

'The Odyssey' Inspires Sonia Plumb's Modern Dance Drama

By SHARMA PIERSALL

Special to The Courant

SEPTEMBER 23, 2015, 3:15 PM

Chances are if a teenager is assigned "The Odyssey" by Homer, many feel that picking up the classic poem is an Odyssey of sorts for them, greeting the scholastic undertaking tepidly, with their collective groans seeming suited for a cluster of Greek tragedy choral members.

Sonia Plumb, founder of the Hartford based Sonia Plumb Dance Company, did not feel that way about the 3,000-year-old tale when she first read it at age 13. In fact, she has had a rapacious appetite for the poem, which has inspired "The Odyssey: An Epic Dance Journey," to be unveiled Oct. 2-4 at the University of St. Joseph in West Hartford and Oct. 8 at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Center in Old Saybrook. The debut of "The Odyssey: An Epic Dance Journey" celebrates the company's 25th anniversary.

"It took me places I'd never been. I love mythology. I loved it so much I staged it with my sisters," said Plumb, whose six dancers get a workout in this modern dance drama in which Homer's hero, Odysseus, must navigate his crew back home from the Trojan War despite constantly being blown off course through the trials and tribulations of his crew's antics, meddling Gods, monsters, and a love-sick nymph.

Homer's tale is given a fresh, condensed take with multi-media (a scene was filmed underwater and will be projected during the performance); masks; a score by Cory Gabel dosed with a bit of a rousing rock-opera style; and glimpses of timeless human traits and circumstances told within a modern choreographic frame-work.

Spencer Pond, who dances Odysseus' companion and also his son (all six dancers take on multiple roles), said that the freedom of modern dance vocabulary helps make the tale translate well.

"In modern dance, shape movement is based off of feeling, so it makes sense," said the lanky dancer, whose role as Odysseus' impish companion has been a fun one for him.

It is amusing, for example, to witness Pond become intoxicated when he inhales the heady fragrance of the lotus flowers as if they were opiates, and staggers euphorically in an exotic montage in the dance. The same goes for moments of suspense, such as the crew's passage through the Sirens' territory, littered with the remains of previous sailors. A wise Odysseus has the men put wax in their ears and commands his companion to lash him to the mast to thwart him from succumbing to the beauties' allure, yet allow him to hear their song. Then there are the cattle at Helios, who literally moo as they get carted off ignominiously over the shoulders of the men for a feast that isn't digested well.

One of the cattle, Danielle Sinsigalli, plays her large-eyed terror well, and is the dancer with the most roles to shift through, sometimes doing several in one montage.

"It's both interesting and challenging; it feels you have to work harder to be fully who you are," she said, adding, "We're actors."

Teacher, Choreographer

Plumb, who also teaches dance at the Academy of the Arts in Hartford, will be dancing as Penelope, Odysseus' wife, in the production.

Moving to choreography and starting a company was a natural progression for Plumb, who describes her choreographic style as very technique-based, with her dancers proficient in ballet. Her work in "The Odyssey" comes across as one with clarity of line and space, and can turn from a comedic moment to a regal lift on a dime.

"I always enjoy partnering, and pushing the dancers," said Plumb, who selects dancers who have a technical foundation under their belt, as well as movement variety.

Since that first staged reading at 13, Plumb has carried the Homer torch, creating her first dance version of "The Odyssey" in 1996, which was very different than the current one.

"Each time I go back, I discover more depth," said Plumb. "The poetry is so beautiful and descriptive."

And, once teenagers and adults alike see the show, they will understand that Homer's themes aren't archaic.

To help audiences, there will be optional pre-show talks prior to the performances, as well as a synopsis in the program, said Plumb. The company has also devised workshops and residencies for age K through Grade 12 that follow the common core curriculum.

As the context of the dance unfolds, some of the layers of Homer's work reveal more than a trying journey where Odysseus keeps getting blown off course (something we can all relate to, notes Plumb).

Love, loyalty, courage, what constitutes a hero (Odysseus uses more brain than brawn), and the powerful resting place we call home, are all explored in "The Odyssey," said Plumb.

Seduced and detained by the nymph Calypso for several years on an island, Odysseus still struggles for home, which is a key ingredient in conveying the character of the new archetypal hero Homer fashioned, and is an important aspect of being human, said Plumb.

"What is home, what is inside our beings, our soul? He could have chosen to stay on the island and be immortal, but he wanted to go home and that resonates for me and I wanted to get that across, very much so."

SONIA PLUMB DANCE COMPANY: "*The Odyssey: An Epic Dance Journey*" will be at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 2 and 3; and 3 p.m. Oct. 4 at the Carol Autorino Center at the University of St. Joseph, 1678 Asylum Ave., West Hartford. A pre-show discussion runs from 6:30 to 7 p.m. on Friday and Saturday and 2 to 2:30 p.m. on Sunday. The 75-minute dance will also be performed at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 8 at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. Tickets are \$25 for adults, \$15 for seniors and \$10 for students at 860-231-5555, 860-503-1286, USJ.edu/Arts and at the door.

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