

Program notes
by Donald Byrd

In 2002 while working on Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weil's *The Seven Deadly Sins* at Pacific Northwest Ballet, I realized that many theatrical works from the first half of the 20th Century fascinated me as "dance theater." These are works that are as concerned about the "theater" of dance as much as pure movement. These theatrical concoctions by some of Europe and Russian's most brilliant and forward thinking artists and intellectuals - composers, visual artists, dancers, writers, and choreographers - focus on how the story is told, how emotions are expressed, and the conventions of theatrical storytelling. During the first part of the last century, many of these young masters, early in their development, enthusiastic, and eager to push artistic boundaries, collaborated to produce works for the theater and dance of astounding complexity, that extended expressive vocabularies, and in turn were either praised or vilified; they shocked and provoked, and some were even banned.

I first encountered many of these works when I was a teenager studying classical music. My orchestral studies featured excerpts of music from the early 20th Century, including ballets and operas. This music was technically challenging to perform because it made new and previously unthought-of demands on its players - extravagant shifts in range, unusual coloration, exotic intonations amidst extreme dynamic shifts, and daunting tempi. When reading the scenarios of these works, I found that their subject matter often seemed lurid, and equally challenging for audiences. The difficult and beautiful musical scoring often belied the provocative nature of the staging and libretti that they accompanied - from the Faun masturbating on the nymph's fallen scarf at the end of Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, through the serial/mass murder in Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, to the prostitution, torture, and murder of his later *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Why would anyone create such stories and scenarios I often asked myself?

The Violence Cure

In the decade after Freud popularized the "talking cure" - a method of relieving trauma by reliving past events in dialogue with a therapist - many ballet and theatrical scenarios veered toward tales of violence. Stories of traumatic love relationships that ended in violence and death gained popularity in the 'teens and 'twenties. Staged as titillating cautionary tales, these productions portrayed violence and misogyny that demonstrated the wages of lurid romance and unchecked passion. These works reminded audiences that lustful hysterias could only end badly for all. Presumably, they also honored the theater's roots as social ritual that produced cathartic release and healing. The stage violence offered a cure of its own after the curtain descended, when social catharsis emerged from a consideration of the emotional carnage presented in these theatrical spectacles.

Béla Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* and Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* both offer scenarios of inappropriate passions and unspeakable violence. The Bartók work - created as a "pantomime ballet in one act" - premiered in Cologne in 1926, but lasted only a single, controversial performance before being banned by the city. A second production in Prague fared slightly better among critics and audiences, but the work never achieved lasting success during the composer's lifetime. What had taken Bartók six years to create - from 1918 - 1924 - became best known as the Mandarin Ballet Suite, later arranged by the composer himself when the dance versions of his work faltered. The work's story of three tramps that lure victims to their lair using a young girl as bait shocked audiences with its depiction of exploitation and seduction. When the girl attracts and seduces a mysterious "Mandarin" - an Other in the ultimate sense of that term - the tramps descend on him and murder him violently. The story ends strangely, with the Mandarin unable to die until he has consummated his passion with the girl. She complies, and he succumbs. Curtain.

Stravinsky's *Petrushka* may be more familiar to contemporary audiences with its tale of a puppet that comes to life for a time and discovers he has the capacity to love. Like his literary cousin Pinocchio, the passion of *Petrushka*'s love for a ballerina puppet is deep, and his tragedy is that he can attain neither real human life nor the affection of his beloved. Created as a "Ballet Burlesque in 4 Tableaux" on commission for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1911, the work has remained in repertory as an orchestral suite and a ballet in several productions. Its story of an impossible love triangle - again featuring an Other in the guise of the brutish Moor who also loves the Ballerina - ends with the violent death of the puppet clown. But again, a strange coda allows *Petrushka*'s spirit to endure and dance after his body has been rent by the Moor.

These works offer up generous doses of misogyny and nihilism in their plots, amplified by tinges of racism and homophobia. And they are explicitly erotic, titillating, and dangerous. It may be that they intend to offer something of a "Violence Cure" in which their performance allows us to recognize brutality head on, and achieve catharsis as we consider the particular wages of these enlarged passions. Freud propounded talking through past traumas to reach a place of contemporary emotional healing. With these 21st Century re-visionings of these early 20th Century works, Spectrum Dance Theater proposes performance toward a similar end for its audiences.

Yet questions remain. Why perform them? Are they appropriate stage fare? Do they resonate for contemporary audiences? Even if they are re-envisioned are they relevant for today's audiences and their concerns? How complicit are we in our tacit condolence of violence when we view them? What role does the theater play in initiating civic dialogue as well as raising difficult and challenging questions? Should the theater be a place that reinforces values or questions them? On the stage should we only see an idealized worldview or one that resembles the "real world" at its worst? Does feeling uncomfortable by themes or subject

matter of work in the theater signify a negative? What is appropriate or inappropriate to show on the stage? Questions that may never be answered in a satisfactory way, with no easy answers that might ease an audience's qualms and discomfort with these works.

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