

Toronto Dance Theatre: Strive for the Miraculous



By Kwame Dawes

The drama of the nativity contains a narrative that is inherently compelling as it relies on a structure that entails repetition and a ritualistic movement towards birth and hope. Mary and Joseph are on the run, they try to get a room to have this baby. They are told no repeatedly, finally they find a place and the baby is born and the fulfilment of prophecy is achieved. Medieval dramatist appreciated this feature of the nativity story and exploited it to its fullest in some of the earliest European dramas recorded. The story was often told through pageantry and in an open air setting involving the entire village community. The drama would simply become a part of the landscape of medieval Europe resulting in a drama that forms an integral part of the mythos of the community. It is this magic; this organic relationship between the drama, the myth and the community that is most distinctly absent in our attempts in this day and age to recreate the drama of the nativity in theatres. Any attempt to recreate the emotional intensity of a nativity drama requires a

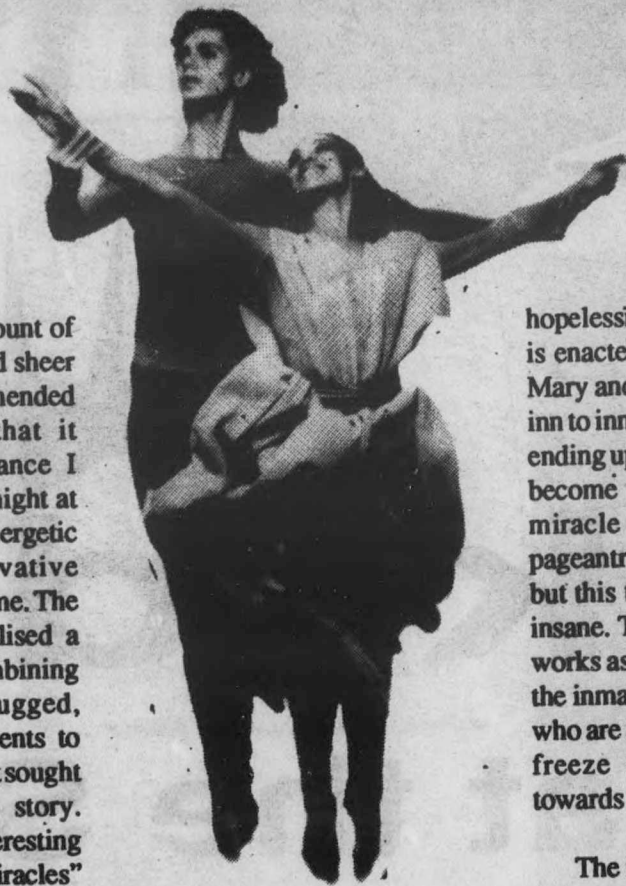
necessary exercise of faith not unlike the leap of imagination that is necessary to truly enter any dramatic piece. The most effective theatrical works that deal with the nativity are those that manage to combine the familiar with the magical.

The Toronto Dance Theatre's production "Court of Miracles" shows how difficult and virtually impossible it is to effectively evoke such emotions in a modern day audience. Quite simply, the miracle is no longer an organic part of modern society thus the pageant is at best a spectator's delight. However, this piece which features some colourful and lively choreography and which has

received a tremendous amount of praise for its originality and sheer exuberance must be commended for the valiant effort that it represents. The performance I witnessed on Wednesday night at the Playhouse was indeed energetic and displayed an innovative approach to the nativity theme. The style of choreography utilised a modern tendency of combining classic postures with rugged, almost pedestrian movements to create a series of images that sought to revitalize the nativity story. Despite its force as an interesting piece of dance, "Court of Miracles" fails in its aim at becoming a full community event in the tradition of the medieval community.

Complete with its own community of bakers, tightrope walkers, priests, rascals, beggars, merrymakers, courtesans and prisoners, the world of Medieval Europe is effectively captured in the first half of the performance. The stage is constantly filled with dancers who form crowds that watch the antics of the various personalities in the community. The dance styles vary with each grouping, from the classic symmetry of the banner dancers to the slapstick buffonery of the rascals and the merrymakers. The duet of the courtesans who get married is lyrical and sensitively executed by the dancers and contrasts well with the explosive and arrogant dance of the gypsies which is set to a very percussive soundtrack.

However, the first half of the piece is simply a pastiche of eclectic choreography whose main challenge is to see how successfully the choreographer makes interesting and meaningful use of the crowd of people on the stage during the many set pieces. Success is varied. The wonderful forestage silhouette of the dancers while the courtesan couples dance



hopelessness that the nativity story is enacted. When the tale is told-Mary and Joseph journeying from inn to inn to find a place to stay and ending up in a manger- the inmates become audience to a wonderful miracle of transformation. The pageantry of the first act is repeated but this time as an offering to the insane. The beauty of the pageant works as a miracle and transforms the inmates into robed individuals who are finally captured in the end freeze climbing an elevation towards heaven.

The intent of the piece is noble and very much inkeeping with the spirit of Christmas, however, the world that it tries to capture remains locked in fable-like images that belong to the colourful world of story books. This portrayal undercuts the potential of the piece to demonstrate the organic link between the real world and the mythic world of medieval society. The promotional package of the company describes the piece as one that "captures the romance and struggle of medieval life and celebrates the triumph of the human spirit over adversity." The intent is there, but the portrayal of adversity and the struggles of the medieval society remain couched in fairytale icons and colours. This is perhaps why, for me, the triumph of the coming of Christ and the grand pageant of celebration seems to lose its force.

This dilemma is avoided in the second half of the piece as fewer dancers remain on stage. This section of the show allows for the expression of wider range of emotions for the dancers. The portrayal of seven inmates of an asylum on Christmas Eve playing the roles of the seven deadly sins demands meatier performances from the dancers. The interaction between the inmates gives us a chance to observe the seven deadly sins at work. The postures and movements rarely succumb to cliché and ultimately, when Envy steals the sins from each character the abject hopelessness is riveting.

It is into this seemingly gloomy and abject world of sinfulness and

Despite these problems, the piece is an enjoyable romp and the use of simple stage properties; the effective use of sidelighting and lanterns and the haunting sounds of the medieval music effectively transport us into a world of colour and energy.

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This week Society will be film for this se film is the docu March, directed The film was to be a docum march of Gen. and his army during the Civ McElwee's gi