

Nonce Dance Ensemble blends an exciting evening

By Lisa Blinn
special writer

In a shamefully ill-attended, premiere performance June 6 at Oakland Community College's Smith Theatre, the Nonce Dance Ensemble delivered a bizarre, intelligent evening of nouveau mixed mediums. Performances ran through June 8.

Nonce, an old English, 16th century word, means for the present or, for the occasion. In 1973, artistic director/choreographer Denise Szukla applied this word to her newly created modern dance company. In this instance, it was a rare occasion seeing the Nonce Dance Ensemble in action.

The beginning act entitled, "Scenes at a Bar (R&E)," featured several separate dance scenes connected in some way to the word bar or to bars as locations or objects.

The first of the three scenes centered around six sculptural objects by artist David Barr. Five aquash, cubed structures were placed diagonally across the stage. The nicely scaled, well-crafted structures increased in height from left to right. A sixth sculpture, placed off to the left, was symmetrically twisted and taller than the other structures. It was yellow on the outside and red on the inside.

FOUR DANCERS interact with the sculptures. They dance and jerk and jump as they weave and wobble around the pieces. Each dancer whines a variety of oohs and aahs, as he performs his part. After several minutes of this, one dancer says, "I just love art exhibits." In this scene, as opposed to the others, the bizarre overides an effective message.

The next segment, "Saloon/Bar," was propless. A funky crowd emerged from off the stage. The costumes were humorous, colorful, and new-wave. One dancer wore a duck-head hat, and another wore black knee socks and lavender high heeled pumps. The scene involves men dancing with men, women with women, and the more usual male-female dancing with women. The marvelous acoustics of Smith Theatre enhanced the trendy, popular tunes that were picked for the piece.

Toward the end of this scene, five robed, religious cult types, filed around the crowd spiritually summing. They eventually decked everyone at the bar and filed off stage, triumphantly with everyone's cash. This scene dwelled on the unexpected. The shock element is never vulgar, just somehow strange and enlightening. This scene portrayed the kind of weirdness that makes one smile, it is shocking but neither threatening nor obscene.

The final scene, "Dance Barre," is a dance duet and dialogue between a role-reversed couple, Molly Morris and Michael McNeil. This scene included an actual dance barre.

The two dancers conversed as they performed excellent dance stunts, creatively involving the barre. Morris and McNeil banged, contorted, and entwined themselves with the barre. Here, the man assumes archetypical female traits, and the woman, men's. At the beginning of the scene, the woman hands the man a piece of gum, which he later finds out is sex-change gum. Throughout the piece, there is fast-paced electronic music softly playing. This work was a prize. Morris and McNeil acted and danced fabulously together. Timing was perfect and the dialogue was clever and suspenseful.

Following an extended intermission, "Quintet: A Dance of Mystery and Murder," was presented. The story depicted was included in the program, with

review

one paragraph describing each of the eight scenes. This was a thoughtful commodity for the audience.

The dance is an intertwined, new-music fantasy. It is at once a dark and daring tale merged with passionate heat and sexual innuendo.

"QUINTET," is an off-beat commentary on the music and dance trends of the '80s. In many ways, the violence and sex often portrayed in modern rock videos are seen live in this piece, either for the pleasure or horror of the viewer. This is a rare and exciting example of live and vibrant steam. There is both an element of enticement and revulsion.

The story includes a pregnant girl, a husband/lover, a wife/mother, a bar dancer (daughter/step-daughter), and a construction worker, the brother of the pregnant girl.

Sharon Urrau as the pregnant girl was excellent as a frazzled and frustrated mistress of a conniving married man. She and Dennis East, her lover, engage in two passionate, adult love-making choreographies that are either eye opening or closing depending on one's stomach for sex on stage. In any case, their performance was quite invigorating.

Harriet Payne, the wife/mother, is nasty and strong. Her look and her moves reflect an androgynous flavor often associated with the '80s fashion trends.

McNeil, as the construction worker and brother of the pregnant girl, played his part of anger and

confusion well. His brotherly anticipations toward his sister's pregnancy were scintillatingly macho and well done.

MORRIS, AS a sexy bar dancer was salty and sleazy. Her moves included throbs and struts as she invited the bar crowd to watch her, and in particular, the construction worker.

The supporting dancers performed well together and enhanced the two scenes they danced in. Their choreography was tough and sensual. The same thrashing and pelvic thrusting Morris performed, is also evident here.

The intrigue and interconnections among the players finally facilitate themselves with the murder of the husband/lover, the last action on stage. "Quintet" also opened with this same movement, so the scenes were in actuality a flashback from this point. The twenty or so members of the audience clapped as loud as twenty people can.

Both the first and second acts truly made for an original and interesting production. The integration of new sounds and new moves transcended non-substantiated absurdity. The Nonce Dance Ensemble is not bizarre for effect. Their level of original weirdness and their propensity for meaningful strangeness enhances the themes of every scene. The talent and perspicacity of the players made all the works relevant and enjoyable even to a conventional audience.



"Quintet: A Dance of Mystery and Murder" premiered last week at Oakland Community College's Smith Theatre.

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