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'This Is It'

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Nov. 3, 2009 NCR Today

Sr. Tracey, a sister in my community said that when Michael Jackson extends his arms up and out, he surrenders to the universe. As if he is saying, this is it. I have given you everything; I can give no more.

Kenny Ortega, film and television director, producer, choreographer, whose musical and dance talents shaped such wildly successful pop hits such as the High School Musical franchise and "Dirty Dancing" starring the late Patrick Swayze, has released an unfinished masterpiece: "This Is It," Michael Jackson?s final concert.

"This Is It" is a fusion of rehearsals for what was to be a tour of 50 concerts for the 50-year-old King of Pop. Songs new and old, familiar costume and dance motifs, finessed to shine anew, new sets, new stories, exquisite dance form and movement blended into a farewell tribute. Michael Jackson is in the groove, in the moment, the consummate artist; the ultimate entertainer.

My favorite part is when Michael challenges acoustic guitarist Orianthi Panagaris to find new chords to keep up with him as he sings a range of notes. He keeps telling her, ?This is your moment!? He lets her shine. Michael is generous, and most of all, humble. Orianthi is marvelous.

But what does the phenomenon of Michael Jackson mean?

I don?t think there is any one way to capture what Michael Jackson meant or means to people. I grew up with music from the 1960s, the Supremes and the Beatles. The Jackson Five was the distant sound track of my novitiate and the '70s.

Then came MTV and ?Thriller? in 1982, the best-selling album of all time. But how and to what extent? Even the Library of Congress has a copy deeming it ?culturally significant.?

Much like inter-textual references to the Michael Curtiz 1942 film "Casablanca" still turn up in other forms of popular culture, ?Thriller? transcends time and nationality; references to it are short-hand for a complexity of meanings that rests with each person. The ?Thriller? routine has been re-imagined for the "This Is It" concert. Perhaps it is the song that defines Michael Jackson best. Who was he? Who was he trying to be? Who did his father, Motown, and the Ed Sullivan Show fans want him to be? In the ?Thriller? music video Michael morphs into a monster. Horror is about isolation, fear, the supernatural, chaos; the young woman seems to experience this intensely. But was ?Thriller? an outward manifestation of Jackson?s inner reality? Perhaps his inner self was filled with turmoil, but the show went on. Did he ever figure it out?

It?s hard to say. With the allegations against him, his odd (weird) behavior, the continual attention to his image, who was he? Did he think that if his body was flawless so would be his soul? We do know that he was a humanitarian and that he cared for the earth. In fact, ?The Earth Song? in the film is poetic and haunting. The theme of love pervades the film and the ending service of blessing between Michael and the artists is warm and hopeful.

Sr. Tracey thinks that the "This Is It" film is like the curtain in "The Wizard of Oz" that Toto pulls back to reveal the man behind. In Ortega?s film, a little more of Jackson is revealed but many masks remain. We may never know the whole man.

The only thing I don?t get about Michael Jackson?s dancing is the crotch move. There is rather a too-long segment of it in the film, but it is like a scene from an episode of "South Park": adolescent males of middle age happy to thwart social sensibilities ? or whatever.

The film is worth the price of the ticket. It was like being there.

As I watched Michael Jackson in "This Is It," I shed some tears when he improvised a dance for the ages. His death -- such a waste. Yet, maybe it does not have to be. What can we learn from the life and death of Michael Jackson?

Let the conversations begin.

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