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DANCE REVIEW

Site drives the stories in 'C'opera'

A superior work of choreography and music plays off its loaded setting: the L.A. Police Academy.

By VICTORIA LOOSELEAF
Special to *The Times*

The scent of night-blooming jasmine is heady. A nearly full moon peeks through towering pines. And amid the din of choppers, bullets and crunching gravel, bodies drop to the tune of a mournful bagpipe as a dazed-looking bride wails, her voluminous white dress in shreds.

It's the final scene of "C'opera," a fusion of movement and music that could have been cooked up only by Heidi Duckler, artistic director of L.A.-based Collage Dance Theatre, and her sister Merridawn Duckler, who also wrote the libretto.

In more than two decades, Duckler's site-specific works have burrowed into a Los Angeles where few have thought to tread: an abandoned jail, a subway terminal, the halls of the now-demolished Ambassador Hotel. But there's magic in many of her choices, as Duckler taps a collective vein with her winsome, wistful blending of irony and his-



CHRISTINE COTTER *Los Angeles Times*

HEAVY: *Chris Stanley in "Code A. Moving Violation."*

tory that invariably unlocks complex emotions.

And the dancing rocks too.

Writhing, leaping, turning and tumbling against the backdrop of the Los Angeles Police Revolver and Athletic Club, a.k.a. the Los Angeles Police Academy, the performers animated four areas of an organization established more than 70 years ago by L.A. cops as a (still operational) training facility. Staging grounds included a rock

garden, shooting range, coffee shop (with a \$5.95 Bratton burger) and gymnasium, where the four-act "C'opera" began Thursday night.

"Code A. Moving Violation" featured Chris Stanley cavorting with a heavy bag while two police training films were shown. Singer Catherine Hay, clad in cop garb (costumes by Ryan Hefington), warbled to six recruits, demanding "full attention." As the group drilled — ran, slipped, rolled — a masked thug entered (actor Chad Amsel), ordered them handcuffed and took Hay captive. Crooning the "Hostage Aria," she pleaded for freedom and was finally released, albeit to chilling effect.

A bit of surreal serenity arrived with "Code B. Mr. and Ms. Demeanor" as Duckler led the audience through the watery rock garden. In camouflage fatigues were Carlos Rodriguez, athletically clinging to a neo-stalactite in a potent solo; Nguyen Nguyen and Lou Becker flipping and flailing amid another boulder cluster; and Stanley, preening in heels and printed tights on a stone ledge.

The coffee shop scenario, "Code C. Health Code Violation," served up whimsy with Lillian Bitkoff, Alison Mixon and Julie Shulman counter-romping and be-bopping to Hay's blues riff

("Where is the man who can fill my shaker ..."). Orders are taken but never filled.

The firing range finale, "Code D. Armed and Dangerous" had Dorothy Stone noodling elegiacally on a flute (the stellar score was composed by Amy Knoles) before a warped "Wedding March" sounded. Dancer/attendants crept in, targets popping up behind them. An officer walked vigilantly; another did a handstand. Hay, now the bride, sang as the daughter of a fallen officer.

Shots pierced the night as dancers slithered downward. Rising, they quivered only to fall again, executed souls populating a tortured tableau.

We are doomed, it seems, as Duckler again leaves us with the indelible imagery of a "to protect and to serve" world gone mad.

'C'opera'

Where: Los Angeles Police Revolver and Athletic Club, 1880 N. Academy Drive, L.A.

When: 8 tonight; 7 p.m. Sunday; 8 p.m. Feb. 16-18; 7 p.m. Feb. 19

Price: \$40

Contact: (818) 784-8669 or www.collagedancetheatre.org