

# Jackson a performer like no other in body, song

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter, Chronicle Herald, Halifax | January 13, 2007

Janice Jackson's *Wolf Moon*, which opened a four-night run on the stage of the Sir James Dunn Theatre on Thursday night, is a tour-de-force of the highest order.

With only a few props and no scenery, she holds the stage for 90 minutes of singing and acting in four contemporary mini-operas. Her vocalization is virtually non-stop and there is no intermission.

We are not just talking stamina here. The vocal challenges set for her by composers Barbara Woof in *Naxos Revisited*, Wende Bartley (*The Handless Maiden*), Alice Ping Yee Ho (*Wolf Woman*) and Sandy Moore (*Echoes of Time Weeping*) are formidable.

They include extended vocal techniques — wails, moans, tongue clicks and rolls, syllabic stutters, bird-like trills and calls — as well as sustained singing over her entire range at a pianissimo level for well over 10 minutes. Jackson effortlessly switches tone, colour and volume from the intensely quiet and crystalline purity of her cloud-piercing high notes to a full, powerful, operatic soprano.

I doubt there is another singer in Canada who could do it. Certainly not one who can for so long grip our attention in a chemical-like bond as Jackson does with her dramatic focus on the action of these theatrical works. She roams the stage confronting the devils which torment the women she portrays, her singing expressively fused to her body language.

*Naxos Revisited* features *Ariadne*, the Greek princess who gave Theseus the thread that helped him escape the labyrinth on Minos after killing the Minotaur. On the way home from Crete, he abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos.

*The Handless Maiden* wanders the underworld after her father chops off her hands in forfeit to the Devil. She begins in Bartley's opera by reading the story to us out of a book, but then begins to enact it in front of us.

In *Wolf Woman* a mad woman conjures up a real wolf from a skeleton of bones she has collected, which suddenly comes to life and transforms into a beautiful woman.

*Echoes of Time Weeping* is a tale of a poor woman who bears two sons to a wandering knight, who decides to take them with him on his return to Spain. She drowns the children then suffers agonies of remorse as she searches for their souls.

The musical accompaniment for three of these operas is on tape. In *Wolf Woman*, Jackson plays a percussion score on bongos, rattles, a half-dozen pieces of metal hung like wind chimes, a bucket of water and a three-metre length of galvanized steel chain.

She integrates vocalizations, gesture and instrumental sound with flawless virtuosity.

To achieve the kind of seamless performance Jackson accomplishes in *Wolf Moon* requires not only an extraordinary degree of technical and instinctual skill, but hours of rigorously disciplined practice sustained by years of healthy singing.

We are privileged to see the foundation of her technique in *Naxos Revisited* where she lies prone upon a long cupboard used for storing the Dunn theatre's black backdrops. As she sings from this difficult position, we can watch the way her entire upper torso becomes a bellows, bulging with air, even (and especially, perhaps) when the sounds coming from her voice are tiny, extremely high, and hypnotically soft and pure. It's an object lesson for singers.

### **Jackson a performer like no other in body, song (continued)**

The decision of Jackson and director Linda Moore to stage *Wolf Moon* with the audience seated on stage creates a raw theatrical magic. Leigh Ann Vardy's lighting scheme not only anchors the action but colours it, integrating the elements of the performance, not just mechanically, but as yeast integrates flour and sugar and water in making bread.

*Wolf Moon*, a Vocalypse production, runs nightly through Sunday at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$20.



Janice Jackson integrates vocalizations, gesture and instrumental sound with flawless virtuosity in *Wolf Moon* at the Dunn Theatre through Sunday. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)