
Los Angeles Times

The Wonder of ‘Magic Frequencies’

BY MARK SWED

FEB. 29, 2000 12 AM PT

TIMES MUSIC CRITIC

Meredith Monk calls “Magic Frequencies,” her new work that she presented at the Alex Theatre Sunday night, a science-fiction chamber opera. I would call it a wonder opera.

Wonder, philosopher Rene Descartes noted, comes first, before understanding, before judgment, before we decide about beauty or danger, love or hate. It is, in Descartes’ beautiful phrase, “a sudden surprise of the soul.”

Wonder is the very essence of theater and also its rarest, most fragile commodity, undone more often than not by all the pragmatic demands of the stage. Get a glimpse of it, and an audience will go home happy. In “Magic Frequencies,” we bathe in it for 75 minutes.

In the opening scene, a couple (Monk and Ching Gonzalez) sit at the dinner table. The stage is mad with clashing checkered patterns--his, hers, the tablecloth’s. The couple are brought plates, glasses, a vase and flower, a bowl of steaming corn on the cob. They have an animated conversation in song, nonsense syllables in a chirpy give-and-take musical style that is uniquely Monk’s--it owes a debt, but not a huge one, to Minimalism. They are adorable; the music is amusing; the corn looks delicious

Behind the couple are three large translucent rectangles, and behind them three extraterrestrials (Theo Bleckmann, Katie Geissinger and Lanny Harrison) parade by. They sing too, in sweet hiccuping counterpoint. Invisible to the couple, they approach the table and curiously sample corn. The stage dissolves to the sound, amplified into cosmic electronic music, of merry chomping.

Soon after, there is a dignified death scene. Gonzalez, in pajamas, lies motionless on a bed, and a solemn Monk erupts in an emotional dance. And soon after that comes a brilliant, joyous silhouette dance for the five performers with the stage drenched in gorgeous orange-turning-to-yellow light.

More not-quite-connected but not-entirely-disjointed scenes follow. One, with Cubist videos of department-store escalators in the background finds Geissinger with a shopping bag singing a chirpy “hey, hey, hey” into a cell phone. In another, a conservatively suited Harrison is a newswoman who becomes possessed by dancing extraterrestrials in the background. At the end of “Magic Frequencies,” the cast, all in black, carry on stage small luminously lit models of the sets and sit in quiet wonder watching a solar eclipse and singing in lucent harmonies.

I’ve left a few things out. The ballroom dancing, and the astronomer (Coco Pekelis) who stands on stage with her telescope and oscilloscope and occasionally speaks. There is also the entr’acte where we see close-up projections of the cast yawn, laugh, recoil, gossip, sneeze, listen, ruminate. And there are the remarkable musicians, Allison Sniffin and John Hollenbeck--she with her keyboard, Theremin and violin; he with his arresting percussion instruments, including tin cans and musical saw, as well as keyboard. At one wonderful point, a dancer in spacesuit is accompanied by Theremin and the rattling of what appears to be a large automobile spring.

Monk is responsible for all of this. She is--in no special order--composer, choreographer, singer, dancer, writer, director, filmmaker, pioneer. All talents contribute to a single, elemental vision that finds sense in nonsense, that finds magic deeply embedded in the everyday.

“Magical Frequencies” flows together in ways that might be discovered with enough analysis. But maybe not. Monk has created a very sophisticated, very centered, very beautiful art with the intent of disarming the brain’s more rational functioning. There is a childlike wonderment (it is hard to get away from the wonder word with Monk) in her work, and thus for all her avant-garde sensibility (or maybe precisely because of it), “Magical Frequencies” transcends age or background. A child of about 7, seated across the aisle from me, laughed uproariously at the funny parts and sat in wide-mouthed astonishment along with the rest of us when that was the obvious response.

The production--with elegant sets by Carol Bailey, witty and touching costumes of Gabriel Berry, lighting wizardry from Thomas Hase--is excellent on every level. The performers and musicians are stunning. Monk, who has been experimenting with

music, vocal techniques, dance, movement, theater, film, opera--you name it--for more than 30 years, has reached a new level where every gesture speaks something elemental and direct, every vignette works. There is no one like Monk and no other work like "Magical Frequencies." And although it's a pity that it could not have stuck around longer than one night, that also enhanced its wonder--the sudden surprise of the soul, which is gone before you were even sure it was really ever here.