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Death in the midst of life is a lively dance

The Joffrey Ballet opens the doors

Smuin's Dance Series 01: A bouquet to love

Death in the midst of life is a lively dance

2017-11-03

Oakland Ballet celebrates the Día de los Muertos

The air was charged, many of the audience dressed in skeleton outfits, women and girls with their hair crowned with flowers, and faces painted in the joyous colors of the sugar-sculpted skulls of the season. The Day of the Dead celebration is meant to be a day of remembrance and reconnection with the dead, and in the theater lobby beautiful ofrendas, or altars, were decorated with candy, toys, candles and marigolds, a flower whose smell is supposed to attract the dead. A food truck was outside providing sustenance for the living.

With brightly colored satin skirts swirling and wide-brimmed hats flapping, dancers took the stage at Oakland's Paramount Theater to celebrate the Día de los Muertos this past Friday. In Oakland Ballet's second year of this celebration, the program included two folkloristic dance companies, Nahui-Ehekatl and Ballet Folklórico México Danza, and a mariachi band, Mariachi Mexicanísimo, alongside the company's "Luna Mexicana," a ballet choreographed by the company's artistic director, Graham Lustig.



The program opened with the dance company Nahui-Ehekatl, the name derived from the Aztec and Nahuatl peoples' sacred history. The creation story holds that there have been five worlds, each named after the sun that hangs over the world. Nahui-Ehekatl, or Wind Sun, was the second world, while we today live in the fifth world, that of the Earthquake Sun. In glittering dress with strands of bells around their ankles and mind-boggling headdresses constructed of feathers three- and four-feet long, the dancers turned toward the four directions, asking for their blessing. Drums onstage beat a sharp fast rhythm to the prayers.

The second presentation was the beautiful Chaconne by the Mexican-born dancer José Limón, the influential modern dancer and choreographer of the mid 20th century. Set to the chaconne from Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor, the piece presents one dancer and a violinist on stage. Ramona Kelley did a graceful and balletic interpretation of the work, and was accompanied by Terrie Baune, the co-concertmaster of the Oakland Symphony.

The Hayward-based Ballet Folklórico México Danza re-enacted a romance of the 1910 Revolution, with Calaveras Catrinas and their skeletal bridegrooms strutting, skipping and stamping across the stage. Child skeletons rise from the tombstones up stage, and the Devil appears in splendid curved-horn glory with trident and long tail. He battles a machete-wielding cowboy riding a white satin hobby horse, and calls on stage a chorus of demonic cowboys in fringed chaps to click their rowdy heels to dissonant percussion. Then the gorgeous skeleton bride in hot pink unitard with black bones and huge skull bats her eye sockets at him and kicks her heels high in the air. O love-smitten Diablo!

The second half began with the lively Mariachi Mexicanísimo, the Hayward-based 10-man band of violins, trumpets and guitars of various sizes, including the ukulele-like vihuela. The audience loved it, despite the at-times excruciating sound system, which did the singers and audience no sonic favors.

The program ended with Oakland Ballet's "Luna Mexicana," a fantasy that tells the story of the girl Luna who builds her Day of the Dead altar and is visited by a series of skeletons and mythic creatures. Ramona Kelley danced the part of Luna, and Emily Kerr and Richard Link were the Dapper Skeleton Bride and Groom, clicking their bones in a duet set before a panorama of huge hearts and heaps of bones. Landes Dixon performed the Deer solo, leaping lightly across the stage. The unearthly visitation ends with a frenetic Hat Dance, and at last Luna falls asleep, exhausted. When she wakes her ghostly visitors have returned to the Land Beyond.

This exciting show was great fun, and made an incalculable contribution to the community. The program was performed for over 13,000 East Bay students during the two weeks before the Friday night performance, in partnership with



Oakland, Castro Valley, Hayward, Livermore, New Haven, Pleasanton, Richmond and San Leandro school districts. If you missed it, make sure to be there next year. It's well worth it.

– **Jaime Robles**

The Oakland Ballet will be performing its *Nutcracker* on December 23 and 24 at the Paramount Theater. For more information, visit oaklandballet.org.

Photos by Steven Texeira.

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