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ARTS

DANCE REVIEW

Allen Kaeja's *Asylum of Spoons* is brilliantly creepy

Modern dance is usually the ultimate in cool – cerebral, aloof, abstract.

Kaeja d'Dance was hot to the touch Thursday at the National Arts Centre in the world premiere of *Asylum of Spoons*, a work that evoked sex, violence, hunger and cruel domination, all in the arms of good ol' Mom.

Choreographer Allen Kaeja told the audience forum afterward he had in mind abandoned houses and the Darwinian struggles that accrued there under the thumb of a matriarch: imagine Joan Crawford running the little house on the prairie. Actually, make that Lizzie Borden.

The piece opens with Karen Kaeja in a Victorian dress with a corset of spoons and witchy black shoes. Her wavy red hair makes her appear maniacal as she sits with rigid proprietary at a table.

Other family members join her at a palpably tense meal. Under cover of good manners, plates are passed, backs are straight, but rage, competition and fear creep through each of the six dancers. They sneak spoons from one

another, they skid their spoons from one end of the table to the other. You can just imagine the conversation they represent, the admonitions from a mother with a tongue like a carving knife.

Kaeja's choreography is brilliantly creepy, especially when his dancers drag themselves by their arms and legs, almost paralyzed, usually after an object of food or lust. In this house, there is no tenderness and no escape.

The choreography was crisp, quick and tight, and the counterbalance on the stage between groups of dancers was taut to the breaking point. Kaeja, whose background is in judo, uses a lot of anchor throws and contact dance to give the piece rough-hewn edges. It never flinched from the darkest lusts and cruelties, and the dancers saturated each gesture with passion. No wonder this is one of the few pieces that doesn't feel too long at 60 minutes.

And the spoons? Kaeja was walking through Honest Ed's in Toronto and noticed them on sale for 50 cents, so he bought 50 to see how they would work. Then he bought hundreds more. Now the production has about 2,000 spoons (and one fork that got in by mistake.)

They have become the unifying motif, used as metaphors for nourishment or currency or aggression. Their clatter as they fell became part of the score and their glittering cascade gave the entire piece a knife-edge brilliance of movement.

Kaeja calls this work an "imagistic narrative," meaning that, unlike many other modern works, meaning is indeed embedded in the piece. In fact, many people later spoke about their own families and their feelings. One woman talked about how humiliated she felt at one point. Kaeja himself talked about how his own mother never really grasped that her children had become full-grown adults.

CANTERBURY DANCERS POLISHED

Before we saw the alarming *Spoons*, Canterbury High School student presented the quietly engaging *Years Unsettled*, created by the Kaejas and performed by 11 students.

The lead dancer – or, at least, the most prominent one, Asha Binti Kingombe, looks like she has the goods.

The company at large was polished and professional, if a little constrained. No doubt they will relax into the steps in a few years.