

Review: Images, dance meld in Great Northern Festival performance

Ashwini Ramaswamy spearheaded the choreography.

By Sheila Regan Special to the Star Tribune

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Choreographer Ashwini Ramaswamy brought together a team of dancers and choreographers for "Invisible Cities," part of the Great Northern Festival.

Italo Calvino's experimental novel "Invisible Cities" made the conceptual framework for a lush new multimedia adaptation at the Cowles Center last weekend. Spearheaded by choreographer Ashwini Ramaswamy and visual artist Kevork Mourad, Cowles and the Northrop co-presented it as part of the Great Northern Festival.

In the novel, Marco Polo describes his travels to fictional places to Kublai Khan. His descriptions become fodder for philosophical discussions between the two characters. "Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice," Polo tells Khan, referring to his hometown.

Ramaswamy drew on the tradition of Bharatanatyam, the classical dance form from South India, and brought together a team of both dancers and choreographers for the work. Working with her mother and sister — Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy — as well as

choreographers Berit Ahlgren, Alanna Morris and Joseph Tran, the piece sought points of connection with other dance styles.

Both Ahlgren and Morris previously worked with Ramaswamy on "Let the Crows Come," in 2019. That work was commissioned by the Liquid Music Series, which, like the Great Northern, is run by Kate Nordstrum. Nordstrum has an incredible knack for bringing together artists in collaboration. With this latest piece, pairing Ramaswamy and Mourad resulted in a compelling, vivid work.

Mourad's smoky, layered visuals, projected behind the dancers and onto a scrim at the front of the stage— had an ancient quality that blurred and morphed and was always on the move.

Drawing on imagery from the book— a chess set, an hourglass, a number of different mysterious doorways, for example, Mourad captured the wonder of Calvino's notion of voyaging. Immensely cinematic, the projections would zoom into secret passageways and blur into abstract figures. The layered drawings brought the audience on a journey of discovery.

The choreography also captured a sense of travel. The dancers could be seen crawling over each other, or moving as if from city to city.

In "Let the Crows Come," Morris and Ahlgren translated gestures from Ramaswamy's choreography and transformed them into their own movements. "Invisible Cities" took that process further, integrating the forms more cohesively and adding Tran's dazzling breaking style as well as Aparna and Raneer Ramaswamy's masterful Bharatanatyam skill to the mix.

Often certain phrases and movements repeated across those sections, interpreted by each choreographer through their own vocabulary. Ahlgren, for instance, drew on her background in Gaga, the dance invented by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, while Morris' work mixed modern, contemporary and West African traditions. The piece especially came alive when the different groupings were woven together, creating a quilt of varied textures. The styles didn't feel disparate, but rather melded and blurred together in delicious cohesion.

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