Window on the Next World

In a dynamic new production, Tandy Beal & Company venture into the ultimate uncharted territory: the afterlife

Story by Traci Hukill Photos by Paul Schraub

THE OLD Cabrillo Theater is empty except for a dozen dancers hanging out stage right and a few scattered observers in the first five rows. The house lights are on, and the duffel bags and bottles of water perched on the front of the stage confirm that this is a rehearsal. Nevertheless, when the music cues and three dancers begin moving in slow motion across the stage as if blown by a lunar wind, the magic takes over. We’re in Tandy Beal’s world now.

One by one the three break from their sleepwalk, rush forward in agitation, fall back again. The tallest of the dancers, the one in the middle, is the last to go. It’s Beal herself, all 5-foot-11-inches of her, dressed in loose-fitting cotton pants and shirt, waist-long hair threatening to tumble from its loosely clipped bun. From the second row you can see the bunions on her bare feet, one of the only signs that the iconic choreographer, like all of us, is aging. Tandy Beal has been dancing in Santa Cruz for more than 36 years. Still, she moves like liquid across the stage, whirling and folding and flashing.

They exit stage left as other dancers enter. A lithe woman sails across the stage on the upraised arms of three others, slicing the air like the prow of a Viking ship. The stage explodes into chaos that coalesces into unison as the music ends. Beal steps forward, reading glasses on, script in hand. "We have a dialogue now. Video," she says. She turns to the imaginary audience and speaks in a stage voice.

"You bought the ticket. In fact, not just the ticket, but all the rides you can handle for the time being. You’re not actually sure where this is all going. The show or all the rest of it. And neither am I. Exactly where am I going? Do you know? The script says I leave soon. But exactly when and where, I have no idea. What I do know is all of you should check those exit signs and turn off your cell phones."

Across the stage, a man with a gray beard speaks up in a resonant voice. "Die, my dear? Why, that’s the last thing I’ll do."

Beal again: "Said Groucho Marx, just before he kicked the bucket."

The back-and-forth continues until we get to the scene’s punch line, an apt summary of the seriously playful spirit of HereAfterHere: A Self-guided Tour of Eternity, the ambitious multimedia production about what happens after we die mounted this weekend by Tandy Beal & Company and the Cabrillo College Dance Program at the Cabrillo Crocker Theater.

"Now you see it, now you don’t," says Beal theatrically. "It’s the biggest trick in the book! Here today, gone tomorrow." Slight pause. "Now you see him, now you don’t. Now you see her, now you don’t."

For the Living

Neither Beal nor composer Jon...
Next, please:

Through ‘HereAfterHere,’ Beal hopes to inspire new ways of framing death. ‘What if what comes after is even more extraordinary than this life?’ she asks.

Neither Beal nor composer Jon Scoville, her partner of 35-plus years and principal collaborator, can say when the idea to explore notions of the afterlife germinated. ‘We can’t remember,’ says Scoville. ‘So many of our ideas come up in spontaneous conversation. I’m not sure there was one moment.’

The couple are in the sunny living room of the San Lorenzo Valley house they’ve shared for three decades. It was a hotel back when hotels were small. Now it feels like one of any number of charming early-20th-century homes with thick walls and quirky touches. Scoville, 67, a slender, ruddy-cheeked guy with twinkling eyes and a ready smile, vacillates between devilishly pointed humor and a startling capacity for eloquence, with occasional gusts of goofball. For him the show is, paradoxically, more about life than death.

‘Inevitably, as people get older they start to realize the limitations of this world,’ he says. ‘It makes it much more radiant and vibrant. I break out into tears all the time now when I hear a piece of music or see something. It’s so on the surface and I’m so grateful for it.

So it hasn’t been morbid thinking about it. It makes everything more visible so we can rise up in the radiance of being alive. I’m glad we’re exploring it. And I’m just hoping there will be a nice 18-hole golf course when I get there.’

Beal, who has been listening intently, leans forward excitedly in her chair, her imagination ignited. ‘Rise up in the radiance of life,’ is that how you said it?’ she asks. ‘I think that’s the purpose of it. Because when we realize that we’re not gonna live forever, we think, I’m complaining about what? I’m cranky about what?’ And we slam around worried about our deadlines—I’m right in the middle of it—and you stop and go, ‘Wow, this is incredible and we’re sitting here, right now, and the light—,’ she shakes her head in disbelief. ‘I think there is a gift about the preciousness of our lives when someone dies.”

Whether it’s due to the expansiveness they attribute to their respective upbringings—Scoville’s father was a Presbyterian preacher who imparted to his son a powerful sense of a world beyond the seen, while Beal’s agnostic mother was constantly expressing wonderment at the natural world—or to their habit of sleeping beneath the stars in warm weather and looking up at infinity itself, the couple have created an all-encompassing experience in HereAfterHere.

Like its identically named predecessor, which premiered as a pilot project of sorts at the West Theater in Santa Cruz three years ago, it’s an intensely multimedia affair. As Scoville’s hour-plus score swells and falls, dancers ply the 3-D space of the stage, their vignettes sometimes silhouetted against video: Denise Gallant’s images of water and space or brief interviews with ordinary people about what they think happens after death. Meanwhile, Beal’s character, along with actor Frank Widmer, imparts the fruits of Beal’s exhaustive research into cultural and scientific notions of the afterlife. We learn of the Egyptians’ daunting 42 gates of heaven and one tribe’s belief that all creatures that expire at the same moment become a kind of family that returns to the earth as one.

It sounds overwhelming, but Beal has intentionally paced the show. "People have gotten to the place where they multitask sensorily," she says, "and you almost need to take things in different modes of perception now. If you’re a real listener, then I think you need the visual to let your mind work on what you just heard. I think we need these resting moments.

Subway Sounds

Like all theatrical productions, HereAfterHere involves the creative labor of many, not least Scoville. For the score, he says, he looked for sounds that weren’t heavenly but weren’t exactly earthly, either. "I wanted the sound of children, because I think in their first three years children are living in paradise. I wanted the subway because it’s very evocative to me of the underworld, of Orpheus’ journey. I wanted thunder because I think it was the first time we realized, ‘Hey, there’s something here bigger than us.’ The result is a mesmerizing soundscape that’s part dream, part circus and part electronic melody meme.

As she enters the homestretch before opening night, Beal is a fountain of gratitude for all involved—Cabrillo College, the dance program, Hospice, the technical crew and especially the half-dozen dancers and other helpers she worked with in the 1980s who came out of nowhere to help. "I wanted a multigenerational cast," she says, "because you can’t just talk about this with 22-year-olds." She starts rhapsodizing over each dancer’s specific wonderfulness before catching herself. "I could talk about all of them," she says.

HereAfterHere is bound to be an affecting performance. But here’s a secret. The aesthetics
are secondary to the goal of encouraging people to look at a part of life—its ending—that most would rather ignore. Says Beal, “All my drive is about making the art, but in a way it doesn’t matter if anybody likes the art, if we can just rest in the question together, at a time when we’re not looking at a loved one who’s dying and completely overcome. Let’s have a conversation about this in a nondenominational way and a noncrisis way.”

HEREAFTERHERE: A SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF ETERNITY is Friday, Sept. 10, at 7:30pm, Saturday, Sept. 11, at 7:30pm and Sunday, Sept. 12, at 3pm at Cabrillo Crocker Theater, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos. Tickets are $12–$35 at www.santacruztickets.com or 831.420.5260. Friday’s performance is a benefit for Hospice of Santa Cruz County; $50 ticket includes reception with performers. One hour before each performance and immediately afterward, a video truck will be standing by to record concertgoers’ notions of the afterlife.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES ON THE AFTERLIFE, a free symposium with Nancy Abrams, Patrick Conway, Rabbi Paula Marcus and Lama Tharchin, is Saturday, Sept. 11, at 3pm at the theater.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION with Rev. Deborah Johnson of Inner Light Ministries follows Saturday’s performance.

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