

The Herald-Sun

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New Clarke piece inspired by Shakers

Dance theater work
in collaboration
with Alfred Uhry

BY SUSAN BROILI

Special to The Herald-Sun

DURHAM — Three years ago at the American Dance Festival, Martha Clarke created a new version of her “Garden of Earthly Delights,” inspired by a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. This season she returns with a different kind of garden. “This is a cabbage patch — straight rows,” Clarke joked at a recent rehearsal.

The straight-laced Shakers



CLARKE

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ADF-goers can still learn a lot about Martha Clarke

and specifically their founder, Ann Lee, inspired her new dance theater work, “Angel Reapers,” a collaboration with writer Alfred Uhry and music director Arthur Solari. The three-day ADF run of this world premiere work-in-progress begins today at Reynolds Industries Theater on Duke University’s West Campus.

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The actors of “Angel Reapers” rehearse in Reynolds Theatre at Duke University on Friday afternoon. The show is choreographed and directed by Martha Clarke.

SHAKER

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In 1774, Lee, an illiterate English factory worker, and eight followers, came to America to spread her gospel, Ken Burns recounts in his PBS film, "The Shakers." This religious sect called themselves the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing but because of their ecstatic dancing they became known as Shakers.

They were celibate, could not marry or bear children.

"She founded the Shakers thinking sex was the root of all evil," Clarke said in a recent interview. Lee's revelation came after she had given birth to four stillborn babies, Clarke added.

"She firmly believed that this was the way to get into heaven," Uhry said of the celibacy Lee required of followers. He described Lee as "a strong, very charismatic woman."

In a recent interview, Uhry also spoke of the problems that resulted from this rule — something "Angel Reapers" shows. A young couple is banished after they fall in love. When a husband and wife join the sect, they, too, must practice celibacy. Finally, the husband becomes so frustrated he sexually assaults his wife. Mother Ann Lee also has troubles of her own.

"You can't deny your sexuality ... That's how we got here," Uhry said.

During a recent rehearsal, dancer Sara Erde, who plays Lee, struggled to convey what her character experiences when she feels attracted to her biological sibling, Wil-



Whitney V. Hunter dances center-stage during the rehearsal of "Angel Reapers" on Friday afternoon in Reynolds Theatre.

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GODD

WHAT: The American Dance Festival presents "Angel Reapers" by Martha Clarke and Alfred Uhry.

WHEN: 8 p.m. today through Wednesday.

WHERE: Reynolds Industries Theater, Duke University's Bryan Center.

TICKETS: Call (919) 668-2233 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu

liam Lee (Peter Musante). This, in fact, was true, although the two never committed incest, Clarke said.

"I realize I have these feelings, too," Erde said after her character has just been disappointed by the two members, who have fallen in love.

"It's a rich, fertile theatrical field," Clarke said of the Shaker material.

This dance theater work places more than the usual demands on performers. They act and speak written text — although not as much

as in a play. Since Shakers worshiped through dance and song, they sing 15 Shaker songs a cappella and perform a number of rhythmic dances. In one scene, based on historical fact, the men dance naked in the woods to show they have overcome temptations of the flesh, Clarke said.

Clarke, too, deals with a number of challenges. This is the first time she has created a work about an American subject. "I've never done a work that was rhythmically driven. I've never used counts — ever," the choreographer said.

She and Uhry have been working on and off for six years to come up with something that works. They first tried a play with movement.

Uhry is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and Tony Award-winner for his 1987 play "Driving Miss Daisy." He also earned an Academy Award for his screenplay for the 1989 film starring Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman.

The playwright first became intrigued by the

Shakers when he rented a cottage in the 1970s one summer in upstate New York near a Shaker community and became intrigued by them and admired the beautiful furniture they made, he said. After seeing much of Clarke's work over the years, he decided she was the only one who could make something on the Shakers. That's why, at a party, he just came up and asked if she wanted to collaborate with him on the project, he said at the Scripps/ADF ceremony earlier this season when Clarke received the \$50,000 award for lifetime contributions to modern dance.

While this production offered many challenges, fundraising also proved very difficult, Clarke said. She had to match funds she received through the American Dance Festival and Spring Lake Productions, co-producers and co-commissioners of the work.

"Shakers is not a sexy subject," Clarke said.

For more dance news and reviews, see Susan Broili's blog at www.heraldsun.com