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- About Us
- Masthead
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Profusion, A Rite of Fall

By: LORI ORTIZ
09/13/2007

The brilliance of "40up," DancenOw's selection of choreographers and/or dancers over 40, opened this year's festival, which ran September 4-10 at Dance Theater Workshop. The potpourri presaged an upcoming season of larger-than-life modern and contemporary dance, and led us into the festival in its totality - 70-plus works, each seven minutes or less.

All four dancers in Guta Hedewig's excerpt of "Forty," a premiere, had their 40th birthdays this year. With finger signals, the loosely linking acrobatic bodies, speaking out their birth dates, celebrate to the carnivalesque "Frankincense" by Hypnotic Brass Ensemble. Debbie Stamos leads, ending the delight by rolling them into fetal hibernation. The limber ladies in this land-locked water ballet look far from ready for retirement.



Misnomer Dance Theater, including Chris Elam, Coco Karol, Luke Gutsell, in "Throw People (excerpt)."

Neta Pulvermacher's heavier "Welcome to My Garden," to Elvis, is a women's quintet with a singing Rebecca Warren, and a framed picture of a garden. With a satisfying beginning and end, the dance suggests a whole life's passing. The dancers shift places on two chairs at a table; one lies underneath. Elvis' come-hither movement and musical style, however, do not move them.

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Gus Solomons jr, artistic director of Paradigm, performed his intriguing work-in-progress with Hope Clarke and Carmen de Lavallade, to Michael Nyman. The bearded Solomons and de Lavallade are severe, regal, commanding. All wear stiff satiny robes, pink and peach. They swing long arms, creating patterns and connecting in courtly social dance-stopping the novelistic dance-drama midstream and hardboiled.

Janis Brenner and company do justice to Murray Louis' lovely "Porcelain Dialogues," from 1974, to Tchaikovsky. During light-footed social partnering in same-sex duets, a statuesque lift is sustained by former Murray Louis Company dancers Brenner and Robert Small. The six then recline and embrace in male/female couples, like classical figures.

Ethereal, and formally satisfying, the content of these visual dialogues can't be ignored, yet can't be deciphered.

The performance is an homage to Louis' 80th birthday.

Michael Blake danced in the Louis piece and also in Larry Keigwin's very musical "Finger Dance." The volumes expressed in those digits are impressive, yet Paradigm dancers Blake, Keith Sabado, and Valda Setterfield interestingly create an Orientalist interpretation of Satie, in Burke Wilmore's lighting and Oana Botez-Ban's costumes. It sings.

Several solos included a new, philosophical Johannes Wieland piece, which Isadora Wolfe performs with impeccable timing.

Helen Pickett's impressive "One Captured Kiss" is performed by Megan Williams to Tom Waits. Aside from Pickett's engaging choreography, Williams' body is articulated from head to toe. With little drama, her concise dance touches us directly, like Waits.

The show ended with Claire Porter's comedic "Interview." Her body language projects as well as her spoken monologue, memorably releasing us with laughter.

On September 5, DancenOw got down and dirty with Base Camp. This rite of fall is an initiation - night after night, explosions of grit and glitz in a nutshell.

If that were not enough, a Festival commission was performed on each of five evenings. Recipients Brian Brooks, Gina Gibney, Nicholas Leichter, David Parker, and Young Dancemakers were all presented in DancenOw and are now in their 10th anniversary year. Nicholas Leichter opened his show with "Animal" from 1997 and performed a new work-in-progress at the end.

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"Animal" may depend on the audience. At DancenOw, the audience was responsive and Leichter, beginning in silence, isolates different body parts, moving into a very energetic, hip-hop inflected solo to "Everything But The Girl." He looks amazed at the moves and sounds he is making, like an animal, pleased with himself. It's apparent he is working with natural movements and taking them into dance. Laughing, talking to himself, vogueing, and hip-hop blends indistinguishably. If only such naturalistic transition applied to all his company's works.

Leichter's musical choices over the years have widened appreciably. "Jeux de Vagues" from "Spanish Wells" is performed to Debussy's eponymous music. I could even abide by the clapping and finger snapping, which distracted a bit from the conventional way we experience dancing's musicality. It added a dimension. Leichter, in red shirt and a feather in his hat, slides across the stage to trills in the music, lending the piece welcome theatricality. "Jeux" features signature complex, awe-inspiring lifts and groupings, and a little samba.

Leichter is completely invested in unison phrases of personal vocabulary, the other dancers less so. Nevertheless the stage is superbly activated and all the pieces fit together, until curiously the spell is broken with a sudden switch to Amy Winehouse's "Tears Dry on Their Own." It ends the evening on a bright note, but spoils the opportunity to wallow in the delicious magic of dance to Debussy. It could be a valentine for lost loved ones.

The entire work is slated for the company's spring season at DTW.

There are other notable dances the same evening in Base Camp I'd like to see again. Several discoveries will have to suffice.

In an excerpt from "Throw People" by Chris Elam, to music by Andy Tierstein, Elam, Coco Karol, and Luke Gutsell dance, with clownish awkwardness, in leotards with fuzzy chenille trim accentuating the choice places. Karol wears cutoff fishnet tights. The costumes match their pale skin, in very bright light. The performers, punishingly acrobatic, move as a close-knit or knotted group. Their irreverent approach to lifts, and to dance in fact, is sophisticated entertainment, art that doesn't take itself too seriously. Hence, we're compelled by the serious in it.

Jason and Lindsey Dietz Marchant perform an excerpt of their 2007 "Inflatable Man, Evaporating Woman" to Wilhelm H. Grikscheid's sound score. It was the evening's pas de deux. He dances stepping on her white gown. After their beautifully musical partnering, he removes the dress, letting it drop to the floor, and she sinks into it.

The following wonderful works were the dance equivalent of chick lit. "Everything's Just Wonderful" by Adele Berne is for a cast of six individualists and confetti. It was created for a college dance team. "Wow, Mom, Wow" is Faye Driscoll's three graces - Lily Baldwin, Katy Pyle, and Nikki Zialcita, in juvenile costumes - a close-knit, or knotted group.

Of the solos given the same evening each offers something different. "Ella" Robert Battle's premiere needs mention.

It's like a tap dance to Ella Fitzgerald, but company dancer Marlena Wolfe interestingly does it in slippers.

It doesn't end here. In DancenOw's wide reach, everything out there is fair game. In the current reality show climate, it celebrates diverse live dance, isn't overburdened with restrictive categories and ranks, and isn't a game. God willing, I'll go back for more.

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