Tandy Beal & Company embraces the mystery of the afterlife in the new performance piece "HereAfterHere"

By WALLACE BAINES
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It is the first -- and last -- great mystery of human existence: What happens to us after we die? Of the more than 100 billion human beings who have ever inhaled the Earth's air, not one has ever returned from the afterlife we think, anyway to tell those of us still breathing what it's like.

The world's religious traditions have, of course, long-established views on life after death, views that millions worldwide accept as absolute truth. But short of tangible, scientific proof -- a YouTube video would suffice -- the experience of the Great Beyond, if there is a Great Beyond, remains as deep a mystery as ever.

In the contemporary world, however, notions of the afterlife are far more like fingerprints -- everyone has one and they're each unique. Consequently, the question has become nearly as central to art as it is to religion.

That's the view, anyway, of celebrated Santa Cruz dancer and choreographer Tandy Beal and composer Jon Scoville, whose latest on-stage collaboration, "HereAfterHere," addresses the question directly. Not that Beal or Scoville have any earth-shaking answers they're ready to reveal when "HereAfterHere" debuts Sept. 10-12 at the Crocker Theatre on the Cabrillo College campus. The two artists are more interested in the imaginative interpretations than in the proof.

"This is the ultimate imaginative leap," said Beal, marking the 40th year of her landmark dance troupe Tandy Beal & Company. "There is no bigger leap and nobody can say you're right or wrong."

The performance, which Beal and Scoville have been working on ever since a "beta" version of the show was staged before a small Santa Cruz audience three years ago, is a broad-minded, multimedia embrace of the wonder engendered by ideas of life after death.

"The value of it is to take a look at death in a noncrisis situation," said Beal. "If we can open this up in a noncrisis time, to talk about it freely, it can pull us up. There is a gigantic mystery at play here that we simply cannot tell those of us still breathing what it's like.

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and share their ideas on the subject.

Friday's opening night performance will also be a benefit for Hospice of Santa Cruz County. About 150 of the best seats in the house will be set aside for those looking to donate to hospice, an organization that assists patients and their families with end-of-life issues.

As an organization, hospice often deals with questions of death and dying, including the eternal mystery of life after death.

"When the end of life is close, that's generally when people will touch their toe into the water on these kinds of questions," said Cathy Conway, hospice director of development.

On Saturday, Sept. 11, Beal and Scoville will host a free afternoon symposium called "Cultural and Religious Attitudes on the Afterlife," bringing together a variety of traditional viewpoints. Among the speakers will be philosopher of science Nancy Abrams, Rabbi Paula Marcus of Temple Beth El, Patrick Conway of Resurrection Catholic Church and Lama Tharchin of Vajrayana Foundation, who will discuss the intricate cosmology of Tibetan culture.

Marcus said she will share the various ideas of Olam Haba translated "the world to come" in Jewish tradition. "The Talmud talks about the six questions that must be asked before you die. And the Bible talks about gathering with ancestors. But there are many ideas about the world to come."

Nancy Abrams said that our understanding of the universe has increased dramatically in recent decades and because of these new discoveries, science may soon be in a position to address age-old mysteries.

"Everybody needs to feel part of something large and purposeful and religions are failing us in that, to the extent that they deny science. I know humans have a cosmic role in the universe."

After Saturday's evening performance, Beal and Scoville will be joined by the Rev. Deborah Johnson of Inner Light Ministries in Santa Cruz for a post-show discussion, meant to keep the question of the afterlife alive with the audience, long after the show has ended.

In creating the show, Beal was inspired by books such as "After Death" by Suki Miller and "Heaven" by Lisa Miller. But, she said, she's just as inspired by the comments of people she meets.

"In the course of our interviews, we met this homeless man," she said. "And he had this incredible story. He believed that every person has a star that calls their name and their name only constantly, and that we never hear it until the very moment we die."

Scoville said that he unconsciously used the voices of young children in his score to the show, because he believed that those close to birth children, or close to death have a strong perspective on what lies beyond.

"My father was a Presbyterian minister," Scoville said. "And I asked him once, Do you literally believe in the tangibility of an afterlife? And he said, The first two and a half minutes after death are going to be the most exciting moments of my life. Because that will be the moment that everything will be revealed."

"HereAfterHere: A Self-Guided Tour of Eternity"

PRESENTED BY: Tandy Beal & Company

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 10 and 11; 3 p.m. Sept. 12

WHERE: The Crocker Theater on the campus of Cabrillo College

TICKETS: $12 to $35 (set-aside tickets for the Hospice of Santa Cruz County benefit on Friday are $50 and include premium seating and a reception after the performance)


NOTE: There will be a free symposium titled 'Cultural and Religious Attitudes on the Afterlife' featuring Lama Tharchin of the Vajrayana Foundation, Rabbi Paula Marcus of Temple Beth El, Patrick Conway of Resurrection Church and philosopher of science Nancy Abrams. It begins at 3 p.m. Sept. 11 at the Crocker Theater.