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ENTERTAINMENT

Dance as religious experience

An evening of dance opiates from Earle

W. HURST

If there weren't already a god, at least in the popular imagination, choreographer David Earle would have to invent one, because religiosity is a major theme in so much of Earle's work. *Exit Nightfall* and a new work *Realms*, shown last week at St. Lawrence Centre, are excellent examples of Earle's use of the liturgical motif.

Realm is a "collection of imaginary images inspired by the variety and richness" of societies in which religion is a primal experience. Using the dancers of Toronto Dance Theatre, Earle was blessed with a large group of men and women who are more technically adept than they have been in recent years. More importantly, the company's stage presence improves with each performance season.

Changing patterns and group rhythms are handled with a subtle, precise sense of stagecraft. Against a barren stage the dancers carry on

whatever props or sets they need, very cleverly. Totems with stylized animals heads on top beome tent poles and processional archways. White robes become the tent walls and shrouds. For most of its movement, *Realm* incorporates classic Graham dance technique, on which Toronto Dance Theatre is based. To see contractions, tilts and other codified movements uses as inherent aspects of the drama is rare and refreshing.

Not until the last section, *The Celebration*, does *Realm* really falter. These closing patterns and footwork are easily associated with dances of the Middle East. Heretofore, Earle had avoided any specific dance style. By including a culturally recognizable style, Earle weakens his statement of the universality of religion by becoming too theatrically specific.

Exit Nightfall, premiered in 1981, is more abstractly liturgical than *Realm* and less derivative from

cultural rituals. It also lacks the props that were occasionally obtrusive in *Realm*. the variety of music, from Bach and to commissioned work by Canadian Kirk Elliot, is exploited by Earle for its diversity but his choreography sustains ideas and mood. the dancers commit themselves to Earle's demands without any staginess. Too many companies need to exclaim their virtuosity to the audience. TDT dancers don't. They sublimate themselves to the dance as an 'experience' instead of a 'performance'.

Dance, like any art form, is a subjective medium. Personal statements are unavoidable and two of Earle's statements are open to discussion. Although he has crafted two evocative dances, David Earle's use of women is rather chauvinist. In an adversarial sequence, men tackle and drag men, men tackle and drag women. However, women never express similar physical dominance.

Although he may be reproducing historical relationships, should a choreographer be caught up in only reproducing age-old 'man over woman' power plays?

Also, the dancers are so much a group that individuals are never revealed in the choreography. The audience never learns much about the dancers as people, in *Realm* or *Exit Nightfall*. That the dancers can sublimate themselves to the creator's needs is admirable and ensures the appeal of Earle's work. However, the result is an opiate, occasionally powerful but rather dull, like religion itself.

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