

ALITHA MIME THEATRE WOWS WICHITA

It takes immense creativity to choreograph mime pieces, tremendous athleticism to perform them, and total commitment to portray the gamut of human emotions expressed. Alithea (Greek for “truth”) Mime Theatre, the mime troupe that performed at Wichita’s Orpheum Centre, Friday, January 24, displayed those qualities in abundance. It was founded 19 years ago in Wichita by its artistic director Nicholas Johnson, director of dance at Wichita State University, and is co-directed by his wife, Sabrina Vasquez, the troupe’s associate artistic director.

The performance was featured in the Sunday, January 18, Wichita Eagle under the headline, “Alithea mimes decide it’s Wichita’s time.” The group has performed internationally since its founding, but not until now has it expected to find acceptance in North America, wrote Eagle correspondent Bob Curtwright. Johnson attributed this lack of appreciation to American performers who have not invested the work needed to create mime’s “magic and wonder,” qualities dependent on “real control, a physical suspension of your body rather than the relaxed posture of a regular actor.”

The Orpheum was proud to present the troupe’s debut in Wichita, which attracted an unexpected crowd, with purchasers of tickets at the door causing a 30-minute delay in the start of the program so that everyone could be seated.

Nearly all of the nine works at Friday’s performance, which except for one were choreographed by Johnson, evoked wonder, hilarity, or tenderness. The comic pieces were well done though not altogether unique in type. Much modern dance employs dancers trained in a wide range of theater arts, including gymnastics, improvisation, and movie stunt performing. A modern dance company can combine serious commentary with wit and whimsy, and a given choreographer is as likely to push the limits of the avant-garde as to restage a classic. Modern dance may use minimal sets and props or build fantastic equipment invented for a particular work.

Several of the Alitheia pieces included effects typical of modern dance and struck me as inventive and well done, but not remarkably so. The piece, “Strangers in the Night,” was a clever interaction between two, then three people in a double bed seen from directly overhead. The mimes had to simulate gravity’s pull while in actuality standing in front of a vertical mattress, and when they sat up in bed, we saw the tops of their heads and their foreshortened torsos. This bird’s eye view was a much more complicated effect to create than one might think, since rolling over in bed, sleepily flailing our bedmates, and stealing their covers seem such a natural set of movements – when you are in fact prone.

In the era of silent movies, all comedy was pantomime of this type. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton were geniuses, masters of movement, who made us laugh through physical comedy. They fearlessly consigned their bodies to danger before the era of stunt men, trick photography, and 3-D animation. Like Wylie Coyote, they were killed and resurrected multiple times per episode.

The primeval appeal of physical comedy is demonstrated by the Marx Brothers act, which began with all three brothers using rapid-fire spoken gags. However, Harpo Marx, after being panned by a critic, created a silent and entirely readable, if disconcerting, new persona. Complex and hilarious, the silent Harpo combined appealing, childlike self-insinuation and a leering forwardness towards women that shocked them and the audience, too. Silent entertainers proved early what communication theory later researched: A very small portion of a message is conveyed by words, somewhat more is conveyed through facial expression, and by far the most believed part of a message is spoken through body language alone and is readable at a distance when a face is not even visible.

Alitheia’s pieces with abstract themes used the most minimal sets and props. Nicholas Johnson’s solo, “Body of Music,” began with the stereotypical mime dragging himself somewhere along a rope, but when he finds himself trapped in an ill-defined container, comic and eerie effects result from a combination of loud breathing on the soundtrack matching the mime’s panic, while quirky music, odd sounds, and changes in lighting present a series of threats from the morphing box.

The powerful duet, “Cain & Abel,” choreographed by Jose Rivera and performed by Maurice Sims and Alex Stoll, required only a long staff as a prop while the barebacked and well-muscled dancers created the intensifying jealousy that leads to the murder of Abel. Abel’s weighty and limp body is carried away hanging from the staff, slung over Cain’s back as he staggers off with his guilt.

Two of Alitheia’s pieces were minor miracles, carrying the audience by force into truths of the human condition. Five dancers in “Asylum” provided a view of mental illness that affirmed the spectrum of health in all people, with or without a diagnosis. The five distinct personalities depicted by the dancers showed human vulnerabilities to isolation and neurotic inwardness softened by an enduring capacity for connectedness, mutual comfort, and the possibility of healing.

The evening’s final piece and *tour de force*, “Angels Rising,” was performed by 13 members of the company, a creation by Johnson that was performed at the youth festival of the United Nations in 2006. The work cycles through the history and contradictions of humanity and ends with a memorable image from the Renaissance, an unmistakable recreation of Michelangelo’s painting of God reaching out to Adam from the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

“Angels Rising” joins mankind at its earliest evolution, with dancers costumed in seeming nakedness: flesh-toned togs with pink-red smears reminiscent of veins and arteries. A pulsing lump of dancers evokes a human heart, then separates into a hominid community of childlike chimps that quickly advances to bullying and deadly competition.

History fast forwards to the self-glorification of the classical era with the troupe’s exquisite dancers beautifully modeling the ideal, athletic bodies worshipped by the Greeks, only more lovely, as the mimes fluidly move from pose to pose. Again harmony degenerates to violence, including wars of recent eras with newscast narration of casualties in Gaza, and the bodies powerfully evoke an atomic bomb, burgeoning slowly and unmistakably into a deadly mushroom cloud. The explosion breaks into the flight and fear of individual soldiers and civilians in mortal danger, their faces not quite so frozen in howling pain as those in Picasso’s *Guernica*.

When a redemptive force summons the sufferers towards hope, they stream in a slow-motion run directly towards the audience, eyes fixed heavenward, and seem to float on the musical theme of *Chariots of Fire*. This rapt quest also decays, and one runner after another attacks a fellow and passes disdainfully by the fallen victims, until the competitors lie wrecked in a shuddering rubble. Still standing, one woman gazes fixedly at a wounded man apart from the mass, and, in an awakening of compassion, she moves towards him. He turns, lifting himself on one elbow, and recognizes her empathy, and the two connect -- but for an inch -- with fingertips outstretched, Michelangelo's Adam and God, a pose perfectly immobile and thrillingly alive under the final spotlight of the evening.

“Angels Rising” was fabulously well done, and the audience greeted the finale with wild excitement and enthusiasm for the entire evening. The curtain call revealed choreographer and dancers, gratified beyond what they may have hoped, considering their long wait to perform in Wichita. Had this been a dance performance, the ovation might have elicited an encore – not needed or wanted here because anything more would have been an anticlimax to an immensely satisfying evening.

The mimes had lived their stories with every muscle and chord of their hearts, demonstrating superior dance training, unstinting athleticism, and the investment of their souls to enact Johnson's work. They earned the profound laughter and tears of Friday's audience. Wichita's welcome at the Orpheum will herald a new openness and hunger for this art form in their home town and beyond, now that Alithea Mime Theatre has favored us with Friday's brilliant debut.

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