

TO HELL AND BACK

Dazzling Dance Company Does Dante



By Patrick Neas

Dante’s “Divine Comedy” has inspired artists of all genres since it was written in the 14th century. Visionaries like Botticelli, William Blake and Gustave Doré made brilliant illustrations of the work. Among composers, Franz Liszt was an aficionado, having written two pieces inspired by it: “After Reading Dante,” a fantasia for piano, and the Dante Symphony. Tchaikovsky musically portrayed one of the more infamous denizens of the Inferno, Francesca da Rimini.

Now Dante’s epic poem is a ballet, and it’s going to be performed in Kansas City. The Harriman-Jewell Series presents the Italian dance company No Gravity performing “Divine Comedy” Jan. 31 at the Folly Theater.

No Gravity and its founder and director, Emiliano Pellisari, are the perfect team to take on Dante’s journey of a soul. Steeped in Italian history and culture, Pellisari also studied Hellenistic theater and the grand theatrical spectacles of the Renaissance and Baroque. The so-called “theater of marvels” employed elaborate machines and special effects designed by some of the greatest artists of the time, like Leonardo da Vinci.

One can see Pellisari’s love for Renaissance and Baroque design expressed in his choreography, which is reminiscent of the curlicues and intricate patterns found in Renaissance and Baroque art. Like a 16th-century Italian theater impresario, Pellisari draws on every trick in the book to dazzle his audience, from stage illusion and the latest technology to the mind-boggling physicality of his dancers.

Clark Morris, executive and artistic director of the Harriman-Jewell Series, says “Divine Comedy” is unlike anything the series has ever brought to Kansas City.

“We’ve presented theater before, we’ve presented dance before, we’ve even presented aerial and acrobatic companies, but we’ve never combined them all into one production that is also dealing with one of the most important poems in the history of the world,” Morris said. “It’s sort of like opera, putting all these elements together to tell a story. The great thing about art is that you keep expanding and exploring and seeing different ways to narrate stories and think about life and history.”



From the sulfurous depths of the Inferno to Paradiso, where Dante has a mystical vision of “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars,” “Divine Comedy” is undoubtedly one of the central works of Western civilization. But to tell its cosmic story theatrically is a challenge. Pellisari, however, has created a stage work that brings Dante’s medieval phantasmagoria to life.

Pellisari previously created a ballet for No Gravity called “Fellini’s Dream,” inspired by a film director noted for his extravagance and over-the-top imagination. In fact, Fellini would have been the perfect person to film “Divine Comedy.” With the circus-like contortions of the dancers and endless eye candy, Pellisari’s “Divine Comedy” is certainly Felliniesque.

“The images are stunning,” Morris said. “It’s very visually focused with a lot of tricks for the eye and imagination. The dancers are also aerialists and acrobats.”

The Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* had high praise for “Divine Comedy.” “Angels and Devils clash in spectacular duels,” the paper reported. “Acrobatic flights, flying actors, souls that fall like leaves in autumn . . . It could be the description of a painting by Escher or Bosch, but it’s Emiliano Pellisari’s show.”

Electronic music that draws on classical and world music will add to the power of the visuals, allowing us to share in Dante’s sublime vision. Although this production will certainly appeal to lovers of the great medieval poet, Morris says “Divine Comedy” is not just for highbrows.

“Yes, it could be for someone who gets into the text and the layers that are in Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy,’ but it’s a visually

stunning, fun, interesting theatrical work to watch,” Morris said. “It’s sort of like Cirque de Soleil. I think multiple times you’ll be saying, ‘Wow, I can’t believe they’re doing that!’”

To reserve tickets and for a complete listing of all concerts, go to hjseries.org.

