Cool Cleveland™

10.17-10.24.07

WorldClass

Previews

Dancing Wheels Explores Helen Keller

If you believe that human interaction is inherently dance-like, then wheelchair dance might seem an obvious possibility. It might even seem strange that no one thought of professional wheelchair dance until Mary Verdi-Fletcher started Dancing Wheels 27 years ago. Logic notwithstanding, we were only gradually persuaded that other-abled dance art was possible. Having been persuaded, we remain convinced that wheelchair dancers face many of the same problems as "stand-up" dancers – i.e., finding apt movement metaphors for music, to name just one.

Clevelanders' only opportunity to see Dancing Wheels this fall involves a drive to Stocker Center in Lorain where the other-abled company, with its mix of "sit down" and "stand up" dancers, is performing "Helen Keller: a tribute to her teacher."

It is an apt choice for Dancing Wheels, the story of a woman who, with the help of her teacher, Anne Sullivan, overcame the double handicap of her deafness and blindness to become a prolific writer, lecturer and fund-raiser. At a time when many of the blind were confined to institutions, Keller graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College and embarked on a wildly successful lecture tour of the world. American show business was not slow to cash in. Keller and Sullivan found a comfortable berth as a long-running hit

in vaudeville. Early film treatments were less successful – both artistically and financially -- but eventually Hollywood produced "The Unconquered" (1953), an Academy Award winning feature length documentary, and "Miracle Worker" (1962) for which Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke both won Oscars.

Dancing Wheels' "Helen" is a retrospective of Keller and Sullivan's life together beginning with their first encounter when Sullivan spelled "water" into one of Keller's hands while water gushed over the other. As Keller later put it, "Somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me." The scenario also touches on Keller and Sullivan's vaudeville days and on Sullivan's marriage to long-time friend John Macy. Mixed media aspects of the production include Sullivan's authentic graduation address and a poem by Keller interpreted by sign language. In keeping with their mission and their subject, Dancing Wheels' production of "Helen" makes itself accessible to every imaginable audience, incorporating audio description, large print, and sign language interpretation in a theater that features "full and equal access" for audience and performers alike.

Dancing Wheels has developed a substantial repertoire of works by noteworthy American choreographers since the inception of their 4-year-old "Choreographer's Project." The choreographer of "Helen," Christopher Fleming, is perhaps the highest profile of the bunch (Cleveland audiences may remember "Edge of Assurances" and his popular baseball ballet, "Play Ball," both of which he created for Ohio Ballet), but that's not to diminish the rest of Dancing Wheels' repertoire.

Sharing the bill with "Helen" on Friday are excerpts of 2 of our favorites from Dancing Wheels' repertoire: "Walking on Clouds" was David Rousseve's first dance to focus on disability. His previous dances were built around his identity as an African-American / gay activist / AIDS activist, so we wondered if Rousseve could work successfully with a company and a theme new to him. Could Rousseve's mix of downtown postmodern release technique and down home sensibility work for Dancing Wheels? The answer was an emphatic "Yes!" We'll long remember "Clouds" for its climactic image of Desmond Davis apparently held aloft as much by powerful words as by the efforts of his fellow dancers.

Also on the program Mark Tomasic's "A wing / a prayer" which provides 3 wheelchair dancers with simple but effective movement patterns set to a darkly portentous ballad. It's a compelling example of the powerful potential of wheelchair dance, and it suggests to us that Tomasic, who recently left Cleveland for San Francisco, has a future as a choreographer if he wants it.

See Dancing Wheels Friday, October 19 at 7PM at the Stocker Arts Center of Lorain County Community College, 1005 N. Abbe Rd., Elyria. To purchase tickets, call 800-995-5222 ext. 4040 or 440-366-4040 or log on to http://www.lorainccc.edu/stocker.

From *Cool Cleveland* contributors Elsa Johnson and Victor Lucas
vicnelsaATearthlink.net