

# Obeah Opera takes audience back to Salem witch trials

By Stephen Weir

When close to three thousand people stomp, cheer, and clap in an almost sold-out theatre, it makes for a volcano of sound. And, for the 22 women on stage inside the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts in downtown Toronto, it was an opportunity to erupt in dance and song as they left the stage.

On Friday night, the cast of Nicole Brooks' Obeah Opera 2019 hand slapped, foot stomped, danced and sang *acapella* with such passion that the audience may well have thought that they were peeking back in time to the Salem Massachusetts Witch Trials of 1692.

"The word obeah is a Caribbean term which is most connected to the word witchcraft," explains Nicole Brooks, the multi-talented Canadian filmmaker, songstress and producer of the dance opera which was staged twice on the weekend as part of the week long Fall For Dance North festival.

"The dance is based on the Salem Witchcraft Trial seen through the eyes of Tituba, the (real) black slave who was the first to be accused in that infamous witch hunt."

Beginning in February 1692, the white people of Salem Village fell into mass hysteria, paranoia and persecution when eight young women accused other town folk of witchcraft. Hundreds



were arrested and by the time court trials were suspended a year later, fourteen women, five men, and two dogs had been executed for their supposed supernatural crimes. Tituba, the first to be arrested, readily



admitted her guilt but escaped the gallows and was eventually set free.

Obeah Opera is a big show performed on a deceptively simple set. The dancers, some with baskets on their heads, wear muted voluminous slave clothing. They are in front of a voodoo priestess who carries a tall obeah banner. Singing in English about freedom and the lack thereof, the Caribbean slaves are keeping their eyes on their overlords, the white community that is mired in a massive two-year long real witch hunt.

It is a high-energy show with the dancers seamlessly breaking out of their complex steps and wowing the audience with back flips across the large Sony stage. The performers are all women; most are Caribbean Canadian actresses, dancers and singers. All have extensive experience performing in Canada, the US and Caribbean.

Nicole Brooks has written the libretto and acts in her Opera.

This is not your classical European classical opera. It is Caribbean through and through with the cast singing acapella in a wild mixture of different musical styles, including spirituals, blues, jazz, gospel, traditional African, Caribbean folk, calypso, ska and reggae. Trinidad and Tobago's Anthony 'Prime' Guerra choreographed the dance.

Brooke writes that her opus "expands the definition of opera by incorporating a variety of storytelling elements from the performing arts and uses an inter-disciplinary approach that includes traditional theatre, musical theatre, opera, dance, visual arts. It ultimately introduces a different use of language, voice, and the body on stage."

In a city where a ticket for a contempo-

rary dance performance usually starts at \$60, Fall For Dance North has kept ticket prices refreshingly low. Thanks to the heavily subsidized price of \$15, a non-traditional dance audience – families, young couples and new Canadians, many who may have never stepped inside the Sony Centre -came out to watch.

Four dance troupes – the National Ballet of Canada, the Introdans (Netherlands Dance Theatre), Morocco's Campagne Herve Koubi, and Obeah Opera - performed 40-minute dances on Saturday and again on Sunday afternoon.

The Obeah Opera was first performed in 2015 in Toronto as a commissioned work for Canada's Pan American Games. The librettist has since revisited the work. Obeah Opera 2019 will be premiering in its entirety next June at Toronto's Luminato Arts festival.

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