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Paul Taylor Dance Company
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Of Life and Death: Paul Taylor Dance Company performs at ADF

The Paul Taylor Dance Company brought three works spanning five decades to the Durham Performing Arts Center July 16-18. Though sometimes wildly different in temperament, "Scudorama" (1963), "Mercuric Tidings" (1982), and "Beloved Renegade" (2009) expressed Taylor's movement vocabulary, theatrical style, and musicality clearly and remarkably consistently throughout the evening.

"Mercuric Tidings," which opened the concert, featured thirteen dancers - alert, alive - in bright blue unitards, and was a vibrant rush and swirl of color, sound, and motion. With quick little jumps and skimming leaps, the dancers spiraled across the stage, blown into twisting eddies on the winds of the music, excerpts from Franz Schubert's Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2. Full of quicksilver turns and direction shifts, the work also carried Taylor's larger, sweeping arm gestures; this time, the arms were thrown or held gently bowed, like full sails turning to catch the wind.

The newest work on the program, "Beloved Renegade," had as its subject the poet Walt Whitman and his work, "Leaves of Grass." Each of the six sections of the dance, set to Poulenc's "Gloria," represented a particular vision from the poet's life: young love with the first budding of sexuality, wounded and dying men returning from war, children playing, and finally, Whitman's death. The poet, danced by Michael Trusnovec, watched these scenes float by, sometimes participating, sometimes separated from the visions by a hazy scrim. This drama was more of a narrative than the other works on the program; it was almost a story within a story, as the poet's death and the grieving of his friends was foreshadowed even as the memories were joyfully or tenderly relived. The dancers' light costumes glowed against the blue of the background, and the work, as a whole, was soft and beautiful. The dance was more sentimental than I cared for, particularly the company's clasped hands thrust upward, pleading for Whitman's life, and the farewell hugs before his ultimate death. The final image, however, was lovely and almost matter-of-fact. Laura Halzack, as a gentle Angel of Death, escorted the poet through the gates of life, and embraced him with her gaze turned away. Palms open, she indicated where he should lie, and he dutifully reclined, arms crossed over his chest. The lights did not fade, even as the curtain began its descent; a triumph, it seemed, for both death and for life.

Perhaps the most fascinating work of the evening was "Scudorama," the oldest of Taylor's featured works and the antithesis of the joy and light of "Beloved Renegade" - this was a "dance of death," according to Taylor. Prefaced by a quote from Dante: "What souls are these who run through this black haze?" The inhabitants of this dark world - lost souls, or maybe those who have lost their souls - slithered, writhed, and preyed upon each other. Set to a jazzy, rhythmic, and cacophonous score by Clarence Jackson, "Scudorama" was weird and creepy, featuring some of Taylor's quirkier movement vocabulary - certainly the strangest of the evening. I particularly liked the trio of women in black unitards and white collars - with arched arms and hunched backs. They stared down the audience like vultures before erupting, all elbows and bent angles, into impish antics. Later, they threatened a woman in red, circling in a demonic prance, heads and wrists flopping, knees lifted high. The red woman's torments were not over yet; a man

pushed and pulled her around like a rag doll. Her legs extended over his head, he grasped her ankles and crack-crack-crack, split her legs in a gesture suggesting sexual humiliation. It was clear, as he stumbled and slid off stage that the act of breaking her left him broken too.

The American Dance Festival's final week of performances in the 2009 season starts off with the Past/Forward concert July 20-22, featuring works by Faye Driscoll, Laura Dean, and Rosie Herrera.

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