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Soul of 'Spirit' speaks to all cultures

Show's fire is in electrifying, inspiring American Indian dance

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Photo/Peter Zuzga

Leading man Brandon Oakes performs Thursday in Peter Buffett's "Spirit - The Seventh Fire," which is being staged under a tent at Milwaukee's lakefront.

Rarely has a single feather carried so much weight.

As the centerpiece of "Spirit - The Seventh Fire," a white feather launches the story behind Peter Buffett's ambitious new production, a show staged with a 40-foot high video projection screen under a tent seating 750 people on Milwaukee's lakefront.

Happily, neither the feather nor the production bent under the strain of Thursday's opening. What Buffett, "Spirit's" creator and composer, has created is a vision quest that leaps across three centuries.



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The audience is greeted by a giant projection of an Indian encampment of the 1800s with flickering campfires under a star-encrusted sky...

But soon we're yanked back into our time, with video of factories, gears and clocks, clocks, clocks. It's a world that is destroying "Spirit's" Everyman, a American Indian trapped in an office and a suit.

But when he finds a feather in a file folder, it summons the spirits of his ancestors. Together they try to take him back to his culture.

Now, the success of neither the journey nor the show is a sure bet. This type of plot can be simplified pap in the wrong hands...

But "Spirit" wins through. Told through dance numbers combined with video, live drummers and orchestra, the story envelops and enthralls, held together by the narration of Shawnee elder Chief Hawk Pope. The seemingly endless list of tribes he intones - Ojibwe, Fox, Santee - draws the audience into another world.

The elemental force behind the show is its dancing. Based on American Indian moves, the technique here is more of the earth than of Broadway. But "Spirit" takes traditional dancing to a different plane: Powwow with a dash of Riverdance. Backed by relentless drumming, the dancing's effect is electrifying and inspiring.

Buffett's rock riffs fit wonderfully with this dance. Combining native flutes with everything from cellos to guitar, Buffett pulls his story line into the 21st century, managing to combine modernity and authenticity.

Despite the complexity of the stagecraft - matching huge videos with live action that extends into the audience.... Yet the most successful parts of the production reach back through the ages, with jaw-droppingly beautiful traditional outfits from shawl- to fancy-dancers.

...This is a show that fills your eyes and your heart, an invitation to "follow the drums home" that we all can welcome.

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