

Celebrate Dance 2010 — As You Like It

by Rachel Levin
March 13, 2010

The Alex Theatre
216 North Brand Boulevard

Glendale, CA 91203
818-243-7700

ExploreDance.com

Like a richly textured Shakespearean comedy, the rave-worthy showcase Celebrate Dance on Saturday night began with a funeral, ended with a marriage, and in between meandered through the highs and lows of complex relationship struggles. Collectively, the nine local dance companies featured on the program delivered an opus of movement from jazz to acrobatic to ballet on pointe.

The funeral of the opening belonged to a lyrical ballet premiere by Macarena Gandarillas' Visions Dance Theatre set in the theatre of war. From love between a young soldier and his bride, to the field of battle, to a grave of grief, the lush, gorgeously executed movements brought authentic emotions to life without even a touch of hysteric excess such themes might cultivate.

The marriage of the show-stopping finale belonged to husband-wife duo Nehara Kalev and C. Derrick Jones' Catch Me Bird. Definitely the highlight of the night, the piece "Guiding Rings" began with the couple's good-natured roughhousing and strong yet tender embraces. The two then retreated behind a thin veil of fabric to perform the breathtaking aerial portion of the piece in silhouette. Moving about in interlocking rings that spun like atoms, the couple explored aspects of trust and partnership as a metaphor for their real-life relationship. Though a technical snafu cut off the lowermost portion of the silhouette, making it appear as if Jones was spinning somewhere below the stage, the power and magnificence of the piece was not diminished.

Other highly physical duets included Marie de la Palme/Motion Tribe's "The Cage" and Josie Walsh/MyoKyo's "Found." The latter was an energetic cat-and-mouse game of contemporary movement exploring confrontational aspects of love. The tight choreography of tangles and oppositions incorporated elements of martial arts and honest-to-goodness funk. The former was a clear audience favorite, a duet between Fabienne Levenson's bird-like woman trapped in a cage and Ben Sayles' valiant paramour who strives to set her free. The dancers' exceptional strength and grace as they navigated acrobatic possibilities for touch built such empathy for their struggle that their final embrace brought cathartic gasps from the audience.

In the midst of these relationship explorations, JazzAntiqua's "Expansions" was a refreshing break of pure party pleasure. Pat Taylor's high-minded jazz composition — performed by a lively ensemble and set to a song by Lonnie Liston Smith — oozed cool. Stutter steps and syncopation in the pocket of the music conveyed a playful, get-down spirit.

Also a departure from standard fare was RhetOracle Dance Company's "Flowers That Pick Themselves," from choreographer Nate Hodges, a sort of wild witches' chorus set to Baroque harpsichord tunes. The group of femmes fatales dressed in flowing white gowns punctuated by crimson trim (suggestive of blood on pale skin)

romped with treacherous knives, a meditation on pleasure at a blade's edge.

The remaining ensemble pieces hewed closely to the night's implicit theme of love and relationships. Mike Esperanza's BARE Dance Company traced homoerotic notes in a flowing quartet about how relationships weave in and out of our lives. Paula Present's PTERO Dance Theatre looked to the poetry of Khalil Gibran for its contemporary expression of rapture borne of pain. And Lorin Johnson's Body Current Dance premiered a lustrous ballet-driven piece with a unique lighting design by Eileen Cooley that highlighted the ensemble's dancing shadows.

Perhaps the one element missing from this year's line-up was the international thread, which in previous years has included Armenian, Brazilian, and Afro-Cuban dance forms, a reflection of the city's diverse makeup. Most of the pieces hovered near the juncture of ballet and modern with a splash of jazz, which made the evening seem slightly less of a dance variety show and more of a thematically and choreographically seamless whole. But that doesn't necessarily mean that the showcase is settling into one particular direction in its fifth year. It just seems that these companies most drew the personal attention of producer Jamie Nichols, who lets instinct rather than premeditation determine the diversity of her program. Never formulaic, Nichols has nonetheless found a winning formula of drawing in the crowds with the promise of awe-inspiring acrobatics and classical ballet beauty, then keeping them riveted in their seats with edgier, experimental fare.

The show sold out for the third straight year in a row — no small feat in an economy where discretionary spending for dance may be at an all-time low. Though the hope is that the showcase will build new audiences for each individual company, the bottom line is that if you can spend the money on only one dance ticket per season or even per year, Celebrate Dance is consistently the hottest ticket in town.