

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lisa Kraus

Monks are Funny Too

by Carolyn Merritt

In the wondrous stone sanctuary that is Bryn Mawr College's McPherson Auditorium. Next to a couple who joke about charging me when I ask if the adjacent seat is free. Overheated, under multiple layers and the extra pounds of another life growing inside me. Exhorting calm as Performing Arts Coordinator Lisa Kraus announces that the Tibetan Monks of Drepung Loseling Monastery's *Sacred Music, Sacred Dance* will begin late. Suppressing a groan as the translator reads the program to us, slowly, not entirely clearly, unnecessarily given we've already waited 20 minutes, time enough to read cover to cover twice over.

Try as I might, my mind is elsewhere. Or here, there and everywhere right now.

Calculating when I need to duck out in order to catch the tango quartet at tonight's *smilonga*. Wondering if my car, dubiously parked, will still be where I left it an hour from now. Thankful and regretful for that new possession to worry about.

Trying not to giggle at the monks' two giant horns, their bleats reminiscent of sheep, the Klezmer-like sound of the pair in concert with clarinets, cymbals, a multi-colored pinwheel lollipop drum. Wondering if the backdrop behind them is Lhasa. Impressed by the buzzing drone of their guttural chants; dismayed at my inability to ride the wave of sound to a more contemplative state.

Rolling through the week's tasks, Thanksgiving Day guest list. Plotting a course of action that covers housecleaning, food shopping, yoga, doula interview, dinner with friends, refreshing on the ins and outs of turkey, the never-ending question of stuffing.

Surprised at the force with which the monks push, shove, jockey with and talk over one another as they debate the meaning of compassion. Charmed by the playfulness they inject into rather heady stuff, as each bout climaxes in claps and smiles.

Wondering how much I really know about Tibet, aside from vague notions that Richard Gere supports the Dalai Lama, that David Lynch's transcendental meditation foundation may have roots as far back as Twin Peaks. (In one episode, Agent Cooper awakens from a dream about Tibet to devise an ingenious mind-body-intuition deductive technique.)

Pondering names, a red-headed baby, the dizzying array of "must-have" items for the tiniest of creatures. Reckoning I could hire someone to baby-outfit our home if I were willing to pay enough. Questioning where that might lie on the slope of outsourcing reproduction, what wombs for hire share in common with monks for sponsor.

Unable to keep from laughing at the Snow Lion, the larger-than-life white and green mascot with the cartoon face, goofy grin and puppy-dog tail, manned by two monks.

Thinking that celebrity endorsements make me leery, even as they bring issues within my radar for the attention they generate. Remembering that a dear friend's mom became a Buddhist after recovering from cancer, that the remaining years of her life seemed a thing of substance, beauty, equanimity.

Impressed by the ticket sales for an evening of music and dance presented by a group of monks from halfway around the world, so marginalized they are practically for sale.

How long will any of this stick with most? As long as the prayer beads, flags, books and other Tibetan memorabilia are available for sale? If the crowds at the merchandise table are any indication, presence alone doesn't ensure remembrance; a material marker is needed. Or perhaps these purchases are political gestures, commercialized expressions of solidarity.

In her introduction, Kraus reminds us that we are about to witness a sacred practice. Though she never utters the word, "authenticity" pops to mind. That the monks are sharing this practice with an audience doesn't negate its truth. That they have transformed it into a spectacle to be consumed doesn't necessarily render it profane. Like the "World Peace" flag that rolls off the Snow Lion's lips, messages and offerings can take many forms.

I leave at intermission, content as I step into the damp night, eager for a smaller kind of peace — though no less revolutionary — that I might find in an embrace.

Sacred Music, Sacred Dance. Tibetan Monks of Drepung Loseling Monastery. McPherson Auditorium, Goodhart Hall, Bryn Mawr College, November 22.

By Carolyn Merritt
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