

Goddesses show their stuff

From Athena to Demeter, they connect in dance

By Mike Steele
Star Tribune Staff Writer

The Twin Cities' newest opera troupe, Opera Millennium, is off to a terrific start, albeit an unusually kinetic one.

Dance and opera have often been intertwined but I can't remember a work that I would actually call a dance opera, until "Goddess Songs," Marjorie Rusche's musical exploration of the mythology of seven Greek goddesses which is Opera Millennium's inaugural production.

The work is unconventional; a choral song cycle for nine women who mostly sing with one voice, appropriately like a Greek chorus. It's scored for bassoon, flute, piano, oboe and percussion instruments including such ethnic ones as temple blocks, maracas, crotales and tam-tam.

The evocative text, by Rusche, creates images of each goddess, poetic yet emphasizing the feminine as it most clearly resonates with modern concerns about love, desire and relationship. The music is dramatically apt, at ease with the text, and heartfelt, conducted sympathetically and dramatically by Kim Diehnelt.

Left there, you'd have a modestly engaging evening. What sends it over the top, however, is artistic director Angela Malek's recruiting of seven of the Midwest's finest ethnic dance specialists to interpret the goddesses.

This results in each woman dancing to Rusche's western score rather than the culturally-specific music that usually underlies their work. So following each section, that wizard of ethnic per-

Opera review

Goddess Songs

- **Who:** By Marjorie Rusche, directed by Linda Shapiro, presented by Opera Millennium, Angela Malek director
- **Where:** Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Av. S., Minneapolis
- **When:** 8:30 p.m. today and Sunday
- **Tickets:** \$12 and \$8; call 340-1725
- **Review:** This unusual dance opera is an exciting, kinetic look at seven Greek goddesses.

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cussion Mick LaBriola has created drum scores in the cultural style of each dancer, allowing them to connect the goddess they've just interpreted with their own cultural backgrounds.

It works exceptionally well beginning with African American dancer Patricia Brown with her beautifully arcing arms and quivering hands projecting a fierce nobility as Athena, goddess of civilization. At text's end, LaBriola sends the big drums thumping and Brown is quickly into the intricately fast footwork, swooping, arcing body, swaying hips and vibrant hops and steps of Afro dancing. Where she radiated quiet intensity in the first part, she's flying by the end of the second.

In a flowing interchange, Brown is replaced by Middle Eastern specialist Cassandra Shore presenting the most openly sensual dance (arched back, pel-

vis thrusting) as, appropriately, Aphrodite, goddess of love. This shimmying, seductive dance melds into the staccato feet and intricate storytelling gestures of Indian Bharatanatyam as danced with splendid articulation by Rane Ramaswamy as Hera, goddess of the hearth.

Modern dancer Diana Kenney follows as Artemis, lady of wildness and goddess of the hunt. Like Ramaswamy, Kenney's dance stays close to the text, "cavorting with nymphs and Amazons." Her chief image is of shooting a bow and arrow which she takes through several expressive variations.

Flamenco dancer Susana di Palma, certainly the group's most dramatic dancer, takes on Persephone, goddess of spring and the underworld, who dines with Hades and gives birth to her own motherless soul. Di Palma lays down her own percussion lines with her snapping, precise feet, all the while teasing and tormenting with a riveting energy.

French baroque dancer Jane Peck is next with a softly danced quiet interpretation of Demeter, goddess of fruition, followed by Javanese dancer Tri Sutrisno, whose light footwork and simple gestural language radiates an intelligence that was an unusually effective way to look at the grumpy, brainy Ariadne.

Stage director Linda Shapiro lets the dance flow and, finally, connect at the end in a simple and effective linking of the seven that brought this most unusual, and unusually effective, opera evening to a close.