

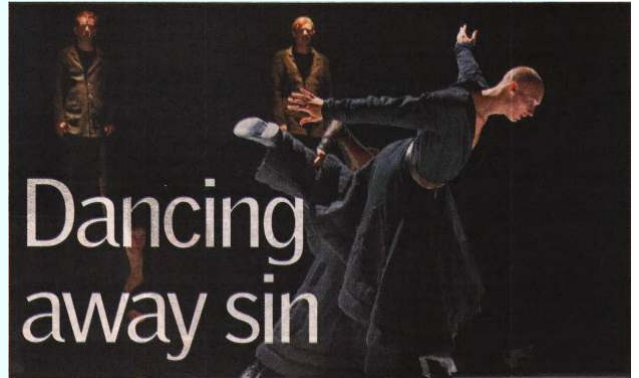


ARTS

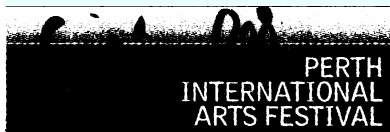
Edited by Stephen Bevis



Dancing away sin



Transcendent: Borrowed Light uses Shaker themes and an austere setting to create one of the highlights of the Festival



DANCE

Borrowed Light
Tero Saarinen Company with the Boston Camerata
His Majesty's Theatre
Review: David Hough

The explosive applause, wolf whistles and stamping feet said it all. For 70 minutes 1000 people sat in pin-drop silence, witness to a congregation of eight dancing to hymns of devotion and songs of praise rendered by eight black-gowned a cappella singers, in an austere black room lit by cathedral shafts of light. For a time I forgot that I was in His Majesty's Theatre.

Choreographer Tero Saarinen and his company from Finland have collaborated with Joel Cohen and the Boston Camerata on this extraordinary project inspired by the gospel music and gyrating dance of the Shaker community.

Borrowed Light is not about Shakerism, but about commitment and devotion, be it spiritual, artistic or political, according to Saarinen. An insight into the inspirational source is helpful, however.

The Shakers were a Protestant sect that originated in Manchester, England, in 1772 under the leadership of Mother Ann Lee. The group of nine migrated to New York in 1774. The sect was committed to communal living, the confession of sin and to celibacy.

Membership grew by conversion and the easy adoption of orphans, as the sect scattered its communities from New England to Florida. Once the state exercised bureaucratic control and confined orphans to institutions, the major source of adherents evaporated. A century ago, membership stood at 6000. Today, there are four members only, in Maine, New England.

Whirling, stomping and percussive dance to strict but free-flowing rhythms is an important component of their religious intention, to dance away their sins. And so they acquired the nickname "Shakers" – a sobriquet that slips more trippingly off the tongue than The United Souls of Believers in Christ's Second Coming.

Participants were accompanied by hymns and songs composed and sung by members, as well as by the chanting of meaningless syllables drawn from a variety of languages, American Indian as well as European.

Anne Azema, Joel Cohen and

Donald Patterson have transcribed 20 songs, originally written with a unique notation, for Borrowed Light, and two of them are heard on stage for the first time in probably 150 years.

The most famous Shaker hymn is Simple Gifts, woven by Aaron Copland into his 1944 ballet, Appalachian Spring, choreographed by Martha Graham. Doris Humphrey, as important to modern dance as Graham, created The Dance of the Chosen in 1930 as an evocation of a Shaker meeting.

In this production, the face of a solo soprano on a raised platform is lit from a high angle by a road-to-Damascus shaft of light as she sings Simple Gifts. Down stage below, a solo dancer, lit from the side by a bigger cone of light, expresses her feelings of ecstasy in slow motion. It was but one of many transcendent moments.

Although "borrowed light" is both an architectural and an astronomical term, lighting designer Mikki Kunttu contrasts the brightly lit with the darkly shadowed, to transform a simple chapel into a religious metaphor.

Costume designer Erika Turunen achieves a similar effect with the semicircle of white petticoat sewn beneath the women's black skirts.

Borrowed Light ends tomorrow