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# Stravinsky's Violent 'Spring' Is Now Sentimental 'Rite': Review

By Jeremy Gerard July 07, 2013

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The invaluable SummerScape festival opened this weekend up the Hudson River at Bard College, offering another stimulating program of music, theater and dance around a central theme; this year it is "Stravinsky and His World."

So what better way to start than with a nod to "The Rite of Spring," whose 1913 Paris premiere sparked a riot among the beau monde, offended by its primitivism.

"A Rite" is the sometimes inspired but also fashionably and generically anti-war collaboration between choreographers Bill T. Jones and Janet Wong and theater director Anne Bogart. There were no cries of outrage at its local premiere on Saturday night in Frank Gehry's beautiful Fisher Center on the bucolic Hudson Valley campus. (The piece was commissioned by Bard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where it was first presented in January.)

Jones and Bogart are strong-willed visionaries who seem to have agreed that "The Rite of Spring" works best as a meditation on the unending horrors and occasional joys mankind wreaked upon itself -- after the piece was written.

"A Rite" begins with the thundering final movement of the work rather than the plaintive opening measures, which we get to later. We are immediately dispatched to the battlefields of World War I; there are readings from soldiers' letters home interspersed with childhood songs.

## Jagged Thrusts

The mixed company of actors and dancers is flung around the stage, costumed in vague camouflage -- gray, taupe and beige. Their limbs precede their bodies in jagged thrusts. Some march in lockstep. Others stop to observe a trembling leg before moving on.

A soldier turns on a radio to hear a scratchy broadcast of "The Rite of Spring," one of many different versions of the work quoted in "A Rite." (None of the music is performed live.)

To help us understand it all, Bogart also throws in a musicologist, played by actor Ellen Lauren, asking, rhetorically of the premiere, "What is it about this particular riot...?" It's hard to tell whether she is for real or caricature.

At some points, the company sings the score, reminding me of my youthful introduction to Bach through the Swingle Singers. At other points, they dance the Jitterbug and Charleston to swing versions of the piece. I found it hard to discern any difference between the dancers and the actors, a measure of the work's success on at least that level.

There's even a long interlude of readings from string theorist Brian Greene, bringing us up to date on every possible interpretation of the work at hand.

All of which was fascinating and perhaps even necessary in a world inured to the violence Stravinsky divined in his brutal evocation of humankind's misbegotten attempts to appease nature. But sentimentalizing "The Rite of Spring" reduced it to a kind of PBS special, interesting for all its 65 minutes without ever being deeply engaging.

SummerScape runs through Aug. 18 at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Dinner and post-performance entertainment are available in the Spiegel tent. Transportation by bus from Manhattan is available for certain performances. Information: +1-845-758-7900; <http://www.fishercenter.bard.edu> Rating: \*\*\*

### What the Stars Mean:

\*\*\*\*\* Fantastic  
\*\*\*\* Excellent  
\*\*\* Good  
\*\* So-So  
\* Poor

(No stars) Avoid

(Jeremy Gerard is the chief U.S. drama critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

Muse highlights include John Mariani on wine and Richard Vines on food.

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