

See the music, hear the music

Decemberists perform 'The Hazards of Love'

ALIE WARD

Colin Meloy, frontman for the popular alt-rock band the Decemberists, feels pretty good when he hears his latest album referred to as a "rock opera." "I embrace it," he says with a sigh of surrender. "I was calling it 'a play for voices,' but whatever. Certainly 'rock opera' is an easy tag."

Meloy originally conceived "The Hazards of Love" as a musical, and its 17 tracks stitch together a narrative thick with murder, vengeance and ill-fated love. The lyrics are heavy with shadowy forest imagery and lay out a drama involving a shape-shifting half-man/half-fawn that falls for a girl named Margaret, only to be driven from her by a vindictive forest queen. Infanticide, rape and folklore-laden anguish are underscored by guitar riffs and squeals as well as the occasional banjo or harpsichord.

But, after it was made, the record's sinister themes didn't seem right for the stage.

"A lot of musical theater is not to my taste," Meloy says, calling most modern show tunes "this weird saccharine

version of modern pop music."

So, rather than stage the musical with live actors, the band decided to team up with L.A.-based film collective Flux to create an animated movie that Meloy describes as an abstract psychedelic approach, rather than a literal interpretation of the album's narrative. "We all have memories of going to laser light shows," he says, adding that the film, directed by four different animators, is "a harkening back to that era."

Called "Here Come the Waves," the hour-long piece is a tumbling series of visuals with four distinct aesthetic styles. Peter Sluszk's ultra-slow motion capture of exploding mushrooms and elegantly disseminating seed pods opens the piece, before giving way to Julia Pott's line art of wolves and foxes hovering in geometric constellations. Pott's illustrative work is followed by Guilherme Marcondes' renderings of skeletons caught among leafless branches and verdant human arms that unfurl like ferns. Work by the artist Santa Maria provides context to the rest of the album, with cosmic,

computer-generated vistas, cartoons of splintering bones and, oddly, a collage of bananas.

The Decemberists, joined by guest vocalists Becky Stark and My Brightest Diamond's Shara Worden, take over UCLA's Royce Hall on Monday to perform the album for the first and only time in front of a 30-foot screening of the film.

"In my years of curating music video and film, there have been a lot of these sort of visual albums," says Jonathan Wells, founder of Flux, which is known for its regular Los Angeles screenings of experimental film. "I really think it's different. Nothing's been executed like this before," he says.

The film will be released this winter on iTunes, which Meloy says "is the perfect vehicle for that. I'm someone who has definitely embraced technology and gadgets."

Though fans will have to wait until Dec. 1 to own a copy, they may never see it paired with another live set.

But if Montana-born Meloy now lives in Portland, why debut this foresty work in the concrete tangle of Los Angeles? He smiles and offers, "That's where the industry is, dude."

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Where: Royce Hall at UCLA, 752 Charles E. Young Drive, Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. Monday

Price: \$37.50

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