

Comfort's dances have style of the cineplex

December 4, 2004

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If Jane Comfort were not a choreographer, it's a good bet she'd be a filmmaker. And it's not just that she is a highly skilled storyteller capable of weaving strange, compelling narratives and creating characters with sharply conflicting emotions. It has much more to do with the way she uses light, sound effects, music and motion (as opposed to just "steps"). Her approach is cinematic.

Consider the two richly imagined works -- "Persephone" and "Underground River" -- being performed at the Dance Center of Columbia College by her New York-based troupe, Jane Comfort and Company. These exceptionally intriguing dances are about change, loss, isolation and the strange sensations of dislocation -- of being removed from one's self, and even from the Earth. And in each, the movement suggests shifts in time and physical sensation in the subtlest, most surprising ways.

"Persephone" is Comfort's newest work -- an interpretation of the ancient Greek myth about the origin of the seasons. The title character (danced by with a fine sense of wonderment by Cynthia Bueschel Svigals) is the innocent daughter of Demeter, goddess of agriculture (the formidable actress-dancer Aleta Hayes) and she is seduced by the god of the underworld, Hades (the small, intense, wholly charismatic Olasebikan Freeman), and taken from her mother.

Driven almost mad by the loss of her daughter, Demeter destroys the once abundant fields of Earth (a riveting scene in which long strips of tape are violently ripped from the floor as if they were rows of crops, and the white floor covering itself is ritualistically folded).

Meanwhile, Persephone journeys down into the underworld with Hades (with gracefully acrobatic moves that have an almost Alice in Wonderland-like disorientation). And she eventually sleeps with him in a profoundly erotic evocation of sexual awakening.

This work, Comfort's newest, unfolds in three "scenes." One beautifully suggests the childlike innocence of Persephone's existence before the abduction, when she clings to her mother and frolics in the fields with her companions (Jessica Anthony, Lisa Niedermeyer, Peter Sciscioli and Darrin Michael Wright). Then comes her upended journey into a subtly neon-lit Hades with choreography that captures the curious and disturbing initial chemistry between Persephone and Hades, and later their tempestuous passion as they consummate their "marriage" in a series of breathtakingly sensual duets.

But that isn't all: When Persephone begins to hear the mournful, desperate cries of her mother, she is still distracted by her passion for Hades. And when she finally returns to Earth, you can sense she is happy to visit but also anxious to return to her lover.

Tigger Benford's lovely East Asian score, Keith Sonnier's set, David Ferri's lighting and Liz Prince's white, draped, neo-Greek costumes all add to the effect.

"Underground River," created in 1998, is every bit as mesmerizing in its conjuring of "altered states." In this case the focus of the piece is Karen, a young woman who has fallen into a coma and whose parents, friends and physician are all trying to break through to her.

Sound depressing? Not at all. It's an absolutely glorious exploration of the conscious and unconscious minds, full of humor and whimsical touches as well as an underlying sadness.

As the voices of her visitors play on tape, Karen dances -- embodied by a quartet that includes the very charming Anthony, along with Sciscioli, Svigals and Hayes. In one irresistible sequence she becomes a tiny, wonderfully expressive stick puppet made of umbrella spokes and rags (a marvelous little creature created by puppeteer Basil Twist). In another you sense her resistance to therapy.

Both pieces take a few minutes to wind up and take off. But once they fly it's quite a ride.