

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

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DANCEREVIEW

Shakers dance again

By Roy C. Dicks
CORRESPONDENT

DURHAM

Martha Clarke integrates a variety of arts into her choreographic pieces. Last at the American Dance Festival in 2007 with her vividly theatrical "Garden of Earthly Delights," she returns with the premiere of "Angel Reapers," a lean, concentrated piece about the Shakers that incorporates songs and texts.

Members of the Shakers religious sect were so named because of their spasmodic, vibrating movements during worship. Their ascetic, communal living gave equality to

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DETAILS

What: "Angel Reapers" by Martha Clarke and Alfred Uhry

Where: Reynolds Industries Theater, Duke University

When: 8 p.m. today

Cost: \$32

Contact: 668-2233 or www.americandancefestival.org



Whitney V. Hunter dances with the Martha Clarke troupe in the Shaker-inspired 'Angel Reapers' at ADF.

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ADF

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the sexes but required their complete separation, disallowing marriage and demanding celibacy. Despite the intention of rejecting worldly evils, such deprivations inevitably led to breaking these stern restrictions, resulting in punishment and ostracism.

Clarke and her longtime collaborators, playwright Alfred Uhry and music director Arthur Solari, have created a 70-minute piece that explores the effects of the Shakers' strict community and, by extension, any oppressive society. In the beginning, six women in white bonnets and

simple full dresses sit opposite a group of five men in hats and black suits, gathered for worship.

Their good-natured laughter soon is replaced with spontaneous hymn singing, rhythmic stamping and clapping, and ritualized dancing in lines and patterns, the sexes always apart. These activities are interrupted from time to time by sudden testimonials glorifying the Shaker life. There's also impromptu speaking in tongues, violent possession of the spirit, and improvised solo dances.

After establishing what seems to be a commonly committed community, little cracks begin to appear – an argument over chores, a de-

SEE THE DANCE



Gallery online: View more photos from "Angel Reapers" at www.newsobserver.com.

sire for rest, a furtive moment of physical embrace. Then one pair, overcome by attraction, finds a secluded spot in the night to fulfill their desires, only to be caught and brought before the rest to be spat upon and reviled. They flee, Adam and Eve-like, from this hermetically sealed world, while the rest attempt to go on as before.

The piece is notable for its mesmerizing quality, the repetitive dancing and the confined structure enhanced

by Christopher Akerlind's constant but subtly changing lighting, providing dozens of hauntingly stark images of this confident cast. The thrust of this "work in progress" sags a little in the middle, and a sudden, dramatic ending needs a little more back-story. Otherwise "Angel Reapers" is a beautifully wrought illustration of oppression and freedom.

The narrow range of the dancing and the relatively dark subject matter may disappoint some, and the adult situations and instances of nudity may disturb others, but the piece should easily satisfy those open to this intriguingly theatrical vision.

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