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Photo: Dee Conway

Borrowed Light

Tero Saarinen Company
The Boston Camerata

at St James Theatre, Wellington
Until 15 Mar 2008
[1 hr 10mins, no interval]

Reviewed by Lyne Pringle, 13 Mar 2008

Congratulations to Lisa Twomey and team for an intelligent and multi-faceted dance and physical theatre programme for the 2008 NZ International Arts Festival. As a happy dance/body punter I offer my heartfelt thanks.

The final precious jewel to be revealed is *Borrowed Light* from choreographer Tero Saarinen and his company in collaboration with The Boston Camerata, America's foremost early music ensemble directed by Joel Cohen.

Saarinen's minimalist canvas evokes the world of the Shakers whose revolutionary Christianity shocked their contemporaries. They challenged almost every mainstream ideal of American society during their time, believing in community ownership, pacifism, ecstatic dancing in worship, equality of the sexes, celibacy, and living simply. Everything they did was an expression of faith.

In their architecture they often incorporated windows between rooms to borrow the light of the sun for interior spaces hence the name for this ravishing piece of dance art.

A dignified silence envelops the murky inchoate stage as a woman moves in slow motion with her back to us, concentrated, finding weight and momentum, using balance and off balance in expertly crafted phrases. There are others sitting in the eerie light, on two sides watching. We are introduced to the physical language of the work, arms sweeping the space, an anticipation of a rhythm with heavy shoes hitting the floor. The silence makes us alert and focused before the heavenly sound of a soprano pierces like a sun beam to gather us into the heavenly realm of the human voice and body in dialogue.

The Shakers considered music to be an essential component of the religious experience; heavenly 'gifts' received from those gone before. There are angels singing here tonight!

The work never falters in its delivery of seamless choreography, song and design exquisitely woven into the central premise: so pure and strong in its intention that it could abrade even the most tired and cynical heart into a tender and open state thankful to be part of a community. My dance colleagues around me knew we had seen something special.

In 70 minutes of very physical dancing I saw individuals taking responsibility for their foibles rather than projecting them onto others and consequently finding support and nourishment from their community: all being drawn forward despite their flaws towards a state of august grace. Tero Saarinen achieves his aim 'to use the language of dance to investigate, promote and communicate a humane worldview and basic human values'.

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This is a wonderful company dancing and singing with soul and without artifice.

They are real people and there is a sense that we can get to know them as they move through astounding unison in a flurry of rhythms that palpitate the air. Just a taste of butoh sometimes possesses their hands as they flail their bodies in movement that is distinctive for an incredible use of weight and earthiness yet they are still able to leap into the air slapping the thighs, defying the weight of their heavy magnificent costumes (Erika Turunen). Deep physicality here.

Solos are poignant, there are several; shafts of light expertly conceived and placed by designer Mikki Kunttu capture the poetry of dancers and singers brilliantly.

Four women dance a sweet ode to nature. Men hold other's belts and use them like slingshots to fling, their heavy coats opening to reveal glistening chests. Many of the lyrics consist of syllables and words from unknown tongues, the musical equivalent of glossolalia creating a rhythm to move to; many are gorgeously poetic creating rich images that propel the choreography.

Piety and avoidance of carnal pleasure are portrayed with tense limbs and distorted verticality. At one point Saarinen runs backwards, incredibly until exhaustion overtakes him. A striking woman senses her own aura in an amber shaft drawing us even deeper into the work emotionally.

Three images continue to resonate.

Firstly the entire cast moves backwards towards us their arms intertwining, writhing, wave-like suggesting both sensuality and support. These simple movements speak volumes, then they face us and the music says 'Love maintained, spirits flow together, linked in pretty mothers'.

Secondly most of the cast spin - minus two watching on exhausted wrestling with inner turmoil - singers one way dancers the other 'A great wheel is spinning round, all must come in to get a portion, loves ocean' (those Shakers were onto something way before the 'Age of Aquarius') eventually leading to exuberant anarchic movement. By now the dancers' faces are ecstatic.

And lastly a woman casting spells with her voice cajoles and beckons another female to join her community who stand together high atop the set. She soothes the fervour back to calmness and resolution.

To quote one of the more famous songs:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come round right.'

See this transcendent and mighty work!

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