

## Olivia Corson

### *Third Stone from the Sun*



Olivia Corson

Is the use of live animals for entertainment ever justified? For the protesters who picketed the Moscow Circus last January, the answer seemed to be an emphatic “no.” But would those activists feel the same way with a work that incorporated live animals and dealt with the very subject matter that they were concerned about: bridging the chasm between ourselves and the natural world? Or would that, too, be considered a kind of animal abuse?

It’s what I wondered about as I drove home after having seen Olivia Corson’s *Third Stone from the Sun*, a wonderful paean and lament for harmonically integrated living on and with the earth. The piece had ended with Corson dancing with a live boa constrictor.

Taking her title from the Jimi Hendrix song, Corson in *Third Stone* created a dance monolog in which she alternated visions of Castaneda-like experiences with accounts of the anxiety-driven existence most of us call our “daily lives.” Supported by a multi-faceted score of natural and synthesized sounds and a series of colorful, reversible kimonos, Corson smoothly moved back and forth between dreams and reality. Clear and

simple dance gestures enlarged and underlined the narrative, their patterns of reiteration setting up effective resonating harmonies with the spoken word.

In the dream sequences, with the help of an imaginary shaman with an “intricately patterned face,” Corson assumed a variety of characters: a young boy, a shepherd and an old woman. “Winged creatures” carried her aloft to look down on a Chagall universe abundant with golden earth fishes, blue frogs, a magical turquoise stone with a pulsating center and a half-alligator ancestress—in short, a paradise lost. Back home again, she talked of protecting herself by sending bad vibes to the TV commercials and developing a coat of “impersonal hostility” towards the misery in the streets around her. Far from a poetic vision of nature, her world here consisted of fleas that won’t die and, in one hilarious incident, crawdaddies that needed to be rescued from encroaching construction sites.

Corson showed herself as a poetic writer and performer with a finely nuanced approach to shifting voices and moods. She easily glided from the elegiac, to new age hip, to wicked humor, to anxiety-ridden frus-

tration. But even at her most tense and pained moments, she came across with a gentle and integrated view of the dilemma of modern living. She also displayed insight into human impatience: “I want a more graceful existence,” and continuing fiercely, as she clawed her way up an invisible wall, “I want grace NOW.”

At the end of the work, she shed the many coats with which she had invested herself to reveal a simple multicolored leotard. This was where the live boa constrictor came in. With the snake entwined around her, she slowly swayed as the lights faded, an image of possible coexistence between man and nature.

—Rita Felciano

Performed at Climate Theater in San Francisco, April 19, 1990. Music by Richard Higgs, and costumes by Cheryl Koehler.

Rita Felciano is a freelance writer and dance critic for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*.