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In Passing brings death to life

Multidisciplinary work includes show and exhibit at the Western Front

By Stuart Derdeyn, The Province November 10, 2011 5:06 PM

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Tara Cheyenne Friedenbergs company provides the dance sequences.

Photograph by: Submitted photo, The Province

Death used to get a great deal more attention in the past than it receives these days. An obituary online is hardly a pyramid. Are we missing out on something by not bringing death to life?

In Passing is a new multidisciplinary work from Astrolabe Musik Theatre, Heritage Vancouver, Tara Cheyenne Friedenbergs and photo artist SD Holman that aims to relate our experience of the past into the continuum of the present.

Part of the City of Vancouver 125 anniversary celebrations, the site-specific performance includes both a show and an exhibit in the Western Front. The long-running artist space is a good setting, too.

“The original owners were this secret society named the Knights of Pythias,” says Heather Pawsey, of Astrolabe. “And during the exploration for the piece, we discovered that they used to prepare deceased members’ bodies there and had a coffin storage room hidden in the back before they went on to be buried in special sections of local cemeteries,” Pawsey says.

“It was a perfect tie-in to the whole idea of how the city changes in passing history and the whole idea of in passing being another way of saying death, too.”

It is intriguing how much knowledge of our surroundings are lost as people pass on and buildings change usage. Heritage Vancouver opens the evening with a walking tour of the Western Front explaining the burial practices in early 1900s Vancouver, the importance of secret societies and clubs in the social order of the day and more.

Following this, audiences will get to take in Astrolabe’s presentation of composer George Crumb’s death cycle Apparition (with text by Walt Whitman) and also Leslie Uyeda’s Pas de Deux — What We Heard About Death (poetry by B.C. poet Rachel Rose). Pawsey will sing while pianist Rachel Kiyo Iwaasa plays and Friedenbergl contributes choreography.

Friedenberg’s dance company also offers an excerpt from an upcoming full work, Highgate. The excerpt is titled “The Three Widows” and features Alison Denham, Bevin Poole and Kim Tuson. It looks at three widows of different ages, conjoined by their skirts struggling to support one another in mourning while hoping to tear out of it, too.

The dance and music segments are performed in different rooms twice a night so you can move around and also take in Holman’s Still Life installation, a memorial to her late wife who died in a float plane crash off Saturna Island in 2009.

“It’s strange working on a show about the ending of things having just had my new baby, which is the beginning of things, but that is the cycle,” says Friedenbergl. “There is an entrance door and an exit, we’re all going there and it is important to bring that back into our culture because we sweep it under the rug.”

After taking in the music, the dance, the art and the mysterious history of the building, attendees are invited to create some art of their own in response to what they’ve seen.

Friedenberg says there is both a contemplative and a fantastical way of looking at the performance. Pawsey goes one further saying that there is a great deal of humour in it, too.

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