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Cedar Lake shows audience how to dance from within

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As the curtain went up Thursday night for the third featured performance of the American Dance Festival, dancers of the Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet walked to the edge of the stage.

Inches from the footlights, they moved in unison to music that only they could know.

The gestures began as subtle shifts in posture before bursting into a series of convulsions that slid into a unified tribal experience.

The scenes in Cedar Lake's "Decadance" pulled from various works composed in the past two decades by choreographer Ohad Naharin.

The show was full of surprises from the dancers, including solos by Ebony Williams, adorned in a feather boa and 2-foot-high stilts, and Jon Bond, who danced onstage throughout the entire intermission.

"The show provides the unexpected," audience member Bobby Ward said.

The interaction between numerous vignettes, overlapping and contrasting each other, kept the audience engaged.

During one scene featuring five male dancers in a ritual setting, the audience chuckled as Williams strolled across the stage in her flamboyant feathers and stilts.

Naharin's works thrive off of the rich variety of styles and ideas within the confines of his choreography. Even the music had variety, featuring pieces such as Ludwig van Beethoven's "Sonata No. 9" and the "Hawaii 5-O" theme.

"His dances exist as statements against conformity," said Suzanne Carbonneau, critic-in-residence for the festival, in a pre-show discussion.

Following the performance, that statement could not have rung more true.

Each segment introduced elements of classical ballet before systematically deconstructing them, and pushing dancers back into a more abstract, modern style.

Dancers convulsed. They froze in place. They pushed the boundaries of the physically and humanly possible, shifting their weight until they were about to fall over before snapping back upright to recover their balance.

As Naharin drove his dancers to their limits, the trust and commitment between company and choreographer became increasingly apparent.

Rather than taking the typical three weeks necessary to teach his choreography, Naharin spent three months retraining the dancers.

His technique, known as “Gaga,” encourages performers to reconnect with their bodies through acceptance and physical awareness, rather than relying on mirrors for corrections.

“I have a request: Get rid of the mirrors. Don’t dance in front of mirrors,” Naharin told the audience.

During Cedar Lake’s three-month retraining, all mirrors in the studio were covered.

“His dances are less interested in who we are, but who we will become,” Carbonneau said.

Naharin was awarded the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for lifetime achievement in choreography, along with a check for \$50,000. The award has become one of the most prestigious in the country, honoring highly influential choreographers.

During his acceptance speech before Thursday night’s performance, Naharin advised the audience.

“Copy — yet, only the good things,” he said. “And if you get an award, make a short speech.”

Cedar Lake will continue their series tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m., as well as a 1 p.m. matinee performance Saturday.

Contact the Arts Editor at arts.dth@gmail.com.

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