

Posted on: Friday, July 27, 2007

This old house's destiny in the cards

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Chandra K. Miars dances the role of the High Priestess in the IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre performance, "The House of the Living Tarot," staged in a decrepit Nu'uuanu mansion that soon will be demolished.

Photos by DEBORAH BOOKER | The Honolulu Advertiser



Danielle Paschal plays the Empress.

'THE HOUSE OF THE LIVING TAROT'

An IONA Contemporary
Dance Theatre performance

8 p.m. Thursday-Aug. 5

\$30

2627 Pali Highway

550-8457,

www.honoluluoffice.com

The century-old, New England-style colonial on Pali Highway housing IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre's latest performance project had been abandoned for years, and showed it. Termite holes were freshly spackled shut. Its main stairwell groaned despondently with even light footsteps.

No matter. IONA artistic director and choreographer Cheryl Flaharty focused excitedly on how she and her dancers would soon give the house a kiss of mystical, ambitious and very brief life as "The House of the Living Tarot."

"This is the Lovers' room," said Flaharty, gesturing in an empty downstairs parlor. "It's going to have green vines stapled up the walls with live roses. A piano will be over there. A cupid will be playing."

We ducked our heads in another room, where guests will be fed bonbons, cakes and petits fours while a real-life incarnation of the tarot's High Priestess performs overhead to "Moon River." Upstairs, Flaharty spun the Ken-and-Barbie-doll-studded centerpiece of the Wheel of Fortune room, promising crazy carnival music. In the Earth room, massive wall-to-wall stalks of criss-crossing bamboo will be suspended over "live green grass on the floor. ... Everyone will stand and hold hands. The dancer will circle them to a piece by U2."

Heading back downstairs, Flaharty pointed through a window to a rooftop spot where an IONA dancer inhabiting the Moon would dance with a three-foot-high weather balloon. Ice pedestals and animal masks were mentioned in passing.

An interpretive and interactive exploration of the eons-old fortune-telling card deck, "Tarot" is the fourth project in IONA's Salon Series. By design, the series takes the company's highly theatrical dance performances out of a traditional theater and sets them in left-of-center realms.

Past shows in the series have been staged on Waikiki rooftops and beaches around the island. "Tarot" takes over a Nu'uau Valley home — donated gratis for the show by its owner — that will be leveled days after final curtain.

How will "Tarot" work?

Each guest enters the house and immediately receives a personal tarot reading spread over 10 cards. The order the cards are dealt determines the path through the house's 10 rooms — each of which boasts a uniquely ornate design and a tarot archetype (the Magician, the Empress, the Sun, etc.) interpreted by IONA dancers.

Each room's five-minute performance is shared with a handful of guests possessing the same card, "but you go through the show alone," said Flaharty. "You may have a couple of cards (in common) with the person that you've attended with. But this is meant to be a journey of the self."

A longtime student of tarot, Flaharty has done her own personal tarot readings each day for more than a decade. Still, IONA's "Tarot" show was primarily inspired by the house that has become its home — which Flaharty often noticed on daily Pali Highway commutes from her home in Kailua.

Flaharty began conceptualizing "Tarot" in May after securing the home from owner

Mike Irish, CEO of kim-chee bottler Halms Enterprises. The show's design continued through June while Flaharty assessed with plumbers, electricians, air-conditioning technicians and engineers the house's ability to stage "Tarot."

Much was brought in: dozens of cans of paint, a couple of five-gallon buckets of spackle, sheets of wood paneling, a dozen or so brand-new air conditioners (which will be removed and sold on eBay post-performance), for starters. Final materials and props collected by IONA dancers to create their rooms and inhabit their characters were installed this week.

Flaharty matched dancers with their tarot archetypes based on their personalities and life experiences. She also lent artistic guidance to room designs.

"Dancers are working on their own rooms so that they buy themselves (in their characters) ... and really own the room," said Flaharty. "My dancers are so talented and so strong. And I know them so well that I've been able to match them with their cards beautifully."

Flaharty said IONA would recoup its entire "Tarot" financial investment if each of its four performances sells out its 175-ticket allotment.

"We've never done anything like this. And I'll probably never do it again," said Flaharty, downstairs again in the empty parlor where tarot readers would eventually congregate. "The House of the Living Tarot' is unique in the way that it's impermanent. And that's a beautiful teaching, as well: the impermanence of life."

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