

'Blue' employs stunning stage for environment

BY CAROL EGAN

Special to *The Advertiser*

Cheryl Flaharty and her Iona Contemporary Dance Theatre have been working hard for the last few years on no smaller a theme than healing the world's oceans and environment. The initial production of "Electric Blue" was a series of community performances held at public beaches around O'ahu. Ironically, the final event, to have taken place at Kailua Beach on April 9, was canceled due to possible water and sand contamination.

DANCE REVIEW

While the beach performances dealt with, among other themes, issues of environmental pollution, resource conservation, Island self-sufficiency and the appropriation of one culture by another, the theatrical version celebrates Earth Day in an explosion of visual effects, sound and media.

As often happens with an Iona performance, there is an abundance of riches.

"Electric Blue" opens with a stunning visual — sand cascades in a pool of light. A solo dancer slowly walks around this "sand-fall," until she suddenly reaches into it and grasps a rope that she mounts like an acrobat in a circus.

The surreal vision is replaced by a woman who enters carrying a giant hourglass that she stands on and begins reciting a text about life and death. As she speaks, a procession of six men in black suits descend down the aisle and take their positions on-stage.

'ELECTRIC BLUE'

8 p.m. today, 4 p.m. tomorrow
Hawai'i Theatre
\$45-\$25
528-0506

A large segment of the dance that was performed on the beaches follows. To achieve the same luminous effect, Flaharty had 10 tons of sand imported from the Mainland. The sand arrived in bags, 56 a week for almost a year.

Bathed in a costume palette of grays, browns, blacks and whites and silhouetted against a scrim lit alternately in gray and deep blue, the lush full-bodied movements of the dancers, the architectural structure of the choreography, and the poignancy and drama of the relationships are equally captivating.

Particularly striking, just as it was when seen at the beach, is the women's dance in which the sand plays an important role, being poured, kicked up, thrown and tossed with the dynamic movements of the dancers who are falling, rolling, swinging and leaping.

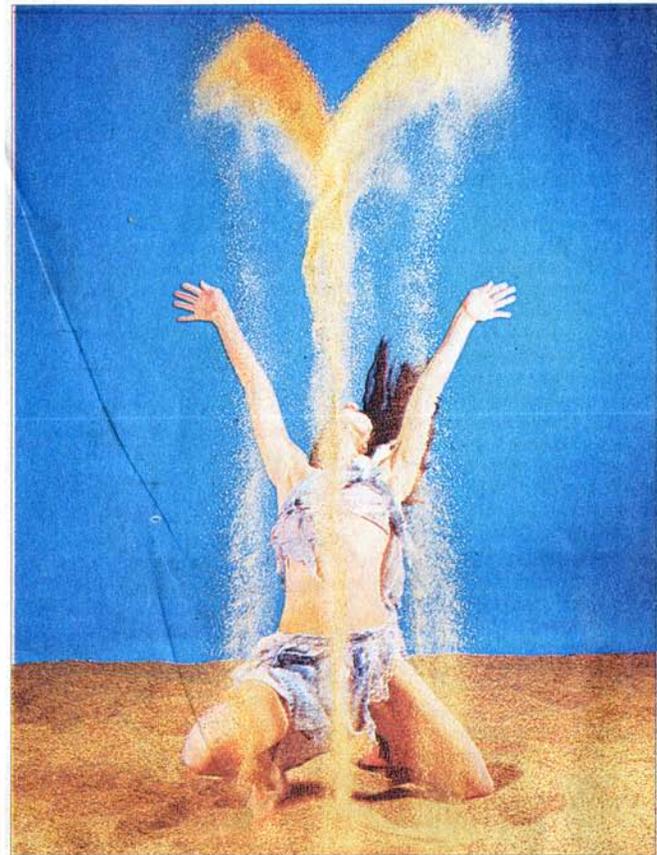
The coherence of this section of "Electric Blue," due in part to its having been tested before numerous audiences, its reliance on the dancers and effective costumes and props, does not carry through in the vignettes that follow. Some are pointedly related to environmental issues, others appear to be gratuitous.

Flaharty incorporates filmed episodes of dancers underwater and the dancers and audiences at various beach performances (beautifully filmed by Mike May and Sergio Goes), along with aerial dances, text (credited to Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Kahlil Gibran and Jeffrey Rothfeder), and music, to paint a large picture.

Although the message is a good one, the messenger is at times overwhelmed by stage technology. Yet, despite these weaknesses, "Electric Blue" offers so many outstanding moments, including a magical finale, that it comes recommended to anyone who loves theater and dance.

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CARL HEFNER

Sand cascades in a pool of light during Iona Contemporary Dance Theatre's performance of "Electric Blue" at the Hawai'i Theatre.

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Beyond the Beach

By Burl Burlingame
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You could call IONA's latest production, "Electric Blue," all wet. Moreover, one could say they're in over their heads. For once, however, this wordplay is simply descriptive.

"About four years ago, artistic director Cheryl Flaharty had a vision about creating a work that incorporated the sea as both a physical force and a spiritual presence," said Crystal Brewé, managing director of IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre. "And then the grandmother of one of the dancers died, and in the process of grieving, Cheryl was struck by the continuity of life, contrasted with the disruption of culture."

Flaharty, of course, is the wildly overtalented visionary behind IONA, a born choreographer and butoh-trained Jedi master at merging dance and spirituality. Like a sculptor, she sees the space as well as the form. An IONA production is far more than people in tights jumping around, although they do, of course, incorporate people in tights jumping around. Comes with the territory.

And so, "Electric Blue." Not the police motorcycle built by Harley-Davidson, but a performance piece that not only occurs on stage, it mandates that the dancers go to the beach and play in the sand. one could say.

Brewé intimated that "Electric Blue" uses the beach as a kind of metaphor, the cusp area between land and sea, the shadowland between life and death, the lapping interplay between cultural traditions and the march of civilization, with a healthy dose of environmental awareness thrown in. Pretty heavy stuff for playing in the sand, but IONA generally makes these things fun to absorb.

And here's the ironic IONA moment for this production -- a performance at Kailua Beach Park was canceled due to sewage runoff in the water. The ocean, the bringer of life, was too dangerous to enter.

That the Hawaii beach sand was too dangerous to use in the theater also has a measure of irony. The world premiere of the entire work -- bits have been previewed on various beaches -- relies on 10 tons of

sand imported from the mainland.

"It had to be pure and dust-free -- it pours like water at times in the piece -- and we brought it in over the last year, 56 bags a week, special-ordered through local hardware stores," said Brewé. "It fills the stage!"

The performances on the beach actually end with the performers diving into the ocean waves for a choreographed frolic. That requires a costume change, and -- clever costumery being another Flaharty/IONA signature -- makes a political point as well.

"So many cultures have been forced to turn away from their pasts. We even fly flags of forgotten kingdoms," said Brewé. "We even have mermaids who change into colonial whites."



COURTESY CARL HEFNER / IONA
Maile Baran creates a heart with a toss of sand. Baran performs in IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre's "Electric Blue," which explores spirituality in a beach setting.



COURTESY CARL HEFNER / IONA
"Electric Blue" has IONA dancers frolicking in water, sand, and, in this case, a bed. The performance runs at Hawaii Theatre.

"Electric Blue," whether presented on a sandy stage or a real beach, also features local environmental organizations. It's not by accident the work premieres on the same weekend as Earth Day 2006.

Friday, December 16, 2005

All the beach is a stage for IONA's latest piece

By Carol Egan
Special to The Advertiser

Never one to avoid a challenge, Cheryl Flaharty, artistic director of IONA Contemporary Dance Theatre, takes on the theme of healing the world's oceans as well as its cultural divides in the upcoming premiere of "Electric Blue." The first in a series of six community public beach performances takes place Saturday in Waikiki and incorporates the sunset, sand and surf as props, setting and subject.

Over the past 16 years, IONA has built a reputation based not only on its versatility and theatricality, but also on its ability to interact with audiences in a wide variety of venues, from large proscenium stages to small galleries and restaurants. No matter what venue it chooses, one can count on IONA to provide innovative work richly adorned with colorful props, costumes and imagery. IONA's efforts to inspire personal, social and spiritual growth resonate strongly with young audiences as well as other artists and the general public.

"Electric Blue" draws from mythology, incorporating the Scottish tales of selkie sirens, mysterious seal creatures who shed their skins on the sand to dance, and the more familiar Homeric account of Ulysses.

For the 12 dancers — sometimes in Victorian costume, sometimes in fur coats — the beach will become a surreal battleground, ringing with the haunting sounds of local singer/songwriter Charlotte-marie, Icelandic musician Mari Boine Persen and This Mortal Coil.

Through the use of simple props and costumes, the dancers convey powerful emotions and relationships. One short section of multiple duets contains images ranging from playful and sensual to violent and confrontational.

After a recent rehearsal on the beach, company members explained tricks they have discovered to overcome the problems of dancing on sand. Said dancer Pono Aweau: "The less contact you have (on the ground), the easier it is to move."

"The difference between performing on sand and on a stage is that everything's that much more difficult," said Darren Miller. Geneva Rivera admitted that, although she can swim, "my biggest fear is the ocean," a fear she is confronting directly through the choreography. Sand burns are not uncommon, and the problem of sinking into the sand is a real one, particularly when a partner is lifted.

Flaharty said this problem is especially prominent in a section in which the performers mount chairs. As the chairs sink deeper into the sand under the dancers' weight, they become too short and must be repositioned so the process can start again.

As with many of IONA's full-length works, "Electric Blue" is a two-year project, with the community beach performances constituting Part 1. The concept was born four years ago, and Flaharty has been slowly accumulating ideas and material along the way. Flaharty said the piece, once completed, will be performed at the Hawai'i Theatre in April.

While the community beach performances represent about one-third of the whole work, they nevertheless incorporate several major themes, particularly environmental pollution, the need to conserve resources and become more self-sufficient, and the appropriation of one culture by another. The full-length version will also include video by Sergio Goes, aerial work and a considerable amount of humor.



Performing modern dance on soft beach sand presents a host of special problems not encountered in a stage, the IONA dancers are finding out.

'ELECTRIC BLUE'

5:30-6 p.m. Saturday

Queen's Surf Beach, Waikiki, as part of Sunset on the Beach

Free admission

Also: "Electric Blue" performances are scheduled at 6 p.m. at

- Hale'iwa Beach Park, Feb. 18
- Makua Beach, Feb. 19
- Ko Olina, Lagoon 2, Feb. 25
- Waimanalo Beach Park, Feb. 26
- Kailua Beach Park (date to be announced).

The Hawai'i Theatre performances are scheduled for 8 p.m. April 21-23