

The Dance of the Ancient Spider

Reviewed by Lisa Jo Sagolla

Presented by I Giullari di Piazza, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, 112th St. and Amsterdam Ave., NYC, June 26-27.

“The Dance of the Ancient Spider” is best appreciated as a rare and exotic theatrical adventure. It’s a concert of delectable Southern Italian folk music, accompanied by ritualistic dancing and stories that reveal the origins of the tarantella as an ancient healing dance to cure women who’ve been bitten by tarantulas.

Written, directed, and choreo-

graphed by its leading singer-dancer-tambourinist, Alessandra Belloni (a celebrated expert on Italian folk arts), the performance conjured a sensually entrancing atmosphere and, in its unique setting, recalls the sort of entertainment events one might have attended centuries ago. For the first act we are seated outdoors on the Pulpit Green at the magnificent St. John the Divine, where torches light our pathways. A symbolic spider is strung between trees, and masked dancers, storytellers, and musicians perform traditional songs and authentically costumed movement rituals. The entire audience then forms a processional that, led by a torch-carrying singer and urged by a propulsive drumbeat, winds its way into the cathedral. We are seated near the altar and made to hold lighted candles that illuminate the show’s sec-

ond act—a series of frenzied tarantella dances.

Though unremarkable choreographically (there’s lots of free-foam hopping, wild spinning, and writhing on the ground), the overall production is so musically invigorating and frighteningly passionate in its depiction of pagan myths, trances, an exorcism that it becomes a startlingly raw performance experience.

Most notable is the spellbinding music. Composed and arranged by John La Barbera, it combines traditional Mediterranean sounds with contemporary world music and is performed by a top-notch ensemble of instrumentalists and the splendid baritone, Ivan Thomas.