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Local women create rock opera about Mary Magdalene

By Mark Collins Camera Theater Critic
Friday, September 26, 2008



Photo by Marty Caivano

Marika Reisberg, left, as Magdalene, and Natalie Oliver, as "Mother Wisdom," rehearse "Magdalene, Woman of Light" at Broomfield United Methodist Church.

There's a reason artistic partners Susan Griffin and Michele Wagner wanted to create a rock opera and not a traditional musical when they started writing "Magdalene, Woman of Light."

The opera, which receives its premiere full production beginning Thursday at the Denver Civic Theatre, includes 24 songs and plenty of choreography, but no scripted dialogue between the music. Wagner says the opera aims to open audience's hearts more than pique their minds. She thinks the opera form offers that opportunity best.

"It's all sung, it's all danced, and people take that in with their heart and their bodies," Wagner says. "We didn't want people to take this in with their minds. We want them to take it in with their bodies and experience it there."

Listening to intuition, seeing beyond the material world and opening the heart are in line with the themes explored in the opera. Griffin, Wagner and composer Kama Devi -- all of Boulder County -- spent considerable time researching the life of the historical Mary Magdalene during the creation of the piece. They pored through a bookshelf worth of resources, from the Bible to the Gnostic Gospels (the centuries-old texts uncovered in 1945 in Egypt) to Riane Eisler's 1988 book "The Chalice and the Blade," which re-examines the feminine role in ancient times.

The Magdalene in "Woman of Light" is not the prostitute perhaps typically thought of from lessons in Sunday school class. Rather, she's romantically linked to Jesus and represents a feminine archetype.

What's a good romance without some romantic tension, though? In "Woman of Light," Peter, Jesus' most loyal and ambitious Apostle, is threatened by the close relationship Jesus has with Mary Magdalene. It sparks a love triangle.

"Peter represents everyperson and that wonderful human part of us that wants to be special," Wagner says. "He wants to be chosen. (He experiences) that part of us that feels jealous and petty."

Peter, a fisherman by trade, uses his hands for a living. He's passionate about Jesus, and Jesus' cause, but is uneasy with the intuitive side of life, Wagner says. Peter represents the masculine, Mary Magdalene the feminine, and Jesus the perfect

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What: "Magdalene, Woman of Light"

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 5 p.m. Sunday, Thursday through Oct. 19

Where: Denver Civic Theatre, 721 Santa Fe Drive, Denver

Tickets: \$34.50-\$39.50

Info: 303-309-3773 or www.denvercivic.com

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blending of masculine and feminine energy.

And in "Magdalene, Woman of Light," the love story is delivered with a backbeat.

Griffin and Wagner hooked up with Kama Devi, a local musician and teacher, in 2004. With much of the libretto already penned, Kama Devi began writing the music. She drew on several musical styles when composing the score.

"We mix some Middle Eastern flavors in with rock and jazz and the harp to get that essence of Magdalene," Kama Devi says.

Among the musicians in the five-piece band set to accompany the opera are guitarist Ted Mentry and pianist/conductor Scott Martin. Along with the traditional Western sound, the keyboard used in the production samples Middle Eastern instruments like the oud, kanon and nay.

The creative team first presented a scaled-down, one-hour version of the opera during the 2005 Boulder International Fringe Festival. After that, they went back to work and eventually produced a staged-reading at Boulder's Dinner Theatre in November 2007. There, a roomful of invited guests gave valuable feedback via comment cards, Wagner says.

"It took Sue, Kama Devi and I five work sessions to go through all the comment cards," she says.

When the show was ready for a full production, things came together quickly earlier this year when a slot opened at the Denver Civic Theatre.

Kama Devi says "Woman of Light" isn't trying to revise history.

"We're not saying this is the way it was," she says. "It's telling the story in an allegorical way."

And, as Wagner says, the opera intends to tell the story to your heart.

"Yes, we need our minds for discernment, but we're missing the boat in not following our hearts," she says. "That's the place we need to move to."

Contact Camera Theater Critic Mark Collins at 303-473-1369 or BDCTheater@comcast.net.

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