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Iona Theatre production celebrates the Divine Feminine



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--Courtesy photo

“My god is a she,” says Cheryl Flaherty, artistic director of the Iona Contemporary Dance Theatre. “I’m a vegetarian, I don’t eat things that have been killed, I don’t believe in killing, I don’t believe in war. I have a lot of really strong belief systems, and of course that comes out in my work.”

That philosophy will be presented in “La Madonna,” an Iona production that has been called a “gallery of performance artworks,” featuring elaborately presented feminine figures and a series of creative takes on an iconic concept.

“La Madonna” celebrates the Divine Feminine, an ancient concept that places woman at the center of spirituality. It was popularized in the best-selling novel and film “The Da Vinci Code,” which came out about the same time as Flaherty’s original production. When talking with her about Madonna, one can almost hear echoes of the novel.

‘LA MADONNA’

Where: former Banana Republic site, King Kalakaua Plaza, 2080 Kalakaua Ave.

When: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday, through May 13

Cost: \$35-\$40

“Madonna is left over from the goddess religions before Christianity came in, and actually the first statue or artistic rendering of a Madonna is the famous statue of Isis, the Egyptian goddess with Horus on her lap,” Flaherty says. “They say that the Christians kind of borrowed that image.”

Info: lamadonna.eventbrite.com or 262-0110

The innovative dance company first performed “La Madonna” in 2004 and has expanded it for performances starting this week.

IONA’S PRODUCTIONS are based on butoh, a Japanese style of dance that involves slow, minimal movement. In one sense, butoh movement is a reaction against traditional dance. But Flaherty said the intensity of butoh is also derived from the elevated state of self-awareness that dancers put themselves into — and hope to draw the audience into, as well.

“We’re a little slow-moving at times, and that just comes from this very high state of consciousness, almost like a moving meditation,” she says. “It’s hard to move really quickly because you’re as big as the universe with your consciousness, and when you’re close up with a dancer, our audience can feel that.

“It kind of creates a trance, and the audience kind of inhabits that realm with the dancers. That’s probably more technical than what you need to know, but it’s the tangent I’ve gone off on this morning,” she says, following up with a laugh.

The director’s off-the-cuff comment and sense of humor reflect the way Flaherty’s creativity flows from one subject to another, which is how “La Madonna” evolved after a trip to Italy that Flaherty took in 2001.

“I was stunned by all of the Madonnas everywhere,” says Flaherty, who grew up Episcopalian. “You turned the street corner, you looked in someone’s window — church after church after church (there were) all of these images of the females ... all of this reverence for the female, which I wasn’t used to.

“And then I kind of got sick of seeing Madonnas. Madonna, Madonna, Madonna. And then I started about how it would be interesting to make my own Madonnas and make them contemporary and sub out the Christ child for the earth.”

THE RESULT: 11 different depictions of the Divine Feminine.

Some had obvious references to defined cultures and mythologies, such as Kuan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy and healing, and Pandora, the naughty child who opens the box that contains all the troubles in the world.

Other Madonnas were totally from Flaherty's imagination, such as the Madonna of the Sacred Fruit, which had a woman surrounded by a "mandala" of fruit. "Mandalas are very a feminine symbol because they're circular and round," she says. "Anything circular or holistic is an attribute of the feminine."

For this year's production, Flaherty has added three new installations, including a reference to the Spanish Inquisition that involves Barbie dolls decorating a throne.

Flaherty said she wanted to bring the production back for years but didn't feel any space was appropriate, until she learned of the old Banana Republic store space in Waikiki. Its high ceiling, split-level floor space and alcoves allow a degree of separation for each installation while still retaining a sense of connection. The space was recommended by a locations manager for "Hawaii Five-0."

"The energy of the space is beautiful," Flaherty says. "The floors are all white marble, it's painted white, they have white chiffon drapes everywhere, so it has a real feminine feeling."

Audience members can wander from installation to installation or stay at one and see what unfolds. The production lasts an hour and 15 minutes, following a music track that features mostly female artists.

"It is not possible to see the whole show, unless you came 14 times," Flaherty says. "Some people may come and get locked in to one installation and not leave for a long time."

Madonna of the Sacred Fruit, for example, got a lot of attention in the 2004 production when she started feeding her audience, conveying a rather erotic message when she used a banana.

Such audience participation isn't required, Flaherty says, but if a dancer "offers you a strawberry on the tip of her knife, I'm sure you're going to want to take it."

– Steven Mark / smark@staradvertiser.com

VIDEO