

Portland Ballet
Choral Art Society
"The Armed Man"

April. 26

by Christopher Hyde

The production of "The Armed Man: A Mass for Piece," Friday night at Merrill Auditorium, by the Portland Ballet Company, the Choral Art Society and members of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, was a triumph equivalent to their ground-breaking "Carmina Burana" a few years ago.

In many ways, the interpretation in dance of the themes of war and peace was a more difficult challenge, but choreographer Nell Shipman and artistic director Eugenia met it both artistically and emotionally.

The Choral Art Society, and the orchestra, under Robert Russell, made the most of Karl Jenkins' difficult and eclectic score, composed in 2000. Soprano Sarah Bailey and mezzo-soprano Abra Mueller sang the solo parts.

The ballet opened and closed with five storytellers--Michael Bachem, Peggy Akers, Abdinasir Ahmed, Ghomri Rostampour and Bill Nemitz--each of whom recounts his or her direct experience of war.

Shipman's choreography is based upon the corp de ballet's depiction of the Soldier's internal struggle throughout the 12 sections of the mass. Soloists include the Soldier in Body, danced by James Kramlich, the Soldier in Spirit, Joseph Jeffries, his Conscience, Morgan Brown Sanborn, Life, Jennifer Jones, and Death, Erica Diesl.

All of the dancers were costumed in neo-classical Greek robes, bearing emblems of open wounds on the fabric. The Soldier was in street clothes and his spirit in white.

The dancers were on stage for all sections of the mass, except for the Muslim Call to Prayer of the second movement, but Shipman's innovative choreography, revealing what is going through the Soldier's mind, held the interest throughout.

Her striking passages were too numerous to list but some of the outstanding ones were the Soldier's death, when he is dragged off, arms outstretched as if on a cross; the pile of bodies in the seventh movement, "Charge," which twitches like a huge, dying insect; the scene in which each thought passes through the Soldier's body; the pas de deux between the Soldier's body and spirit in which they try unsuccessfully to join once more...

The height of the ballet, fittingly, was a triumphant pas de trois in the Benedictus, with Life, Death and Spirit, in an absolutely ravishing sequence of lifts with near-perfect flow, grace and balance.

It was preceded by a brilliant solo by Jeffries in "Now the Guns have Stopped," and followed by the ensemble in "Better is Peace."

Dancers and storytellers appeared together after the last note, resulting in a long standing ovation.

"The Armed Man" ballet should be seen more widely. O'Brien was thinking of a gift to Boston, but Washington, D.C. would be equally appropriate.

Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram. He can be reached at classbeat@netscape.net.