

Friday, August 27, 2004



[WEEKEND]



IONA CONTEMPORARY DANCE THEATRE
Maile Baran as the Goddess of Forbidden Fruit.

Reclaiming Goddess

"La Madonna" is a multi-media Iona Salon Series

by john berger
iberger@starbulletin.com

Christians are, by tradition, extremely wary of goddesses and all the temptations of Eve. After all, "everybody" knows that God is the ultimate Alpha-Male, and that Jesus is the Son of God, and therefore unquestionably masculine, even if we choose not think of Him as ever having had any type of sex life while He existed on Earth in physical form. Satan, too, for that matter, is traditionally portrayed as being of masculine gender.

To the extent that goddesses might represent pre-Christian mystery cults, or sexuality in any form (other than the act of procreation between man and wife), they were something to be viewed with fear and loathing.

It is perhaps the antithesis of this traditional masculine perspective that Cheryl Flaharty, artistic director of the Iona Contemporary Dance Theatre, is seeking to celebrate "La Madonna: Reclaiming the Goddess," an interactive multi-media installation performance that opens tonight at Studio 1 downtown.

"It's a concept I came up with about three years ago when I was traveling in Italy," Flaharty explained. She describes installation art as art that goes beyond the conventional forms of painting and sculpture, and says that "La Madonna," the first in a new "Iona Salon Series," combines art with dance, characterization and music.

The intent is "bringing the female into the light and out of the darkness."

"I grew up in a Western Episcopalian religion (and) we honored the man on the cross, and I was just taken by this glorious worship of the female form (in Italy). The Madonna of the rock, Madonna with the book ... all the different Madonnas with all the different things they're holding and all of that symbolism."

Flaharty adds that she isn't necessarily pushing an agenda but just responding to changing perceptions of the concept of the goddess, in Western society anyway.

'La Madonna: Reclaiming the Goddess'

Presented by Iona Contemporary Dance Theatre

Where: Studio 1 Art Gallery, 1 N. King St.

When: 8 p.m. today and tomorrow, and 7 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$16, available at the Hawaii Theatre box office or at www.hawaiitheatre.com

Call: 528-0506



CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARBULLETIN.COM

Danielle Paschal portrays Kwan Yin in Iona Contemporary Dance Theatre's "La Madonna: Reclaiming the Goddess." The show focuses on female divinity.

"I'm just tuning in to what is going on and creating my art, and it happens to be making a statement about what is going on. The whole punishment of the feminine and the nastiness of the feminine, that's all shifting in the world right now. When you look at a book like 'The Da Vinci Code' that's hitting the best-seller lists, and what that book is talking about, it's something that's happening in our society and in our world today."

Starting with the concept of the Madonna in Italian culture, Flaharty explores other traditions of female divinity in Western and non-Western culture in her piece.

"It's just taken off from there to include even Asian goddesses and deities, and wanting to bring the female back into spiritual honor in the world, and starting to honor the feminine form. That's why I call it 'Reclaiming the Goddess' (since) I grew up with a male God. I want to change that male-punishing God into a female-nurturing, loving goddess."

MEMBERS OF her dance company will portray figures Flaharty describes as "contemporary Madonnas." Some will perform on thrones or pedestals, while others will be positioned to directly interact with members of the audience.

One such piece is "Madonna of the Sacred Fruit," where the dancer feeds fruit freshly cut with a butcher's knife to the audience. She'll also have a chalice filled with chocolate syrup that will be offered to people.

The audience can also interact with a dancer representing Chinese goddess Kwan Yin in "Kwan Yin Goes to Hollywood."



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Danielle Paschal as Kwan Yin in a new show by Iona Dance Company.

"Around her are men's shoe prints, like you stand in when you get your passport photo taken. Above them is written a little phrase about compassion and some of the things that the goddess embodies. She has a bottle of sacred water, as Kwan Yin does traditionally, and she blesses the people who stand in the footprints."

There will be 11 different installations for the audience to experience during the 75-minute performance. There is no designated sequence for encountering the different goddesses, and participation is optional.

"We've got sacred, sexy, fruity (and) another one has a washbucket full of milk. They are all different things that are off-shoots of that title of 'La Madonna' and where that (concept) went for me artistically. There's music playing the whole time, and the dancers are dancing -- some of them 'dancier' than others, some of them more minimalistic."

Flaharty rates it as one of her best shows ever, something she doesn't say often.

"I'm thrilled by it. I think it's so unique, and so unique for Hawaii also. We just don't have this kind of performance art scene here. It takes performance out of the proscenium and (puts people) one foot from the performer."

The presentation is also a challenge for Flaharty's dancers.

"I'm really pleased with the level of focus and concentration that they're working at, that they HAVE to be working at, in order to look someone in the eye ... without breaking their concentration and focus, and trying to be that goddess that whole time."

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