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Rumours of War

by HELEN JAKSCH

Helen Jaksch heads to the African American Museum in Treme for a production that brings the 1811 Slave Revolt to life.

We watch as actors dressed all in white climb up on wooden stumps along the entrance path to the New Orleans African American Museum. We are on the sidewalk. They are behind a rod iron fence. We are now. They are the past. We are separated. By a locked gate. By the insurmountable gap of time.

Rumours of War

Where: New Orleans African American Museum

When: Oct. 22-24, 28-30; 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$20

A whistle pierces the night air. Gede, played by Kenneth Bryan, emerges from the darkness between two houses on the other side of the street.

A mournful trumpet blows from within the gated space. Gede begins to sing. A spiritual. He beckons with his slinky body and skeleton-like hands: follow me.

The gates are opened. We cross the threshold. The ghosts speak. And they are eager to share their stories.

Presented by ArtSpot Productions and New Orleans African American Museum and directed by Kathy Randels and Monique Moss, *Rumours of War* is a beautiful blending of dance, theatre, music, and history. It plays very much like an evocation of the spirits. Of the past. Of ghosts. The audience moves through the outdoor spaces of the museum as they bear witness to the story of Louisiana’s 1811 Slave Revolt from the perspective of its victims and its perpetrators.

War

The audience walks past the actors standing on tree stumps as they declare their names: Cecille, Lindor, Charles Deslonde. We follow Gede to a large banquet table with golden goblets overturned and napkins awry. A man sits slumped in the chair, eyes closed, his chin touching his chest. Women in ornate period dress lay on the ground around the table. At first glance, they look to be sleeping, but their bodies are twisted in a way that suggests violent death. The General, expertly played by Ray Vrazel, pontificates and gesticulates about the laws and the rights of white men while the beautifully dressed corpses arise. They rewind, and reset. They clink their goblets. They twirl. They kiss. They force the kitchen slave Lindor to dance on the table while they jab forks at his feet. We see the scene play out to the bloody climax where choreography meets stage fighting meets poetry. Bright red ribbons are pulled from hearts and stomachs as Lindor and the rogue slave Charles’s knives slash through them. The revolt has begun.

There is much to be said of Michael Quess? Moore’s and Martin Bradford’s performances of Lindor and Charles Deslonde. The actors both brought such force and intensity to their roles. Their bodies were limber and focused. Moore and Bradford created dynamic characters that were made of quiet strength and brutal force, of boisterous war cries and moving poetry.

The White Woman of the West

Music plays from the small orchestra near the gazebo. Gede again appears to bring us through a courtyard where slaves slam doors on the balcony above our heads. They dance. They cry out. They roll on the floor. The Overseer stands on a front porch in fear with a cocked shotgun. Gede leads us to a wooden platform. A room with only its bare bones and bright white curtains blowing in the night air. A woman sings, and there is the strong smell of incense. The woman, Josephine (Kathy Randels), gathers the curtains back. She wears white undergarments of the period and a white scarf around her head. She is quarantined and dying. She drinks from three tea cups: one containing tea, one containing rocks or small bones, the third full of a dark and thick liquid. She does her death dance full of jagged movement and moments of collapse. There are devastating moments of stillness and frantic moments of chaotic energy and words. Randels weaves a story that feels so personal, I feel as though I should not be privileged to see or hear it. The revolt rages here. It is in her body. The revolt of forbidden desire against responsibility. The revolt of life against death.

Lullaby

The Saints Go Marching In beckons us again. Gede brings us to a field. There is a bright red background on one side and a rainbow of colors on another. The slaves stand against the rainbow wall with the handles of knives stuck in the ground in front of them. Cecille, played by Ausettua AmorAmenkum, attempts to pass on her knowledge to her daughter BeBe, played by Monique Moss. AmorAmenkum and Moss create such a charming relationship as mother and daughter with their duet of dueling crisp and rambunctious movements. I cannot take my eyes of AmorAmenkum; she was captivating. The piece, a mixture of singing, traditional African dance, drumming, and ritual, is entrancing and intoxicating. The slaves along the wall slowly pull their knives from the ground and join the dance. Lindor and Charles meet them as well, the red ribbons of blood now wrapped around their foreheads like bandanas. Their cheeks and hands and stomachs are marked in white and a cry rings out: “On to New Orleans!”. The revolt is marching on.

There were times that the play’s pacing was off, causing the momentum to stop and start. Some scenes felt like they ran a little too long. Not all the performers projected enough to compensate for the open/outdoor space and the noises of the neighborhood. Even though I placed myself in the front row for each piece, I sometimes lost what performers were saying. Plays about events or issues can wax sentimental or become very preachy. I was pleasantly surprised to find this was not the case here. The event at the heart of *Rumours of War* is Louisiana’s 1811 Slave Revolt, but the piece is interested in the people, the ghosts, the small stories at the everyday level. It forces us to confront the questions: What is our past? What of our past is being silenced? How do we listen to the quiet whispers of forgotten history? Who should tell these stories? who needs to hear them?

Rumours of War is moving and haunting. It boasts an excellent ensemble of performers, musicians, designers, and technicians. Shawn Hall’s costumes were sumptuous and symbolic. I was especially taken with Charles’ jacket with the nails sewn on the back, suggesting deep scars. Jeff Becker’s set was a series of well-crafted installations within the museum’s space. It was striking, simple and effective. Sean LaRocca and Kathy Randels’ original music created a lovely melodic thread that helped carry us through one piece to the next. Maurice Turner’s trumpet was like a ghostly wail that followed us around each corner. The ensemble of performers should be commended for their performances filled with so much heart and spirit.

During one of the scenes, Charles stalks along the top of a wrought iron fence high above the playing space. He seemed to almost float in the air. I spotted a car driving down the street that slowed down. The music blaring from its windows ceased. I watched as the passenger of the car looked up at the performer. She looked at the audience. The past forcefully intruded on the present in that moment. The present stumbled upon the past. It was a strange and unexpected meeting. Exciting and awful. And important. *Rumours of War* challenges itself to unearth and grapple with some very deep wounds and mournful ghosts. In doing so, the piece challenges its audience to face a difficult collective history for the benefit of a better present. And ultimately, a better future.

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