

Sunya offers dance that haunts

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Sinha Danse and Constantinople of Montreal offered an entrancing blend of dance styles in their show Sunya, at the Dalhousie Arts Centre in Halifax on Thursday night. Sunya can also be seen Saturday at 8 p.m. MICHAEL SLOBODIAN

It was a mesmerizing, haunting performance — a mystical Persian mosaic of dance styles, ideas, murals and music.

Sinha Danse and Constantinople of Montreal brought their spectacular show Sunya, courtesy of Live Art Dance, to the stage of the 3 James Dunn Theatre at the Dalhousie Arts Centre in Halifax on Thursday night.

At the beginning of the piece, the setar strings start up, and the musician playing them, Iranian-born Kiya Tabassian, walks on from the left. He is met in the middle of the stage by a dancer, the choreographer of the performance, Indo-Armenian Roger Sinha. The two wear similar expressions of recognition while staring each other down.

They begin to converse cross-culturally, to relate and then collaborate.

Tabassian sings as though asking a question, and Sinha springs into motion. He turns his hips, legs and feet left and then right, gliding smoothly on the stage, a supple bend in his spine. His upper body reveals his own codified responses through intricate positions borrowed from the ancient art of Bharata Natyam, a classical south Indian dance form, and a connection to his background. His legs move in the manner of contemporary dance. His hands express his eastern roots. The setar's music calls him home.

These are the artistic directors of Sunya. It is their consideration of their own migratory pasts, and their own search for identity among several influencing cultures — from different eastern countries to North America, and particularly Quebec — that have inspired this performance.

Sunya, meaning “zero” and “number” in Sanskrit, provides a great starting point for such contemplation. In the program, they say this choice “refers to this fundamental paradox of being, of language, of movement.”

Though it's a bit unusual for the topics of globalization, colonization and exile to be addressed during a contemporary dance show, they, along with musicians Patrick Graham on percussion and Pierre-Yves Martel playing the viola de gamba and dancers Thomas Casey, Tanya Crowder, Ghislaine Doté and François Richard, do a tremendous job in doing so.

A long note rises from the viola de gamba while Graham scratches the surface of the drum's skin, creating an otherworldly sound. Casey drags his body across the stage while shrouded in light, toward the sound's source, apparently enraptured in curiosity. Two lit beings appear on stage, with the aim of chasing him. Perhaps they represent two identities, harassing him to choose. Tormented, he

lies on his back, grabbing forward into the air and turns over himself, again and again, just as we mentally roll through such thoughts when equally perplexed.

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The choreography does a great job portraying this journey to self-understanding.

The dancers, wearing tight white tops with armbands and accents of gold, with loose eastern-inspired beige pants, all designed by Denis Lavoie, deliver their performance flawlessly. They communicate clearly, interacting and supporting one another throughout the show. Their movements are measured and precise, yet even when dancing with the full company, individual personalities shine through, thanks to the expressive nature of the Indian-infused style.

The piece includes incredible visual art by Jérôme Delapierre, experimenting with video projectors, mirrors and lighting; he creates a canvas of the stage and its backdrop.

Early on in the piece, Arabic calligraphy covers the floor. As Tabassian begins singing mournfully, the words transition to appear as moving water, acting as a liquid unifier, reintroducing and empowering the dancers back into the performance from a calm and cleansed state.

Wanting for a reconciled world between East and West, the piece's choreography builds up to become full of productive energy with the aid of eastern rhythms, inspiring the dancers to take this Indian fusion into their footwork. In ending this way, Sinha hopes to instill the idea that traditions can work together positively, instead of creating divides or acting to denounce another culture.

It is a performance as stirring to the mind as the intrinsic sounds of the setar are to the heart.

More than anything, this piece emits pure joy from freedom of expression.

Sunya can be seen Saturday at 8 p.m.

Kelsey Power is a freelance writer who lives in Halifax.
