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MAKING A WHIRL OF DIFFERENCE

BY ROBERT JOHNSON

For her latest dance, choreographer Carolyn Dorfman has reinvented the wheel.

An 8-foot high, aluminum disc creates an exciting focus within her premiere, "Echad," which the Union-based Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company presented with two older works on Saturday, at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre, in Madison. This wheel is not the labor-saving device that revolutionized life in the cave-man era, however.

Although the dance refers to prehistoric times, technological advancement has nothing to do with the rolling disc. Instead, the wheel that dominates the cast of "Echad" represents a primitive state of mind. It symbolizes the recurring cycles of nature, an endless round in which "progress" is a meaningless term, and in which individual identities remain buried within a social collective.

How life acquires value, during a tribal ritual where a human sacrifice goes terribly wrong, becomes the subject as "Echad" unfolds ingeniously to an electronic score composed by Greg Wall.

Don't look for cave-man pantomime here. A devoted formalist, Dorfman would be the last person to pander to an audience. The meaning of her work, and its narrative elements, must be discerned within the dance's gracious, formal structure.

For example, in the beginning of "Echad," Dorfman shows us a particular arrangement of dancers -- a trio of women; an isolated figure seated on the floor; and two couples. Remember this arrangement, because it will return near the end. Then, notice the way that the dancers exchange places. Dorfman's rather subtle point is that in a society where people are faceless members of the group, they can trade places without it mattering. One wife, or hunter is as good as another, while the structure of society endures.

An interesting facet of the piece is the way that Dorfman builds elusive connections between her

dancers and the public. At times, they seem to reach or bow toward us through an invisible mirror, as though they were striving to become modern or sought to warn us of the danger in group tyranny.

When they mount the wheel and start to roll with it, the tension builds. Brought to the center, the gleaming object defines the stage as a sacred space. One woman reclines on it, another is lifted over. The third woman, Pamela Wagner, gets caught, however. She's going to be the sacrifice, and while she hangs

in the center of the wheel, her tribe worships the earth, curling up on the floor, or propping themselves against it.

Quite to his own surprise, tribe member Jon Zimmerman takes on the Dudley DoRight role, saving Wagner from

sacrificial death by helping her escape out the back. Then, in a fascinating metaphor for a man's struggle with faith, Zimmerman takes the wobbling wheel on his shoulders.

What happens next reveals Dorfman's essential optimism. Instead of turning on Zimmerman as a

traitor, and a potential source of protein and other essential nutrients, the tribe shares his enlightenment.

Like modern-day religion, the wheel ceases to terrorize, yet retains its power to bond. When dancers Wendee Rogerson and Christophe Jeannot peer hopefully at one another through it, for

example, Dorfman suggests a wedding. When the groupings that began the dance recur, the wheel leans over to shelter them.

The last time that the dancers mount the wheel, it has indeed become a vehicle that can carry this tribe into the future.

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