



Flash Review, 4-8: WYSIWYG 'Opus' Momix: Is that all there is?

By Aimee Ts'ao

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BERKELEY -- April 5, another Saturday night, another dance performance at Zellerbach Hall. Forewarned by my editor, at least I wasn't disappointed as I had gone with no expectations. The work, "Opus Cactus" performed by MOMIX, is very relevant to our current cultural situation. It reveals more by what is missing than what is there. This company, under the direction of Moses Pendleton, has been around for more than 20 years and has perfected its presentation. Its dancers have ungodly strength and can do things I could barely imagine possible and yet, they are not credited individually on the program for each section/dance. The amazing visual effects are nothing more than that, tricks and gimmicks. Often very beautiful, in fact, rather stunning, they exist with the merest pretense of context. It is entertainment pure and simple. For those of us who like our dance to express something about human experience, qualities or, heaven forbid, emotions, we won't find it here. Not even a good abstraction of an idea.

My frustration lies in that so much talent and work has gone into the production; the lighting, costumes and sets, the precision of the ensemble are all on the highest level, yet it seems like a vaudeville show, one act after another, especially in the second half, when the curtain comes down after each segment. For me, all the technical aspects should be contributing to a larger picture, not just for the sake of themselves. It is like a painter who mixes incredible colors --

translucent, opalescent, vibrating, deep or rich hues, that move you by their sheer brilliance, subtlety, complexity or saturation. But then he paints a single square on a canvas and places it next to another one of a different single color. What about using those gorgeous colors to paint a picture, combine them in some unique way that has its own architecture, composition, not necessarily a figurative picture, but using the juxtaposition of those colors in various shapes and textures to stimulate the viewer to think beyond the surface of what is seen? That is what art is supposed to do.

"Opus Cactus" has a general theme, the desert, but why aren't the bird and the tumbleweed on stage at the same time, or why isn't there some interaction between the men dancing with the poles and the scorpion? The woman in the hammock which turns out to be a bungee sling could be used as the starting point, as she falls asleep after her restless tossing and turning to dream about all the life forms in the desert and how they relate to each other. I even envisioned telling some of the Native American tales about Coyote, the archetypal trickster.

This piece is symptomatic of the malaise that afflicts popular culture in the United States today. There is no depth. In computer jargon, WYSIWYG, what you see is what you get. All the glitz and glamor, but no guts. Peggy Lee meant something when she sang, "Is that all there is?" And I ask MOMIX and Pendleton the same question, but expecting more than a rhetorical answer.

Opus Cactus was conceived and directed by Moses Pendleton, assisted by Cynthia Quinn, Kori Darling, Brian Sanders, Craig Berman, Amthaymany Keohavong, Nicole Loizides, Jane'l Caropolo, Kara Oculato, Brian Simerson, Michael Holdsworth, and the Ballet Arizona. It was performed in Berkeley by Caropolo, Loizides, Jennifer Black, Todd Burnsed, John Corsa, Kevin Gibbs, Sara Kappraff, Ari Loeb, Natali Lomonte, Heather Magee, Tim Melady, and Jesse Robb.