

Eight Dances, Three Companies, Two Hours, One Fine Evening

Big Range Dance Festival 2009 -- Program B

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Barnevelder Theatre
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The second weekend of the Big Range Dance Festival gave us eight works from three companies. Traveling the farthest was Atlanta's Staibdance, which offered five different works. The company proved to be highly skilled dancers and the only company to offer truly lighthearted moments during the entire evening.

Especially indicative of the latter is George Staib's solo, *NarcissEros*, a piece that finds the choreographer alternately taking himself too seriously and dismissing himself. Dressed all in white, he held the stage with authority, whether he was performing virtuoso turns or silly, self-conscious gestures. This piece drew the only audible laughs of the evening.

Another lighthearted piece of Staib choreography, *Fleur de Lys*, found three performers, two women and a man, all dressed in frilly, Victorian style undergarments or perhaps nightwear. Clearly, they were having fun with gender, but it wasn't always clear what exactly they were saying. Nicholas Surbey sometimes appeared to be actually playing a woman, at other times, a man who just happened to be wearing women's clothing. Daphanie Scandruck literally carries the cast when, in the final moments, she winds up with both of the other dancers draped across her shoulders. This move brought gasps of both concern and delight from the audience.

The other three Staibdance pieces, *Tear the Marble*, *Peer Pressure Candy Crime*, and *Frost*, were more traditional modern dance pieces, but showed a strong command of a diverse movement vocabulary and a gift for large-cast dances. Often a large cast dances can appear busy and leave the viewer uncertain where to look. Not so with Staibdance. *Frost* had eleven dancers on stage at once, but the variety and clarity of movement always stayed focus.

The find of the evening, however, was NobleMotion Dance, a company hailing from Huntsville, Texas. Co-artistic directors, Andy Noble and Dionne Sparkman Noble first offered up a duet, *Yield*, which finds Dionne performing increasingly agitated and anxious movements around Andy, who sits immobile in a chair, hands clutched tightly in his lap. It is a scenario we've all seen before—a woman fretting over a non-communicative man—but the intensity of the performance saved it from cliché.

The real revelation of what NobleMotion is capable of came with *KinkyKool Fan Blowing Hard*, a piece for ten dancers and five large, industrial fans. The dance is set

around the idea of people being blown about the stage and the company exhibits an extraordinary athleticism. The choreography alternates between the expected (dancers struggling into the wind) and the novel (some really inventive ways to fall) and even when one section feels out of place (the soundtrack becomes punk/metal and the movements look lifted out of a rock video), it never fails to hold the attention. Dramatic mood is increased by side-lighting and a fog machine, but these elements never steal the show from the dancing. The final section finds bodies flying across the stage like tumbleweeds in ways you'd swear would only be possible with Hollywood special effects. No gymnast ever bounced across a stage like these dancers. NobleMotion Dance is a name to watch, and if they don't make the trip down to Houston again soon, it would be worth Houston dance enthusiasts' effort to make the road trip up I-45.

Right in the middle of the program was Houston native (and resident company for the venue), Suchu Dance. Mysterious Mountains was classic Jennifer Woods choreography, all spinning bodies and whipping limbs. The "vintage" costumes for the all-female cast were solid color shorts (of various colors) and blouses of bright prints and while I couldn't be sure, it was probably all made of polyester. The soundtrack consisted of a disco version of Cole Porter's "Night and Day," crowd noise, and clinking dishes. The blouses and the sounds transported me back to my 1970s school cafeteria, where women in similar blouses (though perhaps of stouter build) served lunches. Not sure what that has to do with mountains, mysterious or otherwise, but it's not an unpleasant association.

The Big Range Dance Festival continues through June 14, 2009. For more information, contact Barnevelder Theatre at 713/529-1819 or visit www.bigrange.org

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