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Dancing in the Streets' 'Safe Harbor' Transforms Red Hook Into a Living Theater

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Brooklyn Daily Eagle

RED HOOK — At Saturday night's opening performance of Safe Harbor — a mesmerizing mélange of site-specific dance, theater and music that uses Red Hook's historic waterfront both as its stage and its inspiration — the drama began before the performers even appeared.

The desolate beauty of the waterfront, with its cobbled streets and 19th-century brick warehouses, was enhanced by a sunset that turned the sky Technicolor hues.

As the last light bathed the audience, many of whom had come by special bus from Manhattan, the show began. A collaboration between two performing arts companies, Dancing in the Streets and Dance/Theatre/Electra, Safe Harbor takes as its subject the experience of the Irish, African-American, and Italian immigrants who poured into Brooklyn during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Vocalist and musician Tye Giraud, who composed most of the music for Safe Harbor, lifted her rich voice in a pensive African chant that was echoed by the Safe Harbor Community Choir, composed mainly of teenagers and young adults from the surrounding area.

Giraud and the choir — all clad in traditional African garb — were accompanied by the keening of Marlene Rice's lone violin and Cooper Moore's homemade percussion instruments.

The sound of five voices, amplified and ringing out over the Hudson River and into the balmy evening air was stirring, the effect heightened by the subtle but atmospheric theatrical lighting beaming down from a warehouse roof.

Fixed on the singers, it took the audience a few minutes to realize that

'Safe Harbor'

Continued from page 1

something was happening on the gravelly river bank below the wharf. Three dancers — a woman and two men, their lithe bodies clad in simple red shifts — were making their way toward the water bearing a giant glass bowl filled with red flower petals.

With slow, ritualistic movements and gestures, the dancers entered the river until they were submerged to the waist, strewn the petals over the water's surface.

As the music quickened, so did the dancers' movements, their synchronized splashing becoming a kind of ecstatic water ballet that appeared to draw its inspiration from primitive dance.

Part of the drama of this performance was simply the fact that the dancers were so fearlessly dunking themselves in the waters of the Hudson. The sight of human bodies (at least live ones) immersed in this notoriously polluted urban river is one very few New Yorkers alive to day have ever witnessed. It was a strangely moving vision, conjuring up images of Hindus bathing in the holy waters of the Ganges.

By the time the dance was finished, the sky had deepened to violet, the Jersey shore was bejeweled with lights and the Verrazano Bridge shimmered like a string of emeralds in the distance.

Against this stunning backdrop, two small, open boats silently rowed toward shore. The dancers, some of them costumed now as European immigrants, reappeared on the river bank to perform a pantomime of sorrowful farewells that ended with them climbing aboard the boats which carried them off into the night.

Accompanied by the passionate and melancholy music, the performance piece had the emotional purity and pull of silent film melodrama. In fact, the entire production was extremely cinematic. Some of the images it created, such as costumed dancers writhing against a night sky or a candlelit boat floating on the darkened water, linger in the mind like great shots in a film.

The element of surprise in Safe Harbor, as it dissolves the boundaries of conventional theater, evokes a wonder that must be akin to what early movie

goers — many of them newly arrived American immigrants — felt when they saw moving pictures for the first time. As the performance unfolds in the real world, it continually incorporates the landscape and horizon in unexpected and visually poetic ways.

From the dance on the river bank, the show moves — the audience tagging behind it like an enthralled child — to the Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge built in 1914 and now the Hudson Waterfront Museum. Here tap dancer Hank Smith and Irish step dancer Josephine McManara leavened the mood of the show with a light-hearted duet.

With its potpourri of different types of performances, Safe Harbor also smacks a bit of vaudeville — another favorite entertainment of turn-of-the-century American immigrants.

One very brief and amusing segment featured Big Apple Circus clown David Shaps dressed as a merman. As he hung from the ceiling, juggling, his young daughter — a tiny nymphet in a sequined mermaid getup — warbled a ditty.

It was a performance very much in the spirit of the oddball novelty acts, many of them rearing family members, with which vaudeville abounded.

Perhaps the most amazing act of Safe Harbor occurred on a cobbled stretch of Conover Street in front of Balzano's Bar. It is the last longshoreman's bar left in Red Hook and the exterior looks like a set from On the Town.

In front of Balzano's sat a group of old timers, not one of whom appeared to be under 70, eating pizza and drinking beer. They formed a tableau that looked like it had been lifted, intact, straight out of the 1940s.

The fact that the old people were obviously the real thing, not actors, yet totally untaxed by the audience gathered around them, made the whole thing seem slightly surreal. The line between life and performance was suddenly blurred.

This segment, billed in the program as an interview, and conducted by writer and performance artist Annie Lanzillotto, was oral history as theater. When Lanzillotto called into the bar for "Sunny," one half expected Frank Sinatra in sailor clothes to emerge, but instead, out came Antonio (Sunny) Balzano, an elegant, elderly man with

gray hair rippling past his shoulders. He is the owner of the bar (which is open only on Fridays), as well as an artist, poet and musician.

A natural raconteur with a melodious Italian accent, Balzano — who was born in the building that houses his bar and whose family has lived in Red Hook since the 1890s — shared with the audience his memories of the neighborhood during World War II when the waterfront was teeming with workers and Balzano's Bar was only one of many in the area that catered to the sailors.

Balzano recalls how, as a young child growing up with tales of his family's hardships in Italy, he used to gaze across New York Harbor at Staten Island, which he mistook for Europe, the homeland of his people.

At the end of his talk, Balzano gets his tiny, ancient mother to stand up and sing "A Little On the Lonely Side" accompanied by accordion player Bob Goldberg.

The song, Balzano's monologue as he stands in front of this lonely outpost of old Red Hook, surrounded by the living relics of its past, conveyed a particularly vivid sense of what has been lost.

This interview was the most poignant sequence in Safe Harbor, the remaining few acts in the production, which included a slide show projected on to huge satellite dishes and more music and dancing, felt almost anticlimactic.

If Safe Harbor was more impressive as theater than dance, that is as it should be. The waterfront was the real star, dwarfing the performers, except for Balzano, who emerged as a distinct and vital persona.

"Challenging audiences to see the mystery in familiar settings" is what Safe Harbor's director and choreographer Martha Bowers states as her goal in the program. With this refreshingly un slick yet often breathtaking production she certainly succeeded in doing that.

And Safe Harbor, with its harmonious melody of African-American and Irish music and dance performed before a racially diverse audience, made — at least for a couple hours — the dream of multiculturalism a reality.

Safe Harbor will be performed September 18, 19 and 20 at 7 p.m. starting on Red Hook's Pier 41. Tickets are free.