

Ballet Effectively Captures Anne Frank's Life

Written by Johanna Welzenbach-Hilliard
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The Diary of Anne Frank is practically synonymous with the Holocaust. For this reason, Alan Ross, executive director of the Jewish Federation of the Quad Cities, asked Ballet Quad Cities to create a dance based on the book as part of the community project "Beyond the Holocaust: Lessons for Today. "

In response to his challenging request, Ballet Quad Cities and its artistic director, Johanne Jakheln, have succeeded brilliantly in bringing Anne's story to life through dance in the world premiere of *From the Pages of a Young Girl's Life: The Anne Frank Ballet*, performed at the Galvin Fine Arts Center on Tuesday, May 24.

In the ballet's program notes, Executive Director Joedy Cook describes the lengths to which she, Jakheln, and ballet members went to ensure the realism of this production. The company did extensive research on the fashions of the period, and they even found vintage bicycles from the World War II era to use as props. For background music, the ballet used pieces by six composers who wrote in the Judaic tradition, and a piano concerto by Mozart that Anne mentioned in her diary.

The ballet opens with a scene of 13-year-old Anne (played convincingly by Hannah Dorfmueller) and her childhood friends riding bikes on the streets of Amsterdam, enjoying the freedom they will soon lose. I liked the feeling of jubilant flight the girls conveyed as they glided across the floor alongside their bicycles.

The girls' costumes were simple dresses with collared bodices, loose skirts, and cardigans displaying the yellow Star of David. This opening scene is important because viewers must understand how Anne and her friends lived normal lives despite the war raging around them.

Soon thereafter, Anne's sister Margot (the peerless Courtney Walrath) receives notice that she must go away to a Nazi labor camp. She and her mother (expertly played by Jennifer Weber) perform a dance of unutterable sorrow. Their movements were heavy, often abrupt, with heads bowed down and shoulders hunched in despair.

The family goes into hiding in a secret refuge above Otto Frank's business. The set for the hidden annex was effectively arranged with a table and chairs as the central props where all

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group activities took place.

Jakheln made good use of this furniture, having the performers dance around, in front of, and on the table. Set apart from these props was a small writing desk, placed downstage right, where the other Anne, the diarist, is seated and writing through most of the performance. At the beginning of each scene, pages from her diary were read over a loudspeaker.

What came through most effectively in this powerful performance was the emotional tension these people lived with every day. Jakheln chose modern dance movements, which use parallel and flexed feet rather than the ethereal, turned out, pointed toes of ballet. These earthy movements added greatly to the realism of the story. The performers could effectively show their very human anguish (as opposed to the lofty angst of lovelorn tragic heroes from classic ballets) in the sometimes contained, sometimes floppy motions.

In one scene, tensions grow in the tight living quarters and arguments break out. The dancers each grab a chair and dance with it while ignoring everyone else in the room. The chairs symbolize each person's private space, an unassailable refuge from the prying of others. I thought this was extremely effective, since in reality the only privacy that existed in those cramped conditions was in each person's mind.

There were two scenes that affected me profoundly. In one, the inhabitants of the secret annex must sit quietly all day because the Germans are in the offices below. Any sound would give them away. Again Jakheln used slight, spare movements to indicate the fear and boredom of sitting still for so long. The performers' faces were so expressive they truly did speak volumes.

The other scene that left me chilled was when an air-raid siren abruptly shatters the silence and the flashing lights of explosions illuminate the stage, casting grotesque shadows. Suddenly, a solitary figure appears stage left. It is a vision of Hanneli (played by Britta Anderson), a friend of Anne's. Dressed in rags and trembling uncontrollably, she beseeches Anne to help her. Anne is horrified and guilt-ridden as she realizes that could one day be her.

But there were happy moments in this self-imposed prison. Anne and her friend, Peter Van Pels (played by Jake Lyon), developed romantic feelings for one another. The scene in which they discover their mutual attraction is sweet. Their timid gestures and Anne's swooning poses effectively depict the shyness and excitement of first love.

As the ballet ends, the audience is visually assailed with a numbing slide show of the concentration camps and gas chambers, and the sea of carnage that was once human. I was struck by the smiles on the faces of the skeletal prisoners as they posed for the camera. Amidst the horror, they found a spark of joy.