. Seeing the cast suddenly transformed into hip, fresh-faced suburbanites was pretty effective,

but the brief vignettes telling the “history” of black advancement struck me as a tad quaint.

It was saved from looking like a scene from “Hair” — just barely — by its use of hymns instead of “Let the Sunshine In.”

That was only a brief lapse in an otherwise brilliant production. “Underground” is a piece that works because it can be both literal and nonliteral at the same time.

It treats a tough subject with sensitivity, grace and a sharp sense of how art can feed life and vice-versa.

‘Underground’

When: Friday, Feb. 8

Where: Lyric Theatre

Audience: 600 (approx.)

Presenter: Störling Dance Theater

Repeated: Saturday, Feb. 9

Tickets: 913-393-3141

To reach Paul Horsley, call 816-234-4764 or e-mail phorsley@kcstar.com.

© 2007 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>