



Photo by Jeff Huntley

The temptation is great to succumb to the wishes of Sigmund Snopek, who has been quoted as saying something along the lines of "The only important thing about a review is the number of times your name appears." I envisioned paragraph after paragraph of Sigmund Snopek III, Sigmund Snopek III, etc., and I would have even counted them to save him the time. But I'm nobody's fool (at least that I'd admit in print) and certain standards must be maintained, so chicanery was abandoned. Maybe next time.

"Return Of The Spirit" has already debuted at UWM and appeared several times during Milwaukee's Summerfest. I saw it on a cool Monday night in downtown Milwaukee as it helped kick off International Week, and while certain visual aspects of the performance were curtailed (notably animation and some sets) I think I saw what must have been one of the more effective and amazing performances. Imagine Second and Wisconsin at 8 pm. On one corner you have one bank with another across the street. Up and down the Avenue, buildings loom like silent sentinels guarding greed and capitalism. It was an unexpected emphasis to a rock opera that succeeded in making you think, feel and enjoy at the same time.

The plot is not easily explained in a few lines. "Return Of The Spirit" is a complex work, incorporating fantasy, reality and an unusual view of history with exciting music and dance. Frank Arnold (played by Jed Harris) is transported away from your typical Milwaukee wedding reception to a planet so insignificant it is known as Star 14 (it just doesn't merit a name). Frank had been a slightly less than successful musician with dreams of rock stardom. Now he finds himself in the clutches of The Controller who has procured him to supply innocence to keep his planet of clones happy and productive. Seems that all they like to do is dance and sing and obey the commands of The Controller.

Snopek

Return of the Spirit

Frank's reactions go through changes. He's indignant at first, but becomes enamored of his new position as "star" of planet 14. But before he's through, he's traded in his stardom for a position of control, directed the Orbites in military maneuvers and falls in love with an Orbite who soon dies in a war he helped encourage.

Insights come tumbling out of your mind as fast as the changes occur on stage. There are parallels upon parallels. "Return Of The Spirit" is a study in the psychology of the human mind. Some points were so subtly made that I found myself wondering at the brilliance of the script at one minute and questioning my own insights the next. Ric Gruszczynski played The Controller with all the lovable diabolical tendencies we've come to know and contend with in various aspects of our life. He was a controller because that was what he was programmed to be. So the Controller was merely acting out the program of an even higher controller. Amusing parallel here to the ego trippers who think they have positions of importance when they look one way and realize they're pawns in some macabre chess game when they look the other. So we find ourselves pondering a really timely question during this production (sponsored by the Bicentennial Commission and UWM). Is anyone really free anymore? Could it be that the so-called slaves have more freedom than the masters? Could it be that the controllers are in our Skinner box?

I fear I'm rambling. But my mind did ramble throughout the performance, part of me following the action and the music—part of me thinking the thoughts the production promoted—part of me wondering if this reaction was programmed into the program on programming. It was kind of like pondering infinity.

Describing Snopek's music doesn't seem to come too easily to most people. It's original and not easily defined. In this aspect, the rock opera was the perfect vehicle for his talent, with choreography and plot line amplifying the music. Music was performed by Snopek (keyboards/synthesizer); Byron Wiemann (guitar and finger-poppin'); Harold Miller (bass); and Andy LoDuca (percussion). Snopek and Wiemann also provided vocal harmonies, working with the rest of the cast. The music is an outgrowth of Snopek's *Trinity Seas* LP of a few years back. In all, he has written about 55 songs for "Return Of The Spirit," a mind-boggling number. Yet those that are included in the performance succeed in carrying out the message and emotion and holding the opera together with a magnetic musical thread of continuity. "Waukesha Windows" sticks in my mind. It seems to be a good example of Snopek's writing, combining unexpected instrumentation with expert musicianship . . . changes you can't anticipate with a smoothness that makes them work. While music was the core of "Return Of The Spirit," other facets of the production were invaluable in creating one of the few worthwhile bicentennial projects I've seen thus far.

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The performing company of dancers (from UWM's School of Fine Arts) were at the same time a smooth and polished team (essential in portraying the pleasant mindlessness of the Orbites) and distinct as each individual dancer. They were Jennifer Johnston, Robin Lakes, Jane Linley, Joyce Hallman, Lynn Pope and Sandra Wunderlich. Costumed in fluid outfits that were a cross between space suits and slinky versions of Dr. Denton's (costumes designed by Mary Gibson) they were elfin spirits, hebephrenic groupies and compassionate women as the script called for those specific personalizations. The choreography (Rod Keuper and Lynn Pope) was excellent, earning applause throughout the opera. I was particularly impressed with the mock military battle—sharp attacking movements combined with dance most effectively. The dancers succeeded so well in expressing the feelings and moods of "Return Of The Spirit" that an occasional weakness lyrically was smoothly handled.

Essentially, Snopek and company have struck a lethal blow against those doomsayers who bemoan the status of art in Milwaukee. He took a musical concept and made it come alive with a comparatively small company and no real precedent. Snopek seems to have a history of delving into very original and unexpected musical forms and moves well from playing Beatles' songs to using his music to form a picture or a series of images, much like a painter using paints to form a masterpiece. The entire company deserves applause and encouragement. And I'm still trying to decide which of those people around me are Orbites and which are controllers. The Franks are more easily identifiable. It's

very pleasant to have seen a rock opera that gives you both entertainment and many thoughts to mull over in your own time.

Crowd reaction was a combination of high appreciation mixed with a slight sense of wonder at seeing this magic occur in downtown Milwaukee, and squeals from Snopek's pubescent female cheer block, rumored to be part of the company. A few people who seemed to be passing through couldn't have looked any more amazed if they had come upon a spaceship in the middle of Gimbel's. It's nice to see people having their sensibilities rattled a bit. There were no discouraging words from the audience, save for the slight disappointment of a couple of teenagers who saw less of Byron's chest than they might have wished for, because of the cool weather. (For those who haven't seen the Sigmund Snopek III Group in action, Byron normally is noticed both for his skill on guitar and vocals and his plunging necklines). But whenever I get off on these tangents I get accused of being trite and sexist (both of which I'll readily agree to), so . . .

"Return Of The Spirit" was a tri-level accomplishment. It was professionally presented. It was original and entertaining. And it served one of the highest goals of art—to promote thought and feeling (not to mention Sigmund Snopek III). If the Career Controller had trouble handling Frank Arnold—one would-be rock and roll star—he would have been completely baffled in the face of this cast.

P.S.—(That's twelve times, Sig.)

—Carol Line