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Evie Ladin's Body Music of Women's Woes

MoToR/dance's 'Water in the Kettle' restaged in Alameda

By Lou Fancher | Jan 23, 2024



COMPLEX FEMALE Artistic Director Evie Ladin Has Created The Equivalent Of A Masterclass In Poignant Choreography. (Photo By Dean Bosche/Outdoor Film)



Anyone who missed last year's world premiere of MoToR/dance's full evening-length production, *Water in the Kettle*, will have another chance this year to snatch up a ticket to one of two restagings Feb. 3 at Alameda's Rhythmix Cultural Works.

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Oakland-based artistic director, banjo player, singer/songwriter, percussive dancer and choreographer Evie Ladin has created the equivalent of a masterclass in poignant and exuberant choreography and compelling storytelling. The multi-layered work speaks in response to the struggles of modern women in contemporary society.

Through polyrhythmic body music, three-plus-part harmonies and tightly woven spacial configurations and patterns, a multigenerational cast of women and additional guest musicians renders an in-the-moment experience that feels innately human, tactile and personal, but also utterly and completely communal.

In a video performance, the women's faces at first are reserved and focused, as if the marvelous sounds they make with clapping hands or by contacting their torsos and legs are created at work desks and come from keyboards. After 30 seconds, with the camera shifting, the women begin to sing lyrics. Their arms float skyward like scarves swept upward in the wind, and chins lift. A serene look appears on one or two faces.

At the one-minute mark, the women's interactions become interpersonal and more complex, like a game of tag or a conversation occurring in physical form. Language and punctuation arrive as their black boots stomp clear, weighty "consonants." Glances, direct gazes and smiles provide expressive messages that seem to say, "You are in this with me and I with you," or to ask, "Can you believe this is happening, and what do you think about it?" Listening is inherent in the dynamic dialogue of this company made up of bodies in motion.

Composing the cast in addition to Ladin are Valerie Gutwirth, Keira Armstrong, Tammy Chang, Kristen DeAmicis, Heather Arnett and Sydney Lozier. Additional performers include chorus members JJ Hansen, Cynthia Mah and Linda Carr, and musicians Amber Hines (vocal, percussion) and Lisa Berman

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(vocal, banjo, slide guitar). An edited version of the 2023 premiere, created by Dean Bosche/Outdoor Film, is available for streaming online to audiences unable to attend a live performance.

“MoToR/dance is an ensemble of grown women, raised by feminist mothers, amazed to find ourselves still facing some of the same obstacles, especially as we come into ourselves at our most powerful,” Ladin says. “In the most creative ways, *Water in the Kettle* explores the complex female in a way that’s not didactic but expository, with humor, grace and tight ensemble rhythm.”

Ladin’s foundational training as a performer is grounded in Appalachian cultural arts that include percussive dance, harmony singing, string band music and social dance. Bringing these time-honored traditions into contemporary context introduces a complex blend of Black, brown and white cultures, and seeks to investigate rhythms and other aspects of sound that trace their origins to African diaspora polyrhythms.

In program notes, Ladin writes, “I have been exploring the real roots of this music since I was a teenager and realized this inherent connection. I’ve been fortunate to be able to authentically explore these traditions in very intercultural experiences, [including] with Keith Terry and Crosspulse, through the International Body Music Festivals and [the body music/percussive dance] community around the world.”

The founder of IBMF, Keith Terry, trained as a jazz drummer. His performances have been called “musical ballet” by the *Wall Street Journal*. His collaborations with artists such as Robin Williams, Bobby McFerrin, Bill Irwin, Turtle Island Quartet and Ladin have raised the art form’s visibility.

“The 12-member cast has been the same since the start,” Ladin says. “Everyone is committed to this show and finds

great pleasure in the opportunity to perform it as often as we have. Dancers tend to work for years on work that is only performed a few times, and I balk against that model! The complexity yet accessibility of ‘body music,’ plus the emotional and intellectual impact of the production, is deeply satisfying for the cast and the audience.”

The International Day of Body Music is celebrated annually on the first Sunday in February—on Feb. 4 a free, interactive Body Music workshop/jam led by Ladin, Terry, Bryan Dyer and Jim Santi Owen will guide and encourage people of all levels to clap, step, sing and “play with their human instruments.”



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