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Astrolabe Musik Theatre's In Passing boldly faces death

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By [Jessica Werb](#), November 9, 2011

It's often said that art's role is to push societal boundaries, and soprano Heather Pawsey's Astrolabe Musik Theatre is no exception. This weekend, in an innovative evening of programming at the Western Front titled *In Passing*, the new multidisciplinary music-theatre group will be tackling one of our greatest taboos: death.



Visitors to *In Passing* will be able to view artist SD Holman's *Still Life*, a photo installation dedicated to her late wife, and then respond with their own artworks.

The work came out of bereavement, explains Pawsey, who collaborated on the project with pianist Rachel Kiyo Iwaasa, choreographer Tara Cheyenne Friedenber, and photo-based artist SD Holman.

"All of us had recently experienced loss of someone, either a family member or a friend, and we realized that we don't talk about death in our society," Pawsey shares over a cup of tea in a West End coffee shop. She has recently lost her mother-in-law, she explains, while artist Holman is mourning the loss of her wife of 10 years, Catherine White Holman, who died in a floatplane crash off Saturna Island in 2009 and who was also a close friend of Iwaasa's.

"We're a pretty youth-oriented culture," Pawsey continues. "We don't like to acknowledge aging and death, and if you have been raised outside of a faith tradition or if you have moved away from that, there is very little for us to express grief and mourning. We bring in grief counsellors and we're expected to deal with it and get on with our lives, and that isn't the way it works. It seems to be the one thing that nobody wants to talk about."

The focal point of the evening is a performance by Pawsey and Iwaasa of George Crumb's 1979 work *Apparition*. A setting of text by Walt Whitman, it is an evocative exploration of metaphors on death. "The writing is very jagged in places, and then it's exquisitely lyrical and absolutely tonal and beautiful in others," observes Pawsey, who commissioned Friedenber to help her and Iwaasa choreograph movements for their performance of the work.

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In addition to the Crumb, Pawsey and Iwaasa will also perform the world premiere of Leslie Uyeda's setting of poetry by B.C.'s Rachel Rose, *Pas de Deux—What We Heard About Death*. At the same time, Friedenberg will present an excerpt of her upcoming full-length work, *Highgate*, entitled *The Three Widows*, which depicts three women of different ages trying to support each other and escape from mourning. The music and dance works will be performed twice simultaneously on different floors of the Western Front, allowing audiences to pick and choose the order in which they want to take in the pieces.

Visitors will also be given the opportunity to view *Still Life*, Holman's photo-installation memorial to her late wife, and will be given materials to create their own artworks in response. The evening will also feature a tour and presentation by Heritage Vancouver about the burial practices and cemeteries of early-1900s Vancouver—with particular emphasis on the Western Front, whose original owners, the secret society Knights of Pythias, actually prepared bodies for burial there.

Pawsey is hoping the event will help audience members make peace with death, in their own ways. "Art allows us to speak the unspeakable," she says. "And art can sometimes speak to it without words....Because we're artists, we thought art was a form where we could express our fear of death, our rage at death, and our acceptance. It's the inevitable, and it's the big inevitability that nobody wants to talk about."

[In Passing](#) is at the Western Front on Saturday and Sunday (November 12 and 13).

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