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LIFTING THE SOUL

Liturgical dance companies enhance religious rituals

By Janet Weeks

IT'S FRIDAY EVENING IN SAN FRANCISCO'S Chinatown. The narrow streets are charged with dinner crowds. Inside Old Saint Mary's Cathedral it's calm and hushed. In the empty sanctuary, five or six are quietly marking dance steps around the altar in preparation for tomorrow night's Mass.

It's an unorthodox way to see the church's rich, old tapes, but I and the other members of the Omega West Dance Company feel perfectly at home. We have been dancing for special liturgies at the cathedral for almost ten years. For many congregants, our presence has become as traditional as psalms are in the Chinese-dinner parlors outside.

Omega West is one of a handful of professional companies that perform dances in houses of worship. Some create dances almost exclusively for one congregation; others tour to countless churches and synagogues; and some are secular dance companies whose repertoire includes pieces for religious services. But all are driven by the belief that dance has the power to increase the experience of the divine.

This isn't a new concept. In many traditions, dance has always been as much a part of religious expression and experience as music. But in some religions, use of the body in worship became suspect, even banned. Those who dance in synagogues and churches still contend with people who feel that because dance involves the body, it runs the risk of pulling people's minds in sinful, rather than prayerful, directions.

But, though its use was limited, dance isn't completely foreign to the history of Jewish or Christian worship. Indeed, the liturgical movement that inspired the Anshelky Ballet Company's *Mass Intero* (The Jews) dates back to roughly 1200 and comes from Seville, Spain.

Las Sereas was choreographed by Anna Adriaensz Anshelky, who founded the Minneapolis-based Anshelky Ballet Company with her husband, Luitold, in 1952. (Both danced in Col. W. de Baud's Original Ballet Russe before settling in the Twin Cities after World War II.) Anna Anshelky, a devout Catholic, read about a dance still performed by showboys in Seville's cathedral and was immediately attracted to create her company's only liturgical work.

In Spain, the dance is done to accompany the Blessed Sacrament, a consecrated wafer used in Communion. The boys begin by carrying in the monstrance, a large, gilded

chalice that holds and displays the Sacrament. The rest of the dance is made up of solitary liturgical scenes at the foot of the altar after the monstrance is placed upon it.

For her interpretation, Anshelky used some of the marching movement and dress of female dancers in replicas of the medieval attire the young boys wore. But she decided the main part of her dance would be a meditation on the death of Jesus. In her piece, the dancers portray the crucifixion story. Since its creation, *Las Sereas* has been performed hundreds of times at many different churches. It is often done on Good Friday, the observed anniversary of Jesus' death.



Using dance to mark so solemn an occasion might seem odd. But liturgical choreographers argue that dance, as a physical expression of the full range of human experience, is as appropriate on such occasions as on celebratory ones. Solemn liturgical rites do present special challenges, however.

"Excellent dancers can't always do *Las Sereas* well," says Maria Anshelky, the Anshelky's son and now the company's director. "It takes something more. You need to become the past—but it can't be exaggerated. You have to feel it in a real way. It's not that you have to be Catholic or Christian. But the attention you give to the way you pick up and move with a monstrance, like the raising of thorns, is so important." The says the goal is not to win the audience. Instead, you want to lead listeners deeply into the religious experience. "It's like the Zen of ballet," he says.

Attention to the particular needs of the service begins long before the dancers ever enter the sanctuary. The Catholic Mass, Protestant services, and Jewish liturgies all have parts that are always followed. Liturgical dancers have to carefully weave their choreography into sites that have been set for generations.

AS A CHOREOGRAPHER, YOU HAVE to "dream liturgically," says Carla DeCola, founder of the Omega Liturgical Dance Company in Manhattan and now director of the group's Berkeley, California, sister company, Omega West. "You have to consider not only the mood of the day but also the part of the service you're creating for." Dance might accompany the entrance of the clergy and choir into the church, might replace the sermon, serve as a meditation after a scriptural

reading, or accompany an ancient prayer. And all liturgical works have to be created with particularities of each sanctuary's architecture in mind. Sometimes the dancers must negotiate stairs. Sometimes an immovable altar or ark will sit in the middle of the dancing space and must be worked into the choreography. Anshelky says his group needs twelve to twenty hours of rehearsal time in the space whenever they take *Las Sereas* to an unfamiliar sanctuary.

DeCola's Omega dancers also tour to 200 different churches. But for the last six years, the New York group has been part of an annual, one-of-a-kind liturgical ritual known as the Earth Mass, or *Massa Gaia*, that's become a tradition at the large, public Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in upper Manhattan. The Earth Mass is an example of how an ancient rite can express specific needs and concerns of today.

The October liturgy honors St. Francis, the patron saint of animals and ecology. Earth

Avivah Dance Ensemble, built on ritual movement in the Torah service. It begins with the traditional dressing of the tallit or prayer shawl. In Tucker's dance, these enveloping movements evolve into the sacred way of raising the Torah. "There's a prescribed way of lifting and moving it," says Tucker. "We use gestures that come from that." The dance also has an improvised section based on the position of Torah to be read on the day of the dance. Often, the piece replaces that day's sermon.

To create choreography that can, like a sermon, take ancient words and make them resonate for believers today, it helps to have an intimate knowledge of scripture. But

Open up *Avivah Bible Company* dance in Los Angeles. Opposite, *Jesus: The Omega Dance Company* dance an ancient prayer called *De Kyrie* during St. John the Divine, Greater Church House (New York) and members of Saint Paul's Community Paper Church in "The Captive" from St. Mark's (L.A.).

Tucker points out that such knowledge comes in handy elsewhere, too. "It's great if you can speak the clergy's language," she says, "because they almost certainly won't know anything about dance and may be concerned about having it in the service." An understanding of various prayers and scriptural passages gets a long way toward putting clergy at ease.

Both Tucker and DeCola consider choreography a major part of their work. But they also place importance on teaching non-dancers to move spiritually. Both teach workshops designed to take all levels of dancers into a deeper, embodied understanding of scripture. This means focusing on movement as a form of personal meditation rather than on performance. Both choreographers say dancing close for a liturgy calls for confidence, instead dancers so the congregation won't be distracted by fears that the movers will make mistakes. But occasionally both women do teach choreography to non-dancers who want to dance for their own congregations. When members of a congregation prepare liturgical movement for their friends and families, the result can be very moving for those who know and love them—even if the dancers don't have lots of training.

Janet Weeks, a Brooklyn-based choreographer and dancer, has found this to be true—as much so that his liturgical work revolves almost entirely around one church and he uses members of the congregation, along with professionals, in every sacred work he creates. Gaines founded the Creative Outlet Dance Theatre of Brooklyn seven years ago. But he didn't begin to do liturgical work until he met Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood, pastor of the 8,000-member Saint Paul Community Baptist Church in East New York, in 1992. Youngblood realized right away that dance could help the church's ministry, so he asked Gaines to create movement for their annual production of Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*. Since then, Creative Outlet has been a fixture at the church, creating dance for worship services and other events and teaching movement classes to children and adults.

OVER THE YEARS, HUNDREDS OF Saint Paul's congregants have danced with Gaines and his group, and the time they put in isn't trivial. Three months before a church presentation, Gaines has his dancers, novice and professional, rehearsing three nights a week.

Saint Paul's has given Gaines free space and time to create, and he has made liturgical works for Easter, Mother's and Father's Day, Christmas, and Black History Month. Often his liturgical works are danced to hymns or spirituals, and can happen at almost any point in the service.

The church also presents a huge dance-theater production often performed in churches but not during the liturgy, that Gaines choreographed called *The Mighty Isiah*. *Isaiah* is a Jewish word that is used to describe a great prophet or doctor. The Jews remember the millions of Africans who lost their lives to slavery. Starting in Africa, it begins with a village scene. "It's a beautiful, colorful celebration with dancing and traditional dancing. But it's interrupted by genocide," says Gaines. The Jews takes viewers to the slave block, plantation, and, eventually, to a celebration of freedom. But it ends with people in chains.

"The slaves were led to believe they were free but that they're still chained together mentally," says Gaines. "The *Mighty Isiah* is an historical piece that brings history to life and awareness," says the dancer and choreographer. "Our effort is to create spiritual order in our time by showing people the suffering our ancestors have gone through." Though the struggles are harsh, Gaines says audiences are uplifted. "Dance is a total package. It brings together mind, body, soul, and spirit of healing. When all of these elements come together you've got something powerful." ■

Associate Editor Janet Weeks dances with Omega West and holds a master's degree in theology.



