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Dreamland of sight, motion

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By Jean Battey Lewis - Dazzling, dramatic images swept the stage over the weekend as Mexican artist Tania Perez-Salas brought her Compañia de Danza to the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater.

In an after-performance talk, Miss Perez-Salas described her creative method as relying heavily on dreams; her rich theatrical imagination makes the stage a magical place full of strange, arresting sights.

In addition to dance, she turns to other arts to help create her vision, drawing inspiration from essayists and authors including two prominent in Mexico (Ivan Illich and Octavio Paz). In music her choices range from Bach and Vivaldi to rock.

But the strongest element by far is her visual imagery, which includes dreamlike video projections, extravagant props and dramatic lighting, often with a darkened stage pierced by bright pools of light.

"The Hours" opens with rolling swaths of material flowing across the stage to give the effect of giant swelling waves. A similar image can be seen in the fluttering ribbons of cloth in Japan's Kabuki theater and in the "Wading in the Water" section of Alvin Ailey's "Revelations," but here the effect is much larger and all-encompassing.

The waves retreat. Under their fabric we see a woman, dressed in a voluminous hoop skirt, her arms flinging out in sharp gestures. After peeling away yet another layer, three women, beautifully costumed, emerge from beneath her skirt. Their long skirts are seamed to bind them together — a striking image. Later, a woman hangs suspended in a scroll of red cloth; five giant curling ropes materialize, hanging from the ceiling. The five women climb on them, first looking like athletes, then suddenly caught in the ropes, contorted, hanging motionless like flies trapped on sticky paper.

"Anabiosis" deals with love both profane and sacred, beginning with a man spread-eagled on the floor, heaving spasmodically. Here music plays a pivotal role, with Dave Seeman's driving music animating the lustful opening and a movement from the ever-popular Bach "Cello Suites" bringing its own ineffable joy to the spiritual side of love.

Compañia de Danza reached new heights in its finale with "Waters of Forgetfulness," a work of great imagination. Miss Perez-Salas covers the stage with a few inches of water, then revels in its magical powers and visual enchantment. As the dancers lie down, their movements send out great arcs of liquid sparkling like diamonds. To see her dancers up close and personal, bodies wet and glistening, is to come closer to something elemental.

The women, their long hair dripping, throw back their heads and the air is filled with swirls of jeweled drops. The sound of swishing water is amplified, enhancing the visual with the aural.

Miss Perez-Salas has created memorable, haunting images. If the look of her work is more moving than its content perhaps it is because dance, with all its capacity for emotional resonance, plays a somewhat minor role in her rich, integrated theater.

*** MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS