

On Stage

Choreography Sprouts From Hawthorne Tale

By Lisa Traiger

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LAURA Schandelmeier's themes range from the fantastically bizarre to the overtly political. Feminist manifestos and memory plays, ruminations cheerful and violent, elegant and odd -- they all make their way into the works of this Mount Rainier-based dance specialist, who teaches and performs as well as choreographs. Of late she has teamed with Stephen Clapp, a Washington-based dancer of preternatural grace and a strong sense of social responsibility. Saturday the seeds of their work will blossom as "Rappaccini's Daughter," based on a Nathaniel Hawthorne short story, makes its debut at Dance Place.

"We were interested in working together, dancing together," Schandelmeier says. "Our size and movement qualities [are] very compatible. As distinctive as our voices are, there is a symbiosis philosophically that has made the collaboration succeed."



Laura Schandelmeier in the role of a woman raised as a rare flower with Stephen Clapp in "Rappaccini's Daughter."

(R.C. Schandelmeier)

Schandelmeier introduced Clapp to Hawthorne's darkly gothic romance about a controlling father who raises his daughter to be as untouchable as a rare flower. He was instantly drawn to the little-known 1844 tale.

One of the artistic directors of the local experimental collaborative CatScratch Theatre, Clapp found Hawthorne's 19th-century creation myth with Edenic and Shakespearean references relevant in 2004. In reading through the tale, he asked, "Which is stronger: love, freedom or death?"

Clapp and Schandelmeier term the 70-minute work a trio, for joining the pair is a life-size sculpture by Richmond artist Eleanor Rufty. This movable piece of art shares the part of a suitor named Giovanni with Clapp, who plays all the characters except Beatrice, the isolated daughter. As Beatrice, Schandelmeier embodies the young woman raised among exotic and poisonous plants who becomes central to her botanist father's research. Giovanni, entranced by

Beatrice, finds himself equally trapped in the experimentation. But Schandelmeier will say no more: "We don't want to give too much away."

"The work toys with who's in power, who's the villain, who's the victim," she says. "Everyone has a different take on who that might be. I really appreciate the openness of interpretation in art, which I believe was Hawthorne's intent."

Clapp adds with a laugh, "It's not your typical holiday 'Nutcracker.' It's a gothic love tale, a little spooky, a little creepy."

"The story is really juicy," Schandelmeier chimes in. "It's a good ghost story."

"RAPACCINI'S DAUGHTER" -- Saturday at 8 and Sunday at 4. Dance Place, 3225 Eighth St. NE. 202-269-1600.