

Israeli 'Oyster' Yields a Pearl of a Performance

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Watching "Oyster," an evening-length piece created by Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak, the word that comes to mind is "transcendence." The dancers move like creatures from another planet, but they uncover truths about human nature.

It is unfortunate that Thursday's performance at Lisner Auditorium, presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society, could only happen once, because Pinto and Pollak offer a distinct form of dance-theater that speaks to multi-generational audiences. There are moments of magic in the acrobatics and circuslike scenes, plus elements of transformation through costume and choreography that recall artists such as Oskar Schlemmer and Alwin Nikolais.

The stage is set simply with a string of bulbs outlining the proscenium and another string of bulbs marking an entryway upstage. Recorded music ranges from tango to big-band jazz to throat singing, distinguishing the short vignettes wherein duets, trios and groups dance together. In spite of the harmony between music and movement, there's usually an element of coercion or manipulation in the performers' interactions. One matronly figure controls two women on leashes as they contort and flip like simians. In another scene, a woman is attached to a huge pulley and seems to fly over, and then rest in the palm of the hand of, the man standing next to her. The artists in the Tel Aviv-based Inbal Pinto Dance Company are phenomenally strong and versatile, and their antics let us leave reality momentarily. "Oyster" creates this surreal dreamscape, but is also a testament to human spirit.

In a question-and-answer session afterward, Pinto said, "In life we have ideas about what is ideal, but we all have limitations. As people we are pulled by strings, and their sources can be our countries, families, manners." Although "Oyster" was made in a region often associated with deep conflict, it's a work of stunning beauty that transcends time and place.

-- Kate Mattingly

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