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A LAYERED TREAT OF SOUND, LIGHT, MOVING IMAGES

By Terry Byrne, Globe Correspondent | May 4, 2007



In the opening scene of the world premiere of "Denizen," Kinodance Company's contribution to the Boston Cyberarts Festival, two dancers wander the stage moving in unison -- arching their backs, reaching up in supplication, spinning and searching for a place to rest. To the sound of a bouzouki playing in a mournful minor key, the fluid choreography is hauntingly beautiful, filled with wonder and longing.

This opening sets the tone of exploration for the stunning "Denizen," which then takes us into Armenia, a land of song and sheep, community and culture. An homage to the 1975 film "Seasons," by Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Peleshian,

"Denizen" integrates film, a scenic design, and especially lighting into the dance to create a theatrical experience with enormous dramatic impact.

As we travel into Armenia, filmmaker Alla Kovgan projects images of rural Armenia, from herds on a hillside to conversations around a haystack. At first, the images, projected behind and sometimes on the dancers, appear through a narrow lens, as if the audience is secretly observing this landscape. But then the lens opens and we are drawn into this world, losing the sense of a film screen's frame and feeling part of the flow of movement among the dancers .

Peleshian's film observed the Armenian connection to the land as well as the tension that created. Kovgan's images celebrate the country's ancient history with dance sequences filmed in an abandoned monastery, among a herd of sheep, and in a bucolic meadow, but they also capture images of loss and struggle.

Choreographers Ingrid Schatz and Alissa Cardone place the dancers -- Ruth Bronwen, DeAnna Pellecchia, Pape N'Diaye, and themselves -- onstage in various combinations, sometimes without the film, sometimes in the midst of the film action. The result is a breathtaking synthesis of live and filmed dance, with the dancers onstage complimenting and competing with the images of the dancers on the screen. N'Diaye, a dancer from West Africa, incorporates his own energetic dance style and a song sung in Wolof (the language of Senegal) into the piece.

Lighting designer Kathy Couch makes the lighting a performer in its own right, projecting the dancers' shadows onto the screen in tandem with the filmed dancers, making red-orange flames lick a dancer onstage while the images of fire rage behind her. Set designer Dedalus Wainwright has created a backdrop of woven strips (a wonderful metaphor for this production) that allow light to pass through in dramatic ways, while an abstract sculpture suggests haystacks in the Armenian fields. The backdrop also blurs the edges of the film frame, making the images spill out onto the stage so that the merging of two different pieces of media is surprisingly seamless.

The final element of "Denizen" is the musical score, a mix of Armenian tunes, Russian compositions, plaintive piano, original music, and found sounds (breathing, snatches of song, a crackling fire) for a rich aural landscape, put together by Andy Bergman.

The layering of emotionally potent choreography, exotic imagery, sounds, and staging add up to a daring and dramatically theatrical experience.