

LIVING ARTS

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In the middle of earth is art

Olivia Corson's work on living with nature in the city

By Allan Ulrich
EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

THE WORDS "urban" and "urbane" may be joined at the etymological hip, but for Olivia Corson, the terror of city existence confounds all lexicographic strictures.

The artist's new 70-minute, solo (or almost solo) dance-performance piece, "Third Stone From the Sun," premiering this weekend at Climate Theatre, tells us that consumerism is hell, and that the attempt to keep nature from reasserting itself in one's life is doomed to failure. It's a fantasy, and one that is easily shattered by tomorrow morning's temblor.

After workshoping the work a while ago, Corson, an East Bay resident for the past 12 years, chose to open "Third Stone" on the 20th anniversary of Earth Day. The title, of course, derives from a Jimi Hendrix song.

On the surface, the gesture may smack slightly of cashing in on the *Zeitgeist*, but one pays attention to this rambling and often endearing skein of monologues precisely because the performer avoids trendiness. She might have voiced similar sentiments a decade ago.

Corson takes the city dweller's eternal plaint, "There must be something better," and builds parallel universes, shifting between daily existence in the Oakland flatlands in the post-Loma Prieta earthquake era and a persistent search for more enduring values. The performer manages the transitions somewhat schematically; the repeated exclamations of "I'm fall-



Olivia Corson with Angel, one of two snakes that alternate in bit parts.

ing" sound like lighting cues.

One hopes Corson refines "Third Stone" a bit more. What happens between those breaks is very much to the point. It's the lack of fluidity that occasionally disconcerts.

Corson's mundane existence revolves around annoyance at dog hairs and anxiety over taking long showers during a drought. She worries, too, about possessing a large refrigerator with rotting food and ties herself up in knots over TV commercials.

The narrator feels herself singled out by nature. In the drollest episode, Corson recounts her saga of a crawdad invasion. Thanks to the city's filling in of natural habitats, the critters have picked out her house for an infestation. The description of her compassionate attempt to restore them to their own world — a litany involving empty cottage cheese cartons and trips to Redwood Park — soared above the surrounding material at Thursday evening's preview performance.

Corson's exploration of her

dream state coheres because of her deployment of reiterative imagery. A white mask and a turquoise ring borne by a shaman are unshakable obsessions.

The recurring dream is one of wholeness with the cosmos, a quest that takes the narrator to the crest of a hill, below which she observes a primal scene involving that magician, a master of timeless fantasy. Corson's anthropological studies lend these episodes an aura of verisimilitude. She conveys the sensation that she is the heir to an ancient civilization, one rooted in unity to the earth, and that she's likely to fail any test imposed upon her.

Corson is a natural storyteller, who often uses her dance training in fresh, alert ways to reinforce her anecdotal material. As "Third Stone From the Sun" nears its end, she suggests, in gentle terms, that it is mankind who has despoiled the landscape, and upset the natural order. Corson doffs her flowing costumes to reveal an iridescent, body-clinging snakeskin underneath.

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But only when she brings out a real snake (Cherokee, a 10-foot boa, was Corson's partner Thursday; Cherokee alternates with a python named Angel) does the metaphor of kinship with nature achieve its most potent level. What's wrong with a bit of showmanship, anyway?

Laura McPherson's effective set carefully demarcates the natural

and dream worlds. Malcolm Patrick O'Leary's revolving sculpture, "Sun Memory," and a vinous mass from a "Tarzan" movie suggest the natural world. A painted area-rug and a couple of floppy dolls represent all the discomforts of home. Richard Higgs' seductive, semi-synthesized score is entirely apt.

Sunday's 8 p.m. performance of "Third Stone From the Sun" will be a benefit for Nature Conservancy.

Olivia Corson's "Third Stone From the Sun" is performed Thursday through Sunday through May 6 at the Climate Theatre, 252 Ninth St. Call 626-9196.