

Joni Mitchell's moving plea for paradise: DANCE

Pepper, Kaija

The Globe and Mail (1936-Current); Feb 10, 2007; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail

pg. R8

Joni Mitchell's moving plea for paradise

DANCE

Dancing Joni & Other Works

Alberta Ballet
At the Southern Alberta
Jubilee Auditorium
In Calgary on Thursday

REVIEWED BY KAIJA PEPPER

How could anyone fail to be moved by a ballet that ends with a little girl holding two fingers up in the peace sign so beloved in the sixties and seventies? *The Fiddle and the Drum*, a collaboration between legendary singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell and Jean Grand-Maitre, the artistic director of Alberta Ballet, is a plea for sanity in these warring and environmentally threatened times. So you'd have to be made of stone not to have felt a catch in the throat as the child (Clara Stripe) — who represents the future of this planet — is given her few moments alone on stage.

Perhaps the 45-minute work is a little too sentimental to be truly heart-stopping, but it's full of athletically thrilling dance choreographed by Grand-Maitre, and it's set to non-stop Joni. That, on both counts, is a good start.

First, the music. The 63-year-old, Alberta-born Mitchell has been writing songs for four decades, and her vivid poetry and startling rhythms will play in some people's heads forever. Involving Mitchell was a canny move by Grand-Maitre, who's always thinking about how to broaden the potential audience for his dance company. He's already gone the story-ballet route (which



CHRIS BOLIN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Songwriter Joni Mitchell and the Alberta Ballet collaborated to produce *The Fiddle and the Drum*, being performed in Calgary and Edmonton.

apparently people prefer over abstract works). Now it's the turn of setting dance to popular music.

Grand-Maitre's move was also heart-felt, judging from his sensitivity to the nine-song soundtrack that includes some tunes from a 1980s album called *Dog Eat Dog* as well as two new pieces and a surprise encore set to *Big Yellow Taxi*. For the most part, he avoided choreographing literal movements to

words, and his choreographic relationship to the music was occasionally stunning.

Grand-Maitre created streams and eddies of constantly flowing movement, filling the stage with eye-catching dance. At times, performers crossed upstage in single file, neatly leaping or marching, sometimes carrying flags, while a downstage duet or trio worked in a more detailed way.

The movement draws on a wide range of styles — hip hop, jazz, modern and club — but it's mostly balletic, and in fact there are too many gorgeous arabesques, high-flying leaps and pretty arms. After all, *The Fiddle and the Drum* is about destruction, and though this company is increasingly thrilling to watch in pure ballet vocabulary, it was not always appropriate here.

I would have preferred more of

the startling theatrics found in the opening, before the curtain is even raised. This is set to an early Mitchell song, which asks: "How did you come to trade the fiddle for the drum?" Here, a single dancer stands still before us, costumed in white trunks, his bare-chested body streaked with red and green paint, his lips eerily scarlet. The other dancers join him, similarly costumed and painted (except the

women are in short leotards). Some wear First World War-style army helmets. They huddle together, and walk upstage.

The war theme developed when Grand-Maitre first approached Mitchell and found her in the midst of a project involving her second career as a painter. Grand-Maitre's original conception of the collaboration was biographical, but now, impressed by her mixed-media images depicting war and revolution, more serious ideas emerged.

Based on these images, Mitchell also designed the visuals for *The Fiddle and the Drum*. Shots of the Earth and the moon seen from space are projected on a circular screen placed upstage, and also on both sides of the proscenium. The latter are unfortunately placed so far to the left and right they are difficult to see without looking away from the dance.

In her program note, Mitchell explained that with the "situation for all earthlings — man and animals — becoming so dire, I felt that it was frivolous to present a lighter fare," that it would be like "fiddling while Rome burned." Given these sentiments, opening the evening with George Balanchine's romantically mysterious *Serenade* from 1934 might not have been the most apt choice. Then again, there are many imperatives driving any art form, and many ways to inspire.

Dancing Joni continues in Calgary today, and is in Edmonton at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium Feb. 16-17 (Ticketmaster: 403-299-8888 or 780-451-8000).

Special to The Globe and Mail