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The Nikolais Perform at UW-Madison [A review of a performance by the Nikolais Dance Theater]

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THE NIKOLAIS PERFORM AT UW-MADISON

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

THE NIKOLAIS DANCE THEATER, in residency at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, from November 6 to December 9, 1978, performed on November 18 and on December 7-9. Their November concert included "Group Dance" from "Sanctum," "Gallery," and "Styx."

It is seldom that a single individual in the performing arts is able to exercise so complete control over the elements that enter into a dance performance. Alwin Nikolais choreographs, composes, designs costumes and lighting, and directs the entire operation with demanding exactness. The three works on the November 18 program at the Union Theater in Madison reflect a unity of style that is possible only with great attention to detail.

In "Sanctum," the dancers jump like molecules in their energy field. Red, blue, green, and purple stripes attached to moving bodies merge and dissolve an array of patterns that is difficult to describe. Shadows of dancers' bodies interact with their positive images to enrich the visual abstraction. Augmenting the dancer is a constant collage of color projections,

which are an integral part of the experience.

"Gallery" draws on the conventions of Japan's "Noh" theater, using masks that appear and disappear along a horizontal bar. At first the masks are like flowers in a row. They bob up and down in series, as if they were on mechanical springs. The kinesthetic patterns that emerge are constant with surprise. Colors are extended with the use of black light. Clown faces give way to full figures. The figures playfully interact: embracing, pulling away, converge into groups, and fading away. Delightful suspense prevails throughout.

The boundary between two worlds is suggested in the piece called "Styx." To create the allusion to the world of the dead, Nikolais uses catatonic sculptural poses. The movement is often stiff and lacking in flow. Of the three works, "Styx" is least successful in the Nikolais style. Perhaps it is because the mythical theme attached to the word styx creates conceptual expectations that are not realized in Nikolais' particular set of abstract visual images.

