

The Truth about Rita

Review by Paula Thomson



They Called Me Rita by Onyx Hartwell

Premieres at the United Solo Festival

"The body never lies," said the legendary modern dancer, Martha Graham. In "They Called Me Rita," a play written by Onyx Hartwell and dance choreographed by Aydan Cohen, words and movement fuse to portray the 1940's Love Goddess, Rita Hayworth--her private life and exuberant triumphs. Nelia McNicol, the actress/dancer, brings the icon to life from the first glimpse of her entering as only the glamorous Rita Hayworth could: electrically alive and elegant to the core. McNicol flirts with the audience and makes us feel warm and excited for what comes next, an exuberant piece of choreography. It's sexy, grounded, dynamic and wholly captivating. Cohen's skill is most notable during the transitions between scenes; McNicol never leaves the stage. Both are professionally trained dancers.

Rita shares about her life, from age 12 as a professional dancing partner with her father, Eduardo Cansino, through years that included 61 films, four with her own production company, five husbands, and two daughters. Behind the glamour was pain and tragedy,

including 30 years suffering from Alzheimer's before her death. McNicol skillfully embodies Rita's joys and awful betrayals from her family and her very famous husband, Orson Welles. In the darkest moments of the play, McNicol brings us with her into the pain: her emotion, whether loud or quiet, always feels real. The complex life of Hayworth would benefit from a story that is longer than 60 minutes.

Lil Malinich's direction is fluid as each scene moves beautifully from one to the next. She uses the whole stage to feed the raw and dynamic elements of the play, creating a tapestry of emotions in a story that could too easily focus on pain. The depth of Rita Hayworth's character is fully explored and highlighted by powerful cinematic moments.

Hartwell mercifully lifts us from the visceral tragedies of Rita's life and ends the play on an uplifting note, the need to heal, as Rita has done. Nelia McNicol gives a stunning, convincing portrayal of these stages and transitions, embodying the truth of Rita Hayworth's life.

Paula Thomson is a New York graphic artist turned writer, most recently published in "Art Heals the World" ed. Benjamin Perry. She looks for art that is real, alive, truthful. This play is it!