

Critics' Forum

Theater

“Rumi” Follows Uneven Path to Divine End

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

The Djanbazian Dance Company's new performance piece, “Rumi: Path to Enlightenment,” began as most major Armenian cultural events do – late – and ended like them too, with a standing ovation. In between, this multimedia work about Jalal ad-Din Rumi, a Persian mystic and poet of the 13th century, navigated both brilliance and tedium on its way to a stunning finale.

As conceived by Anna Djanbazian, “Rumi” combined elements of dance, spoken word, live music (instrumental and vocal), and video in tracing the Sufi sage's spiritual journey in search of Love and Unity. Djanbazian's pastiche premiered on Saturday, January 7, as part of a two-night engagement at the Freud Playhouse on the UCLA campus.

Rumi's influence spans time and geography. The Sufi order of the Whirling Dervishes, founded on his principles, maintains a following to this day, and his musings on Love and Unity are not only revered as works of literature but are also used as texts for meditation.

The root source of Rumi's inspiration, however, is a rather unique relationship with one Shams of Tabriz. The bond that existed between Rumi and Shams was so deep and intimate that when circumstances forced them apart, Rumi was devastated and mourned the loss of his “love” in his poems. This longing for reconnection ultimately led to “unity” with the divine.

The love that the two men shared likely transcended the physical, and Djanbazian had certainly gone to great lengths to downplay any homoerotic context. In fact, she had buffered the dancers portraying Rumi and Shams with female partners who personified abstract concepts like “Experience” – a choice that diluted conflict and tension in the narrative.

The first act was heavy with dance, and Djanbazian incorporated huge swathes of fabric in creating some memorable sequences. But her choreography made few difficult demands of her dancers. (An obvious talent like Arsen Serobian, as Rumi, seemed particularly under-challenged). Occasional sparks of dynamism propelled this short act forward, despite instances of incongruity between the modern dance moves and the traditional tones of the accompanying Middle Eastern music.

The second act opened with an intriguing video montage, as it segued from Rumi's relationship with Shams to his relationship with the divine. Punctuated by live music and spoken word, this segment certainly achieved visceral moments – as with the rhythm of percussive beats – but often fell short of capturing the intensity of Rumi's rapture. Still, Shahla Sarokhani sounded altogether hypnotic when she recited in Persian and hauntingly beautiful when she vocalized musical passages.

Technically polished and competently executed throughout, “Rumi” achieved its greatest triumph in its concluding moments, which revolved around Aziz Abbatiello’s stupefying performance as a Whirling Dervish. Abbatiello recreated part of a Samaa ritual, in which participating dervishes whirl for an impossibly long time. Simply watching the endless twirls can induce vertigo, but Abbatiello defied bodily limitation in spinning indefatigably. For a few glorious minutes, Djanbazian’s choreography went into overdrive, as members of the company fell into a vigorous movement pattern, with the dervish in their midst. The inspired scene provided the perfect illustration of how dance, as a medium, can create its own path to the divine.

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Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting (“The Farewells”) and directing (“Three Hotels”). His performance piece, “Protest,” is currently being staged at the Finborough Theatre in London.

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