

Review

DVD

Byron McKim. *Dancing with Spirit.*

Soaring Heart Pictures, Burlington, Ontario.

www.soaringheartpictures.com.

It gives me great pleasure to offer a review of an item in a genre unlikely to have appeared in this magazine. Dance. And not just dance, but modern dance, the contemporary evolutionary stage of ballet. And not just modern dance, but modern dance as performed by professional dancers from First Nations.

The product under review is a video in six episodes entitled “Dancing with Spirit: An Aboriginal Dance Series”, produced by Soaring Heart Pictures. It first appeared on the Bravo Network, which commissioned the work. Now the entire series is available in a two-disc DVD package, purchased through Soaring Heart Pictures at their website.

Each episode is beautifully photographed by James Sainthill and skilfully directed by either Bryan McKim or Brad Smith. The entire production is a visual tour-de-force of outdoor locations, many in remote places of breath-taking scenery. For example, those of you with memories of Wanuskewin Park just outside of Saskatoon will be very pleased to see it again, in the best light possible. For those of you new to the park, suffice it to say it has a wondrous prairie ambiance and is rich in First Nations history with its Buffalo Jump and Interpretative Centre.

The one startling exception to the gallery of scenic wonders is *Triptych*, which is set in the mean streets of urban anywhere. In this lone case, the camera performs other kinds of magic as it switches from blurry black-and-white, pseudo-archival (or perhaps dream-like) footage, to modern colour format (and its symbolic representation of the present). In all the episodes, multiple cameras are used to create contrasting points of view in a very sophisticated web of edited excerpts. The music, freshly composed for five of the six episodes, is mainly atmospheric, employing electronic resources with an occasional orchestral string instrument and native flute added for good measure. Nowhere except in episode 2 are traditional musical sounds or rhythms systematically employed.

And what of the six themes? All the classic struggles and dreams of First Nations people are explored, from the deep attachment to natural landscape, to the corrosive effects of dislocation and the uprootedness of spiritual desolation. The dances range from mime to pure interpretative dance, each in

their own way re-enacting the essential nature of First Nations storytelling. Iroquoian, Cree and Inuit are represented by dance-makers from Montreal to Iqaluit. The dances feature all the techniques of physical tension, release and travel that are common to modern dance, along with some First Nations traditional dance gestures. And, true to modern dance, the First Nations dancers dance “through and around” the beat (if one exists), never with the beat, as in traditional First Nations dance.

The mimetic episodes are found in the Inuit adventure *The Hunter’s Journey* (created by Sylvia Ipirautaq Cloutier) and the Iroquoian myth-story *Here on Earth* (created by Santee Smith). In the former, the most mime-like of the series, a traditional hunter’s life and dreams are seen to be inextricably wound together with his wife, while in the latter performance, two men and two women act out an Iroquoian Creation Story against a vast cliff wall of limestone and its nearby grassy slopes and lake. The dancers, presumably representing the first “sky people”, figuratively descend to earth by slowly climbing down metal latticework pillars. They then dance dramas of interaction in single, duple and quartet configurations, finally returning to the sky by slowly ascending the same pillars from which they arrived. I wondered if the dance replicates one of the stories of the Woman Who Fell from the Sky, this one featuring her daughter, and her daughter’s twin sons.

Purely interpretative dance episodes include *Manitowapan* (created by Gaétan Gingras), a complex engagement of a man, a woman and unstated myths represented by two masks (owl and old woman) and a slowly turning, narrow, circular platform. Given the crucial importance of False Face and other masks among the Haudenosaunee (Iroquoian) Confederation, the presence of the masks makes this dance sequence especially significant. *Passage* (created by Christine Friday-O’Leary) features one lone female dancer positioned on the edge of a lake, surrounded by a dense, pristine sub-boreal forest. In her vigorous, even explosive, movements, the dancer performs a kaleidoscope of moods with gestures derived from modern dance, aboriginal traditional dance, and even pop dance references such as the group zombie sequence in Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. Occasionally she is assisted by a male, and in the final moments of the episode she and her male partner dance around a blazing log fire in the gentle light of dusk, misted with rain. She reverts to a powwow shawl dance while her male partner performs a powwow traditional dance, perhaps signifying a re-

turn to one's roots, or maybe a defiant statement from the two dancers expressing the fact that they are comfortable and accomplished in both worlds.

Tryptych (created by Michael Greyeyes) is unique among the six episodes in its depiction of dark places in the soul. We witness the struggles of an aboriginal man, John Prophet, as he falls prey to drifters and low-lifers in a garbage-strewn alley under an omnipresent traffic overpass, the uncaring elevated right-of-way of modern times, unaware and oblivious of the desperation below. Within minutes, we discover that he is wrestling with past demons that haunt him from his youthful years in a residential home run by Roman Catholic nuns and a priest. As silent figures press fingers against pursed mouths to silence the viewer, John seems to be sexually abused by the priest, making his mentally addled state even more tragic, and the wordless demand for silence horrific. At one point, John scribbles furiously in a notebook, perhaps to expiate his burden, and as the camera looks over his shoulder, we see that he is writing in the Cree orthography, ironically the legacy of a Christian missionary, James Evans, *circa* 1840. And what are we to make of the mysterious title, which suggests a painting in three parts? That question could be the beginning of a great discussion about the meaning of the many conflicted scenes. Ultimately the significance of the episode is summed up by its accompanying note – “Dedicated to those with the courage to look back.”

Episode number 3, *Paskwawiyowak*, takes place on the rippling grass hills of Wanuskewin Park and is a radical departure from the modern dance of the other five episodes. It is a vivid portrayal of powwow dances (directed by Tyrone Tootoosis), with music provided off-screen by one of the pre-eminent drum groups of Canada, Northern Cree.¹ The first dance is an unusual, simultaneous performance of several men's powwow dances (a Grass Dance, Traditional Dance and Fancy Dance) performed by eight men over the length of eight “push-ups” (repetitions). This stationary “grand entry” is followed by excerpts of each of the men's genres of dance mentioned above, and an inspired Jingle Dance performed by two young women. The look of repose on the women's faces as they work through the long and exhausting dance is a beautiful sight to behold. Between each of the dance excerpts, an elder appears briefly, providing a few words of reflection, or sometimes a silent but reassuring presence, as if he is a mentor bringing encouragement and approval. The powwow drumming during the opening scene, performed as the grandfather elder appears for the first time, is startling because it has no singing during its performance. It is a rare opportunity to appreciate the performance elements of drumming, such as the hon-

our beats and vivid dynamic contrasts, completely separate from the vocal line.

The list of principal dancers and creators in the series reads like a who's who of Canadian aboriginal modern dance performers—Gaetan Gingras (Haudenosaunee/Mohawk), Christine Friday-O'Leary (Anishinaabe), Santee Smith (Haudenosaunee/ Mohawk), Michael Greyeyes (Cree), each with their own websites. Sylvia Ipirautaq Cloutier (Inuit) works in the context of the Ottawa performance ensemble, Aqsarniit, and Tyrone Tootoosis (Cree) is the Group Leader of the Great Plains Indian Dance Ensemble.

This DVD series is likely a beneficiary, either directly or indirectly, of the ground-breaking work done by the 50-plus aboriginal dance centres and soloists identified in the 2003 report of the Canada Council for the Arts entitled *Findings from the Survey with Aboriginal Dance Groups and Artists in Canada*. One of the more prominent names is the Native Earth Performing Arts society in Toronto (founded in 1982). The NEPA singled out dance for its attention when it initiated its Weesageechak Festival in 1989.² Another prominent group is the Chinook Winds Aboriginal Dance Project, founded in 1996 within the Aboriginal Arts Project (1993-to present) of the Banff Centre for the Arts.³

An eloquent description of the cultural work of the Chinook Winds dance program is found in the self-titled booklet *Chinook Winds Aboriginal Dance Project*, edited by Heather Elton with Paul Seesequasis and Florence Belmore (Banff Centre Press, 1997).⁴ Marrie Mumford (page 110), a previous director of the Aboriginal Arts Program, makes an interesting statement of her personal vision of the program in which she says, “The program has reaffirmed its original mandate to frame our activities within indigenous world views, (while) resisting pressures from dominant theories and cultures”.⁵ This is a fascinating point of view, given that the aboriginal modern dance program operates side by side with the Banff Centre's famous ballet program, founded in 1947. The ballet division has attracted hundreds of advanced young ballet dancers and a faculty of brilliant teachers from around the world. They immerse themselves in an intense regimen of training in classical ballet and modern dance while living in residence so their dance experiences are highly enriched and 24/7. The ballet and AAP dancers share the same living and working spaces, so the likelihood of cross-pollination is very strong.

Now, I know that the CSTM is not the CSTMD, the Canadian Society for Traditional Music *and* Dance. In fact, dance studies in Canada are well served by the CSDS/SECD, the Canadian Society of Dance Studies/Société des études canadiennes en danse. But I believe that when we in the CSTM sys-

tematically ignore the performance art of movement that is the twin sister of music, we do so at our peril. Where would trad music be without trad dance and its jigs, reels, and polkas? I know that the CSTM has had the benefit of occasional papers on music and movement, such as several excellent presentations on step-dancing that have been featured at our Annual General Meetings. But in general, we seem to reflect the general neglect of dance common in academic music circles.

Being blind to the study of dance begs many questions like the following: "Is it possible to study, play and teach the music of traditional dances with any authority or insight if the musician has no visceral, corporeal knowledge that comes from dancing them, or at least describing the patterns and sensations of their movement?" Of course, we know of countless Western Art Musicians who perform, for example, waltzes without having the faintest idea of the physical movement of a box step. But does the ignorance of the kinetic intelligence of the dance fundamentally deny the performer the central experience of the music, even if the listener is satisfied with the performer's end product? It seems rather like singing phonetically in a foreign language, without knowing the meaning and intent of the words.

I see a grand canyon between the study of music and the study of dance. For example, where is the dance literature in a university library (usually catalogued according to the LC Library of Congress system)? Not in the music library, where the Ms (music), MLs (music literature), and MTs (music tutorials) are lined up, row upon row. No, they are in the GV section, alongside circus entertainments and books for use by the Department of Kinetics (once known as Physical Education). And who taught you square dance in high school? Not the band teacher, or the choral instructor. It was the physical education teacher. Volleyball last week, square dance this week, usually to the sound of scratchy old LPs, never the school's band, orchestra or swing band.

I will accede that a review of a dance publication is barely tenable in this journal devoted to traditional music, so I will pull forward a second excuse. My review focuses on one of the expressive arts of Canadian First Nations, an abiding and consuming topic of interest in our circle, and rightfully so. However, I grant that this dance video under review is a form of modern dance and is therefore a potentially baffling experience for some. Bodily gestures are coded according to the norms of modern physical expression developed for the purposes of the stage, usually acted out as an interpretative mirror of newly composed music. If the viewer is intimidated by modern dance in general, a book like *Basic Concepts in Modern Dance: A Creative Approach* by Gay Cheney would

be a tremendous advantage. At the other end of the spectrum are the theoretical writings of Janet Adshad and Susan Foster, the leading lights in the application of critical theory to art dance.⁶

Be that as it may, if you should find yourself curious about this brave new world of aboriginal modern dance, thanks to my review and your subsequent viewing of the videos, you could do no better than to read *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* by Jacqueline Shea Murphy. The author singles out dance as one of the prime icons of aboriginal culture in North America, acknowledged by Natives and non-Natives alike. Her sweeping view of indigenous dance in the United States, with frequent excursions across the border to Canada, begins with the wretched prohibitions against First Nations dance in the nineteenth century and the unlikely exception provided by Bill Cody's Wild West Show, through to the freely interpreted indigenous dances performed by non-Native modern dance pioneers like Martha Graham and other modernists. These chapters are then followed by the stories of the brilliant Native American ballerinas, sisters Marjorie and Maria Tallchief (first wife of George Balanchine), and then today's gifted aboriginal dancers. Canadians can take pride in René Highway (1954-90), brother of the playwright and novelist Tomson Highway, and a bright light on the Canadian dance horizon extinguished far too soon. His early life in Winnipeg partly consisted of sneaking into rehearsals and concerts of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, lest his buddies see him. René Highway is our very own Billy Elliot, waiting for a movie treatment.

The world of ballet and its modern dance offspring are under severe attack. At least, that's the opinion of a very influential author named Jennifer Homans. Speaking as an insider with an impressive resumé as ballet dancer and national media critic, she recently published an article in *The New Republic* (October 13, 2010) entitled "Is Ballet Over?", in which she outlines her theory that art dance is in a state of near collapse.⁷ "Contemporary choreography veers aimlessly from unimaginative imitation to strident innovation usually in the form of gymnastics or melodramatic excess, accentuated by unimaginative lighting and special effects. This taste for unthinking athleticism and dense thicket of steps, for spectacle and sentiment, is not the final cry of an artistic era; it represents a collapse of confidence and a generation ill at ease with itself and uncertain of its relationship to the past." The article has mightily stirred the pot, with dance animators like Karen Kain responding to her criticisms on CBC talk shows.⁸ I fear that aboriginal modern dancers will be swept up in this tide of engulfing self-doubt and withering protestations.

Along with my strongest recommendation to see and even purchase these videos, I would like to leave you with two quotes. The first comes from Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947), the deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, and coincidentally a poet of great note, often called one of the pre-eminent Confederation Poets. Mr. Scott is a Canadian enigma, complex and troubling because of his two pursuits that travelled down very different roads. On the one hand, his poetry encapsulated Canada at the turn of the previous century, and on the other hand, he was the bane of Canadian aboriginal peoples, making him one of the *Beaver* magazine's "most contemptible Canadians." It was he who declared in 1913 that "it has always been clear to me that the Indians must have some sort of recreation, and if our agents would endeavour to substitute reasonable amusements for this senseless drumming and dancing, it would be a great assistance." Against such terrible animosity and ignorance imposed by the Scotts of the day, Canada's indigenous people continued to dance, a testament to human resilience and First Nations resolve.

The second quote comes from Isadora Duncan; "If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it." As we study the music and culture of First Nations, I think we should embrace Duncan's point of view.

Norman Stanfield, Vancouver, B.C.

Bibliography

Anonymous. *Findings from the Survey with Aboriginal Dance Groups and Artists in Canada* (Canada Council for the Arts, 2003).

- Cheney, Gay. *Basic Concepts in Modern Dance: A Creative Approach* (Dance Horizons Books, Princeton Book Company, 1989).
- Doolittle, Lisa, and Anne Flynnne, eds. *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture* (Banff Centre Press, 2000).
- Elton, Heather, ed., with Paul Seesequasis and Florence Belmore. *Chinook Winds Aboriginal Dance Project* (Banff Centre Press, 1997).
- Ferguson, Will. "Duncan Campbell Scott: Canada's Rhyming Racist," p. 37, in "Canada's Hall of Infamy", written by David Bercuson, Michael Bliss, Graham Broad, Margaret Conrad, et al., in *The Beaver*; volume 87, number 4 (Aug/Sep 2007) CBCA Reference and Current Events, pp. 31-37.
- Heth, Charlotte. *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions* (National Museum of the American Indian and Fulcrum Group Publishing, 1993).
- Homans, Jennifer. *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (Random House, 2010).
- Jackson, Naomi M. "Dance Analysis in the publications of Janet Adshead and Susan Foster," in *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, volume 12, number 1 (Summer, 1994), pp. 3-11.
- Jackson, Naomi M, ed. *Right to Dance: Dancing to Rights* (Banff Centre Press, 2004).
- Livingston, Lili Cockerille. *American Indian Ballerinas* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1997)
- Murphy, Jacqueline Shea. *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- Titley, E. Brian. *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (University of British Columbia Press, 1986).
- Tallchief, Maria with Larry Kaplan. *Maria Tallchief – America's Prima Ballerina* (Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

Notes:

¹ *Stay Red: Pow-wow Songs Recorded Live at Pullman*. Canyon Records, CR-6406 (2006).

² The Centre for Indigenous Theatre, founded much earlier, in 1974, seems to concentrate its efforts on theatrical productions. The CIT and NEPA were both founded well before the more famous AIDT American Indian Dance Theatre, which was begun in 1987 and is currently based in Los Angeles.

³ Sandra Laronde is the current artistic director (2008-present) of the AAP and is also the artistic director of a modern First Nations dance company named Red Sky, resident in New Westminster, B.C.

⁴ Other interesting books about modern dance, including aboriginal choreographies and productions, that have emerged from the Banff Centre Press are two collections of essays entitled *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture* (2000), edited by Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynnne, and *Right to Dance: Dancing to Rights*, edited by Naomi M. Jackson (2004).

⁵ Marrie Mumford is now the director of a new performance theatre at Trent University called Nozhem: First Peoples' Performance Space.

⁶ Naomi Jackson, "Dance Analysis in the Publications of Janet Adshead and Susan Foster," in *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, volume 12, number 1 (Summer, 1994), pp. 3-11.

⁷ The article is the epilogue of her magnum opus, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York, NY, USA: Random House, 2010)

⁸ Google CBC radio, Q, debates: "Is Ballet Over?", first aired on October 21, 2010.