

Cultural Daily

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Two Singular Shows That Resonate: It's Time & Martha

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 5th, 2017

Paul Linke's unassuming show at Pacific Resident Theatre (PRT) has an unassuming title: *It's Time*. Time for what? No, not *for what*. Just... time. It's about how time is all we really own or have to spend. And then about his time, the kind that got spent in his one-man trajectory from childhood to drifting college student, to the actor on the stage before us who is about to tell us all about himself.

If that sounds egocentric, it is not. Linke is a man who "found" himself as an actor. Oh, I know; you've heard this one before. Happens a lot. But acting was something Paul Linke had never contemplated until a Croatian girlfriend during his directionless college years suggested he might like it. He liked it.

Linke has been an actor ever since. He's not a major "celebrity" except to this family, although he has a list of credits he can be proud of. They're in his bio. But he turned out to be so much more than a list of career achievements: an honest man, a good father, who, after the death of his first wife which left him widowed young and bereft with three tots in tow, went in search of his lost happiness. In this one-man show at PRT, which had an initial run at the Ruskin Group, he brings us nothing more than the sharing of his entire life experience so far, and more important, nothing less.



Paul Linke (foreground) with his wife Christine Healy in *It's Time* at Pacific Resident Theatre.

Luck played a big role, as did good friends on the day he was introduced to Christine Healy, the woman who would become his second wife and who, as Linke puts it, agreed to marry the whole package: him and his three children. Together, he and Healy produced a fourth tot, and you might say all of them lived happily ever after.

But telling you this sweet story is not the only thing Linke attempts to do in *It's Time*. He had written an earlier solo play shortly after his first wife's death called *Time Flies While You're Alive*, primarily intended to be cathartic for him. It was, although it also touched many hearts. But *It's Time* is a different animal. It is a public manifestation of a deep gratitude shared, this one intended to remind us of the enormous capacity we all hold within to use our allotted time on this planet to find and spread that rare commodity called joy.

With this highly personal monologue in the firm hands of director Edward Edwards, Linke manages to at once narrowly focus on, yet broadly magnify his experience into a funny, self-deprecating commentary on how to blunder your clumsy, sincere, loving way into happiness —

and then extrapolate that good fortune into a dissertation about time, an intangible tangible that he aptly calls “the currency of our existence,” in the way it envelops and rules us. This is no lecture or how-to manual. By sharing a personal transcendence, he enlightens us on how, out of a lot of sadness, foolishness, eagerness and commitment in the search of happiness, you sometimes can play a role in finding or creating it.



Paul Linke in *It's Time*.

A show like this is the ultimate prescription for what it is to live right, with values that matter. It is uplifting — a balm and a healing in an aching world. When it is this simple, this direct and wise, theatre is capable of being the highest of the arts, shaped by our finest emotions.

Top image: Paul Linke (foreground) with, l-r, Gordon Davidson, Linke, Christine Healy, Kate Mulgrew and Robert Egan.

Photos by Ed Krieger.

WHAT: *It's Time*

WHERE: Pacific Resident Theatre, 705 ½ Venice Blvd., Venice, CA 90291.

WHEN: Thursday-Saturday, 8pm; Sunday, 3pm. Ends April 30.

HOW: Tickets \$25-\$30 available at 310.822.8392 or online at www.PacificResidentTheatre.com.

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Christina Carlisi in *Martha* at The Whitefire Theatre.

FOREVER MARTHA

Speaking of the highest of the arts, it seems the eminent Martha Graham might have had a somewhat sterner idea of what a life well-lived might be. She called the theatre *a verb before it is a noun, an act before it is a place*. These words, coming from the Queen Mother and Master Wit of Modern Dance, might have been spoken by Linke or anyone else who has ever set foot on a stage. Said she, *the reason dance has held such an ageless magic for the world is that it has been the symbol for the performance of living*.

The quotes that flowed from her from her feel endless. *Movement never lies*, was a mantra. *There is only one law of posture I have been able to discover — the perpendicular line connecting heaven and earth*. She was a dancer, woman, artist, martinet, wit, but above all: a genius of the human body.

Christina Carlisi, a dancer as well as an actor who worked with Ms. Graham for a time, has undertaken the “terrifying task” (her words) of recreating that genius at the intimate Whitefire Theatre in Sherman Oaks in a fast-moving 75 minutes, give or take. It’s hard to tell exactly because, from the moment she steps on stage, she grabs our attention and doesn’t let go until it’s over, giving us in the interim a taste of what it must have been like to be around the formidable Ms.

Graham. Carlisi's show, titled simply *Martha*, makes magic mostly by delivering a passionate portrait of the whole woman without sentimentality — Graham's crises, her arrogance, her convictions (many) and her weaknesses (few). Director Stewart J. Zully's measured staging neither overdoes the imperiousness of the lady, nor hesitates to face the depth of love Graham felt for her one and only husband, dancer Erick Hawkins, who walked away from her after a very few happy years.

Zully is well supported by Ellen Melaver's elegant script, which sticks mostly with the dancing and the personality. It makes good use of the abundance of irreverent material that came pouring out of Graham's mouth or her pen, yet with enough restraint that it never grows tiresome or takes away from Carlisi as Graham's impersonator. Rather, it underscores the focus in ways that heighten the genius and the irascibility without becoming merely irritating.



Christina Carlisi in *Martha* at The Whitefire Theatre.

The good news is that, while working with Graham had to be intimidating for a young dancer such as Carlisi (and surely bewildering for any uninvited intruder), Graham as portrayed here is a trove of brainy bons mots and a font of wisdom, careening from the unexpected to the biting to the amusing (*The best partner I ever had was a piece of knit jersey. Critics have called this my long woolen underwear period*).

Melaver, Zully and Carlisi relish the wit, enough to share a good amount of it. Example: Graham had such an aversion to dancers counting to the music while dancing that she compared it to “*calling out instructions during love-making*.”

“*But how can we all move at the same time without counting, Martha?*”

“*It's very simple. Synchronize your heartbeats.*”

Pure nonsense, of course, but to accuse Martha Graham of operating in a rational universe — as John Houseman, who served on her board, apparently attempted to do on more than one occasion — was a waste of time. Her mind was otherwise engaged on making the body, especially hers, do things most bodies never dreamed of even being capable of doing. And she was so consumed by the altitude of those aspirations, that almost all of the ordinary pleasures or events most people experience in the course of a lifetime — motherhood being one — were things she would occasionally glimpse and wonder about having missed, but never for very long. It always all came back to how to change dance forever and to hell with the rest of it.

This brief evening benefits from Carlisi's sober, well balanced performance, with plenty of verbal humor and enough dance to sketch in a portrait of the artist, although one suspects the real Martha of being capable of also inspiring greater terror and humiliation than we see here. Still, Carlisi capably delivers some of Graham's celebrated jabs along with snatches of the “angular” Graham dances (reinvented by choreographer Camille Loftin) to go along with Melaver's engaging and unhurried discourse.

Zully's staging, Derrick McDaniel's precise lighting, Candice Cain's simple costumes and David Svengalis' tech design, which includes appropriate musical accompaniment, combine deftly to enrich the integrity of the production.

Graham was almost 97 at her death, after having continued to dance well into her 70s. Sadly, she resisted the idea of recording her works, considering dance to be an art that needed to be experienced live. Her pre-mortem elegy for herself that one can easily imagine her delivering in a state of complete exasperation: *I cannot dance and I cannot love, and these are the only things in the world I want to do.*

Photos by Charles Dougherty.

WHAT: *Martha*

WHERE: Whitefire Theatre, 13500 Ventura Blvd. Sherman Oaks, CA 91423.

WHEN: Sundays only, 7:30pm. Ends May 28.

HOW: Tickets: \$25, available at www.marthasoloplay.brownpapertickets.com. Info: (818) 687-8559.

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