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H. Art Chaos

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Between Death and Rebirth: H. Art Chaos performs at 2009 American Dance Festival

Sometimes there's a fine line between dream and nightmare. Japan's H. Art Chaos, an all-female company founded by choreographer Sakiko Oshima and dancer Naoko Shirakawa, drew from both sides of that divide in their performance at the Reynolds Industries Theater (June 29, 30, July 1).

"Flowers of the Bones," a brief new work commissioned by the American Dance Festival (ADF) that included a musical contribution by Alan Terricciano and the participation of three ADF dancers, introduced Ms. Oshima's visually striking aesthetic and the physicality of the dancers. Haunting the mysterious space between life and the oblivion of death, soloist Shino Kido floated and hung, writhed and gasped amidst visions and spirits. The lighting was fabulous and eerie, filtering through the mist that fills the stage, illuminating at first a woman (Ms. Kido) suspended in the air. She lay flat as if dead, but slowly began to move, arms and legs awakening, swimming through this new air. Before long she flung her body around, struggling against the power that suspended her.

Maneuvering rolling tables around the stage - later, they danced atop the tables and hung off the sides - reaching toward the dead woman, swirling and flitting across the stage, the other dancers seemed at times to be friends from the living world, mourning this death, and at other times, creatures of this middle realm, spirits of the dead welcoming and engulfing. The movement was very dramatic, full of angles, broken lines, and heads thrown back. The layered electronic score had an ominous pulse, hinting at a nightmare we never quite saw. Instead, visions passed by of mermaid-like spirits with long feathered tails that whipped circles through the mist, brushed clouds of snow into the dark; broken and pleading figures with palms pressing forward and mouths wide open, gaping, gasping. Finally, the dream wound down, leaving the woman alone in a rectangle of light, hands crossed at the chest, ready for death.

"Rite of Spring," first performed in 1995, brought the theme of death and rebirth firmly into the realm of nightmare. Set to Stravinsky's iconic score, Ms. Oshima's "Rite" presented dancer Naoko Shirakawa as a sacrificial victim of society. Reliving her nightmarish experience, pursued and menaced by four dancers dressed in suits - onlookers who did nothing to help the victim, according to the program notes - the soloist crossed and splayed her legs, threw herself to the floor, literally pleaded for her life. Despite the visual promise of the work - a world of fog and floating chairs, a bathtub and a fallen lamp - the dance proved to be a disappointment. The quality of movement, characterized by violent hair tossing, anguished gasps and spins that collapsed on the floor, was too melodramatic for my taste, suggesting more adolescent angst than true persecution. The movement vocabulary, too, did not hold my interest for long, reading as generic and predictable.

Some remarkable and downright creepy moments did surface, some reminiscent of a horror movie: disembodied fingers and legs slowly reached out of the bathtub, suggesting a broken body within; the central woman pulled desperately on the chain of the lamp to extinguish the light, but the light returned despite her efforts, illuminating the figures slithering over the floor towards her; the four supporting dancers, suspended in harnesses, danced with, on, and

around four hanging chairs; her head submerged in the bathtub, the menaced woman erupted, flinging a shining arc of water across the stage from her whipping hair.

Ms. Oshima has a strong eye for visual effect and a company of dancers noted for their physicality and passion. Indeed, the energy and commitment of the dancers was powerful and undeniable. However, that energetic passion was not enough to redeem "Rite of Spring" for me, not enough to bring the work beyond a passing tantrum to the intended vision of cruel, complicit society.

American Dance Festival's 76th performance season continues July 2 - 4, with the presentation of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, performing works by Twyla Tharp, Laura Dean, William Forsythe, and Jorma Elo.

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