

Holocaust ballet extracts beauty from tragedy

Review

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By Jane Vranish, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

We've been watching the collective "Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project" unfold in the Pittsburgh community over the past month as 19 local organizations participated in assorted panels, exhibits and performances that exposed a great human tragedy from all angles.

It came to a climax when the ballet that inspired this unprecedented collaborative atmosphere made its local debut at the Byham Theater Thursday night. Nearly 50 Pittsburgh Holocaust survivors of the 116 living in the Pittsburgh area attended a tribute in their honor at the Renaissance Hotel and then attended the performance, where choreographer Stephen Mills succeeded in extracting a strange beauty from a horrible tragedy.

**Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre
'Light/The Holocaust &
Humanity Project'**

When: 2 and 8 p.m. today; 2 p.m. tomorrow.

Where: Byham Theater, Downtown.

Tickets: 412-456-6666 or www.pbt.org.

But then, good art has that ability to transcend life in a number of ways. Mills obviously did his research because it was all there -- the deafening surprise of Kristallnacht, the degradation, the confinement and closed confusion of a boxcar, the abject fear, bodies being passed overhead, a forced march in the snow -- all that and more than we had expected.

The images seemed to tumble over one another, as if moving in and out of our collective memories. To Mills' credit, they were mesmerizing without taking advantage of the powerful subject material.

He accomplished this ballet about death by beginning with the Tree of Life itself as Adam and Eve (Robert Moore and Alexandra Kochis) embraced beneath it. In a celebratory dance, he established the vibrant and colorful traditions of Jewish family life. And when it was all over, Mills took time to decompress in the final section, using a more traditional ballet vocabulary that, at its best, washed over the viewer, cleansed the memories and opened the mind for renewal.

There was also a delicate thread for the audience to grasp during the intensity of middle sections, which moved from "Targets Behind Doors" and "Isolation and Degradation" to "Boxcar" and "Ashes." Mills built the ballet around a real survivor, Naomi Warren, played with a glowing intensity by Julia Erickson. Janet Popeleski was the older Warren, occasionally joining the story as if it were her memories playing out on the stage.

In one particularly poignant moment near the end, Erickson performed a solo where she periodically collapsed. Each of the other dancers in turn cradled her and helped her to her feet, but they themselves only fell by the wayside. Then Popeleski returned to walk her off stage, as if Warren, finally alone, has found her own deeply rooted strength.

Mills' choreography in that central core emanated from a landscape of emotion, but there was still a taut structural sense that tied the scenes together, enhanced by Tony Tucci's atmospheric lighting design and a fine collection of contemporary composers, including Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Arvo Part. (Part's selection from "Tabula Rasa" here ironically was also the accompaniment to one of PBT's finest commissions, a similarly titled 1986 ballet by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin.)

"Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project" also required an unwavering emotional commitment from the tight-knit cast. Each dancer wore the movement like a second skin, so as to blend into the story. As such they were able to create a series of portraits reminiscent of the Eishishok exhibit at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., where three floors of individual photos represent the 3,500 Jewish people who were killed in that small Lithuanian town.

A series of duets in the "Doors" section skillfully conveyed first reactions. In a duet with Christopher Budzynski, Joseph Parr placed his hand over his mouth to symbolize those who remained silent.

Nicholas Coppola gained a new forcefulness later in a trio with Kochis and Stephen Hadala. Elysa Hotchkiss flailed in frustration as she rose and fell and melted away. But it remained an ensemble work and relied on that to support it.

Social commentary in dance, and especially ballet, is a tricky tightrope to walk. But Mills' "Light" had the balance to deal with a forceful topic and the abstract intelligence to harness the outpouring of emotions associated with it. PBT had the courage to move along a new, more risky artistic path, the first since the 1986 "Tabula Rasa."

In the end, it was easy to be inspired by the lesson learned, symbolized by the trickle of sand at the final curtain. It signaled that time may pass, but we must still remain vigilant.

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