

Day Three: Celebrate Dance Festival at the Casa del Prado Theatre, Balboa Park

Rebellious brides top final day

By Kris Eitland

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Dancer/choreographer Sarah Swenson says her company, the neo-modernist Vox Dance Theatre, recognizes the gifts of each dancer. So it was fitting that her accomplished company should perform on the final day of the Celebrate Dance Festival, an event that celebrates the gifts of all dancers and styles.

Based in Long Beach, Swenson formed her company in 2004, so she could perform her own work and the work of others, and continues to work with modern dance pioneers Simone Forti and Rudy Perez. Her style merges classical and modern techniques, theatre and improvisation.

Her signature piece "Fimmine," which explores the contentious ritual of marriage, was the pinnacle of Sunday's lineup at the Casa del Prado Theatre. Emotional, provocative, and professional, it was an outstanding outlier within a very diverse program.

Set to a booming polyrhythmic score by Philip Glass, "Fimmine," is filled with powerful imagery and intense focus. Seven brides appeared in wedding gowns with sharp arms and splayed fingers. They whipped the trains of their gowns, and offered the billowing fabric to Swenson, who obviously did not share in their joy. The sequences that followed were not a rejection of wedlock, rather they focused on the courage and alliances that women forge as they prepare for it.

One minute the women were innocent debutantes, all leaping with open arms. They lay on their backs with feet spiraling as if on a bicycle and did a polka dance in a circle. But they pivoted, their gowns swirling like a storm - one woman seemed to fly away - and all eyes were on Swenson, who stood with her back exposed, motionless and vulnerable. It was a striking moment that alluded to the historical aspects of marriage, such as women as property, the on-going abuse of women in our country, and the horrific treatment of women in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

But Swenson also conveyed the intense devotion and sisterhood of women. In solidarity, the brides stripped down to bras, merry widow corsets and petticoats, as if to say, "We are brides, but underneath we are proud and will not relinquish our friends."

A final scene further illuminated Swenson's artistic skill and the belief that women must enter marriage with a fierce sense of self. The brides grabbed the air, kicked and galloped in waltz rhythms, then eased into a solid runner's stance before bursting into grand jetes. They looked out into the crowd and danced with the red sashes that had been tied at the waist. It was a wow moment that made you want to cheer out loud.

Swenson's Vox Dance Theatre was one of 28 groups that performed at the festival on Sunday. I was able to view a total of six groups in the final three hours, and their range brought new meaning to the phrase, "variety is the spice of life."

Dancers from the Colette Harding Contemporary Dance Company offered a breezy work punctuated by airy lifts, yet slow tempo and too many somersaults and rests on the floor just felt too long and spacey. Deven Brawley and Keely Campbell were standouts in a duet. They are long-time partners with chemistry, and their musicality and sizing up stares were engaging.

Set to the breathy song "Faithful," by Me'Shell N'degeocello, The PGK Project presented a group piece that wrapped around a romantic duet and tossing trio. Dancers Lara Segura and Justin Viernes leaped on and off small coffee tables, interpreting the piano rhythms with sharp attention. In a swift transition, another couple shifted the mood, rising in sexy lifts and embraces. It was all quite lovely with one glitch. When the singer sang "you have such pretty hair," the petite woman caressed her very tall partner's bald head. A trio (Segura, Ericka Buechner, and David Wornovitzky) picked up the tempo with quick changes in direction and the women tossed their male partner with little effort; still, the final sequence suffered from poor timing (there was a slight collision) and felt cluttered.

Angelika Nemeth Dance Ensemble, a company from Costa Mesa, performed Middle Eastern dances that incorporated grapevines and hip swivels, and their unison was tight. With fine musicality, two women and a man performed a dance with canes, sort of a cross between Fred Astaire and a whirling dervish.

Members of the Glitter Dance Company balanced votive candles in each hand during their belly dancing. A woman in red gave it her best in an undulating solo, but seemed a bit dazed. Even simple turns were stiff. A group of women in brilliant kaftans did pogo steps and shook their hair, and another group in very odd blue and pink ruffles did step ball changes from side to side.

The Celebrate Dance Festival almost didn't happen this year because of a strained economy and subsequent funding problems, but Eveoke Dance Theatre, the intrepid organization that has presented the festival for 13 years, made it work. Instead of cutting artists, they cancelled the outdoor stage, and many people and organizations stepped in with support.

In the final hour, Eveoke director Nikki Dunnan thanked her team, including festival administrator Molly Terbovich, and students from Eveoke's apprentice company and summer intensive workshop performed. Their dances focused on themes of trust, self-confidence and friendship, and in the last one they threw glitter.

But the real finale - and surely the most emotional - was Dunnan's solo (choreographed by fellow Eveoke founder Gina Angelique) that was sandwiched between the student works. It was a reminder of Eveoke's sacrifice and dedication as a dance company and presenter, and for many new viewers, it was a first glimpse of Dunnan's talent as a

performer. Despite exhaustion, Dunnan interpreted Ani DiFranco's "Messing with the Atom" with amazing presence, and never once lost her focus. In the last sequence, she rose from a contraction on the floor and stood solid in a pose, and her authority and courageous spirit were real; it was one of the best solos of the evening.

[Celebrate Dance Festival schedule](#)

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Dates August 21, 22, 23, 2009

Organization Eveoke Dance Theatre

Phone 619.238.1153

Production Type Dance

Region Balboa Park

Ticket Prices Free

URL www.eveoke.org

Venue Casa Del Prado Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego

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About the author: Kris Eitland has contributed to sandiego.com since 2006. Her critiques and features have appeared in local and national publications including Dance Magazine, TheatreForum, Dance San Diego Magazine, and San Diego CityBeat. She received Excellence in Journalism awards from the San Diego Press Club in 2007 and 2009. [More by this author](#)

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