

Saith What Lord? Articulating our beliefs, our hopes, our terrible dreams

by Deborah Jowitz

October 4th, 2005 6:34 PM



Asli Bulbul and BTJ/AZ Dance Company in
photo: Paul B. Goode

We sit and watch white words scroll down dark screens. They describe in several languages a society laid out according to Enlightenment ideals—a society embracing religious tolerance in which "human cruelty and violence" may be overcome through "social improvement and government structures." But this is no lecture on Locke and Hume being delivered in Montclair State University's handsome new theater. It's the prologue to Bill T. Jones's galvanic and galvanizing premiere *Blind Date*. And in light of the 2004 election and all that preceded it and follows from it, a sentence like "Religion should be reasonable and result in the highest moral behavior in its adherents" clangs in my head like an alarm I can't turn off. As does the reminder that most of the greatest human crimes were "perpetrated in the name of religion and God."

Blind Date, however, is not a polemic; it's a work of art, and a stunning one. However fervently Jones puts forth (or queries) ideas through texts (spoken and projected), music, and vibrant dancing, he doesn't talk politics or present our date with destiny in black-and-white. He was reared on the Bible, and at one point, Andrea Smith speaks some of the words we've seen projected, but on his knees, eyes up, clasped hands raised. Near the end, Jones and tall Leah Cox stand companionably together. Does she have a cigarette? (He's been asking this all evening, his addiction a slightly annoying but not irrelevant subtext.) No. They identify themselves as a Democrat and a Republican, but their gentle gestures and his little bit of dancing hint at a sympathy that transcends party lines.

Bjorn G. Amelan's set sensitively frames the action and the issues. The translucent screens (including one that shows a row of sitting ducks like those in a shooting gallery) rise and fall. So does the threshold behind which we first see Charles Scott extend his long limbs in a solo, while small Erick Montes rolls and tumbles past, singing scraps of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the "Marseillaise," and the Mexican national anthem.

Daniel Bernard Roumain's live score for a small, versatile group of musicians also frames the piece elegantly, pausing for long stretches, borrowing a Bach violin sonata (beautifully played by Nurit Pacht), making astute use of Akim "Funk" Buddha and Neel Murgai's throat-singing talents, and creating textures expressive of sweet and bitter struggle. Dancer Shaneeka Harrell sensitively delivers Otis Redding's "Security." Jones sings the Irish folk song "Mrs. McGrath," about a woman whose son comes home from war missing limbs, while Cox dances in angry desolation.

Jones takes on the motif of the military drill but expands it both into the notion of combative forces and into chains of dancers that flow and interlock like metaphors for orderly, considerate conduct. A common trust exercise, on the other hand, turns into something more terrifying. "Me!" someone calls out and topples like a tree. She is caught, by one set of hands or by many. Before long all the dancers are onstage; several may decide to fall at once. The danger is palpable. Stuart Singer's nose almost hits the floor. If too many soldiers are shot at one time, how many die without arms to hold them?

The rich brew of overlapping and simultaneous events is brilliantly engineered. While Jones and Smith wrestle with slo-mo formality, engaging in a mildly argumentative dialogue over and over ("A man told me he wants to see more rage onstage," Jones says), Asli Bulbul and Maija Garcia yell and fight ferociously, and Montes sings "O, say can you see" from a handstand. In the end, the marvelous dancers (including Wen-Chung Lin and Shayla-Vie Jenkins) keep replacing one another in an ongoing, tenderly erotic duet on the floor, while a taped voice recites, as hesitantly as a child learning to read, fierce injunctions from the bellicose God of Leviticus 20 as to who should not sleep with whom, under pain of death or expulsion from the tribe.

At a time when aggressiveness is prized and corruption and mendacity in high places don't count as betrayals of moral values or religious ethics, *Blind Date* shines a searching light.