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One dance major reflects on how The Sacred Veil moved audiences so deeply, it renewed her sense of empathy and purpose in dancing

by Skyler Ryden

The lights dimmed and the theatre went silent. The climate of anticipation and intrigue that settles in the moments before a live performance begins is unmistakable. This time, it marked my cue to walk onstage alone and take position in front of a live choir of twenty-five people. The stage was simply set with a piano and a cello on either side of the singers. Each one of us, the musicians and myself, prepared to take the audience on an emotional journey. As the first three notes resounded from the piano, the lights went up and the story came to life.

Two years ago, when I first received a text from Sophia Smith, my fellow dance major at Oklahoma University, asking if I would be willing to workshop some choreography with her for a “future project,” I was completely unaware of the journey my “yes” would open the door to. As an ambitious freshman who was eager to rehearse anything and everything, I was thrilled someone wanted to give me an opportunity. So, on the first day of rehearsal, I arrived ready to dance. Pointe shoes on, feet warm. When the first words out of Sophia’s mouth were, “We are going to chat for a few minutes first,” I knew this would not be a typical rehearsal process. What I did not know was the extent to which it would change me.

We sat on the floor as I listened to her pour her heart out about a story she felt compelled to share through dance for years. About a man named Tony and his late wife Julie whom he loved unconditionally through their struggle with infertility and her battle with ovarian cancer that ultimately led to her death at thirty-five. Many years after his wife’s passing, Tony gave himself permission to fully grieve his loss when he, along with his close friend, Grammy-award-winning composer and conductor Eric Whitacre, created an hour-long twelve-movement score in her honor entitled *The Sacred Veil*. Both beautiful and haunting, the music is named after the seemingly thin and holy “veil” that separates loved ones who have passed on from those of us still here.

I vividly remember asking myself, “How is Sophia going to make a ballet about this?” I will never question her ambition again. Not only did she choreograph a full-length, single-act work set to Eric and Tony’s score, she created something that deeply moved audience members. She fostered an environment where every single person in the audience saw themselves on the stage. She brought a cast of nine OU dancers together in a way that forged lifelong bonds throughout the journey of rehearsing and performing it twice within the span of a year, all while being a college dance major herself.

The Sacred Veil’s resonance lies in its poignancy; it is intensely powerful because it is intensely relatable—everyone faces disappointment and devastating loss. The admiration I have for Sophia’s zeal to face these heavy themes is undying. I will spend the rest of my life thanking her for trusting me with Julie’s story because through it I learned who I am as a dancer. Artistically, the process of rehearsing this ballet challenged me in new ways. The narrative nature of the piece and its range of

remarkably emotional moments demanded an honest approach to acting that I had not experienced before but one that was necessary to portray the story in a meaningful way. This practice in empathy developed in my dancing a renewed sense of purpose and authenticity. With the music as its foundation, Sophia's choreography made an impact by communicating human joy, fear, and sorrow without saying a word, a true testament to the power of movement.



Cast of The Sacred Veil
Photo by: Ioannis Andriotis

Although this journey gifted me a new appreciation and respect for the cathartic capability of similar stories, being a part of a project that dealt with themes of sickness also reminded me of a controversy that took the dance scene by storm. When choreographer Bill T. Jones premiered his work *Still/Here* in 1994, it was met with an infamous *New Yorker* article called “Discussing the Undiscussable” by dance critic Arlene Croce. Croce stated that she had no plans to see the piece and criticized Jones for creating something she dismissed as “victim art.” *Still/Here* was inspired by people who were living with terminal illness and therefore, according to Croce, the project was beyond the reach of criticism as it incorporated people who were fighting for their lives. In the thirty years since this controversy, I believe the performing arts world has evolved to a place of understanding that stories centered around real-life sickness are among the most impactful we have to offer.

I have always known that what ripens passion is the conviction that your work matters. A struggle I face daily is feeling selfish for choosing dance as a career because it demands everything from a person. It is easy to view the hunger dancers possess to refine each movement or the energy they spend on their craft outside of class and rehearsal as a self-centered chase. All of us have made countless sacrifices to get ourselves here. We have spent years in the studio striving for a perfection we know is unattainable. Yet we are fascinated with the pursuit still. Immersed in the daily, invisible work and perseverance required for the brief but blissful moments onstage.

The experience of performing *The Sacred Veil* in Eureka Springs, Arkansas last April reminded me that being a dancer is anything but selfish; it is a way of touching people's souls and stirring their hunger for depth. A goal that is made possible only by pouring everything you have into the preparation. On the morning of our final show, I prayed that “today changes lives and hearts.” When I wrote this in my journal, my mind was on the audience; I hoped they would feel the

transformative nature of the story and leave with a newfound peace. My prayer was answered in that way. The atmosphere in the theatre and the hugs with loved ones after the performance told me they were moved by what they saw. However, I believe the lives and hearts that were changed most profoundly were the cast's.

To say our final show was surreal would be an understatement. It was a performance I will remember for the rest of my life. As I looked around at the people who poured their blood, sweat, and tears into this passion project, I realized why it was all worth it. Every long, tedious, and tiresome rehearsal. Every late night and early morning. Every traffic-ridden drive to Oklahoma City to rehearse with the choir. Every moment when the emotions of the story became too much to handle. They all paved the way for the kind of performance any dancer would be blessed to experience once in their career. I would not trade these memories for anything.

To be surrounded by people who care so fiercely about their gift is an honor. We brought Julie and Tony's story to life with remarkable maturity and sincerity; we left everything we had on stage, and I am proud of that. The friendships I have gained as a result of Sophia's vision are among the most meaningful and impactful in my life. I am immensely thankful for such a tangible reminder that our work matters. It is never done in vain if its purpose lies in other people.



Skyler Ryden is a BFA Ballet Performance Major at the University of Oklahoma as well as a member of Oklahoma City Ballet's second company. Now entering her fourth year, she is from Midland, Texas and looks forward to pursuing a career in Ballet after graduation.

Photo by: Emma Castor

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