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American Dance Festival Past/Forward 2009-07-21

Finding the Balance: ADF presents old and new works in Past/Forward

The American Dance Festival presented Past/Forward this week (July 20-22), an annual concert that looks at dance in both directions, honoring classic modern dance works and commissioning new dances. This year's program offered a World Premiere by Faye Driscoll, "There is so much mad in me," and two reconstructions - "Infinity" (1990) by Laura Dean, and "Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret" (2009) by Rosie Herrera, all performed by ADF dancers.

Driscoll's in-your-face dance drama - more about emotional interactions than dance vocabulary - pointedly unsettled the audience as it navigated the narrow distance between anger and excitement, sex and violence. A bit dwarfed by the emptiness of the bare stage - no wings, no backdrop - the dancers moaned and screamed and cursed, teased and fondled and fought.

"Infinity," brought a more organized, measured turmoil to the stage. Reconstructed by former Laura Dean dancer Rodger Belman, the work featured choreography, costume design, and music composition by Dean herself. Accompanied by an invigorating, percussive score performed by Jason Cirker, Mitchell Cirker, and Matthew Spataro, the dancers filled the space with their swooping arms, weighted walks, stomping feet, and of course, lightning-fast spins across the stage. "Infinity" blended a multitude of dance styles, including hints of Irish step dance, flamenco, African dance, and American folk dance. The dance developed a mesmerizing momentum, as new, overlapping patterns were continually introduced, and the eye could barely keep up with the constant, certain change. The dancers were phenomenal in their stamina, timing, and execution of Dean's challenging movement.

"Infinity" operated with the complex precision of a machine; each element - movement, rhythm, pattern, pulse - clicking into place, both driven and bound by the motion of every other piece. But this industrial image does not capture the spirit of the dance, the very alive-ness of both the dancers and the music - as present and substantial as the dancers themselves. Rather, these strands wrap and weave, tying and unraveling a complicated series of knots; the flow rushes through the orderly tangle of capillaries, or follows the winding, inevitable path of water to the ocean. On a grander scale, the forces at work in "Infinity" seem as powerful and unstoppable as gravity, guiding the dancers through the arc and whirl of planets in orbit.

The true highlight of the evening was Herrera's "Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret," an astonishing dance-theater work that gracefully brought together both spectacle and intimate gesture. Tied together by images of "drowning," the dream-like scenes of this cabaret were hilarious and touching, quirky and uncomfortable, and sometimes all of those at once. The curtain opened on a collection of characters, each in their own situation, but aware of each other, as if present at the same strange nightclub. A couple at a table was offered a real baby on a silver platter; a woman atop a ladder dangled a pinata over the heads of two drag queens in large hats chatting on a sofa; a couple slow-danced; a long, sinuous man danced by himself in a bathtub; a man in a silk robe carved and ate a ham suspended on a platform in front of him.

The theme of drowning took on layers of nuance as the work developed, tapping into our deep, instinctual fear of unknown depths, of a power that overwhelms, of getting in over our heads. As appropriate for a cabaret, the music - and in particular, the lyrics - helped to underscore these images in literal, ironic, and graceful ways. Two men shared a dance of romantic coercion to "Baby, It's Cold Outside," one ducking under the other's elbow, trying to get away as the singer begged, "I really can't stay," while the other drew him closer, violently clutching. A drag queen lip-synched to "My Heart Will Go On," from the movie Titanic, tossing down a locket and smashing a block of ice on the floor before stripping to a wet suit and flippers. A woman, her sequined dress setting the floor shimmering, tried to keep her head above water as the sound of water dripping filled the air. How profound, then, the silence at the end, as the whole cast of characters wheeled out the drag queen in the bathtub, naked except for his stage make-up. A woman - weeping? - dribbled water over his bare head, and tenderly, quietly, wiped his face clean of the heavy make-up as if preparing him for death.

Herrera, whether through intuition or calculation, has found just the right touch, just the right balance between campy and poignant, over-the-top and subtle. By the end, we found we'd been carried along without even knowing it into a place of wistful beauty, into the bizarre center of our lives, our sad and hopeful dreams. In the last scene, a video projected on the backdrop, six characters on a raft in the middle of the ocean let themselves topple into the sea. From underwater, they float and fall - not panicked, not drowning or gasping - as if learning to live after all.

The ADF 2009 performance series concludes with the Mark Morris Dance Group, July 23-25 at the Durham Performing Arts Center.

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