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Program flawed, but Dayton troupe wields power

By: Jennifer Brewer, March 22, 2010

PORTLAND — The dancers of Dayton Contemporary Dance Company are marvelously powerful and passionate. At Saturday's Merrill Auditorium performance, they displayed technical virtuosity and intense commitment to every movement of every piece. It could be said that they danced their hearts out.

The four pieces on the program were uneven in audience appeal. In particular, the second – "Vespers" by Ulysses Dove to Mikel Rouse music – presented difficulties.

Although the dancers, including the divine Sheri "Sparkle" Williams, gave it their all, the loud, steady drumbeat and lack of apparent relationship between the choreography and its stated message made it hard for some to appreciate the piece; a number of audience members left the theater afterward.

However, the program became more accessible after intermission, with two pieces by multiple Tony-nominated choreographer Donald McKayle.

"Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder," created in 1959 for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, benefited from McKayle's choreographic texture – blending classical jazz with modern and African dance – and a comprehensible theme.

To traditional songs arranged by Robert DeCormier and Milton Okun, the moving, artistically satisfying "Rainbow" told of men on a chain gang – their frustration, exhaustion, yearning and dreams.

Six bare-chested men entered, linked by held hands. Their subsequent movement evoked both restrained power and the agony of that restraint. Their dreams took the form of a sweetheart, mother and wife, all performed by Marlyana Locklear in successive solos and duets. Many of the songs were about leaving, in homecoming or in death.

"Children of the Passage," by McKayle and Ronald K. Brown, depicted "decadent lost souls" as they partied raucously and then found redemption, rescued by ancestral spirits.

In colorful, stylized evening wear designed by Omotayo W. Olaiya, the dancers were led in debauchery by the towering G.D. Harris (apparently – individual credits weren't given), in a brocade coat and derby. Music by the Dirty Dozen Brass Band featured soaring brass and saxophone in a mix of New Orleans jazz and sultrier soul.

The movement ranged from exuberant to lugubrious to frenzied to sinuous, with evocations from tribal to downtown.

The transition to redemption was rendered effectively, as the colorful group was replaced by a single dancer in white, dancing with gentleness and gradually joined by the rest, in new white garb.

The evening began with "J Lawrence Paint (Harriet Tubman Remix)," a half-hour piece by Donald Byrd originally created as part of an evening-long work inspired by the Harriet Tubman series of painter Jacob Lawrence.

Lawrence's work is color-saturated, with vibrancy even in depictions of sorrow and struggle, whereas "Paint" was monochromatic, with off-white costumes and neutral lighting. Yet, Lawrence was woven throughout the piece, in poses and steps (notably cartwheels), and in style and tone.

"Paint" opened with dancers sitting in a line facing away from the audience. One arm at a time, they joined hands, then collapsed onto one another. As the piece progressed, they leapt, performed inventive lifts and posed like statues evoking hope, toil and mourning.

As Harriet Tubman, Williams wore an apron and headscarf, in contrast to the other dancers' minimalist costumes, and frequently pointed upward, in a pose precisely matching Lawrence. She led the others, but only periodically, so that the piece was – like much of Lawrence's work – an impressionistic, not literal, depiction of Tubman's history.

"Paint" showcased the dancers' artistic strength, especially in their precision and smooth transitions from spasmodic shaking to absolute stillness, from spinning and rolling floorwork to seamlessly integrated patterns and lifts.

Williams was mesmerizing, with a subtle spiritual force. The overall effect was hypnotic and appropriately painterly.

DCDC's program could have been perfected with more attention to the diversity of the audience. Contemporary dance can become more inward than outward, more about the artists' experience than the audience's.

Perhaps simple tweaks to musical volume or program order might have been helpful. Nonetheless, most who attended seemed to sense their good fortune in encountering these powerful artists.

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