

Entertainment

Dance Review:

Celebration of joy

Jamie Nichols pulls nine best of the best dance companies and they shine.

By Melonie Magruder

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For five years now, Jamie Nichols has brought her exuberant vision of dance performance to Glendale, and it's not all about pink tutus and demure pliés.

At Sunday's gala event Celebrate Dance 2010 at the Alex Theatre, Nichols drew together nine dance companies of energetic talent and creative choreography to illustrate that dance, thrillingly, is for all audiences and all ages.

Nichols, executive producer of Celebrate Dance, invites dance companies from around the country to participate in a show that gives each act 10 minutes or so to wow the audience, and all delivered.

Macarena Gandarillas of Visions Dance Theatre jumped right in with her premiere piece — "Always Remember . . . Never Forget" — an homage to our troops going to war, choreographed to Byzantine hymns by Vassilis Tsabropoulos. There was passionate connection in the first movement's pas de deux as the company told the story of one soldier not coming back. With a hint of Jerome Robbins' choreography in a piece of aching sorrow, Bradley Beakes and Sara Vincent showed that great dance is just as often about great acting.

Josie Walsh's Myokyo group recreated "Found" in a song by British electronica group Lamb. The pas de deux explored a love/hate relationship with terrific ebb and flow, and young Heather Phillips is a star.

In the premiere "Flowers That Pick Themselves," the Rhetorale Dance Company featured eight exceptionally well-trained dancers with conflicting feelings about a table piled with knives. Whether a "secret addiction to bitter medicine," as billed, or a cautionary tale on the lure of self-cutting, this was dance as alarming fable. Never has Bach sounded so subversive.

"Expansions" by the Jazzantiqua Dance and Music Ensemble, set to the electronic funk of Lonnie Liston Smith, brought to mind the cheerleading squad of Los Angeles' WNBA team, the Sparks. This is not an insult. The Sparks' squad features women and men of all shapes and sizes who are there to cheer their team, not just shake booty, and their enthusiasm is infectious. Jazzantiqua's choreography was perhaps not as adventurous as some, but their dancers were having more fun than a barrel of monkeys.

And speaking of monkeys, Motiontribe's presentation of "The Cage," showed how seamlessly excellent dancers can bridge the distinction between man and beast. Ben Sayles and Fabienne Levenson danced the entire piece with Levenson encaged like a zoo animal. Debussy's impressionistic "Afternoon of a Faun" was the perfect music to frame this athletic dance and Sayles was superb both in form and musical interpretation. He has a great career ahead of him.

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Motion Tribe's Ben Sayles, top, and Fabienne Levenson perform "The Cage" during dress rehearsal for Celebrate Dance 2010 at the Alex Theater in Glendale on Saturday. (Raul Roa/News-Press)

The two couples in Bare Dance Company's presentation of "Drift," set to music by Beethoven, were technically proficient, but the choreography, by design considering the title, was ambivalent. Parrying around a white, square cloth on the stage floor, the male dancers seemed more interested in each other than partnering the ladies.

In a Cirque du Soleil moment, the Catch Me Bird company combines aerial performance, dance and theater in their celebration of love, called "Guiding Rings." Choreographed in three movements to music by Ry Welch, the piece begins with a cool, percussive rift that perfectly highlighted the remarkable chemistry between C. Derrick Jones and Nehara Kalev. The second and third movements allowed them to morph slowly into an amazing display of balance on hanging rings.

But the best performance of the evening came from the Body Current Dance company's premiere of "My Breath Comes Differently." And this is the precise place to mention what a treat it was to see dance performances correctly lit. Designer Eileen Cooley has received seven Lester Horton Dance Awards for Excellence in Lighting and she deserves every accolade for lighting to emphasize the lines of dancers' bodies.

In Body Current's piece, dancers' silhouettes were projected onto a large scrim behind them, so that four dancers seemed 40.forty. Dynamic choreography, outstanding performers and tense, dramatic and difficult music (9/8 time — try that!) combined to make this piece electrifying.

Nichols evidently has high standards in selecting companies to perform in Celebrate Dance and this year's gala showed an eclectic, compelling, tight concept. It would be great to share her vision more than once a year.

About the writer MELONIE MAGRUDER is a screenwriter and journalist whose dance appreciation was shaped by years of dogging the best dance companies of Europe.

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