

Modern Moves Festival

 criticaldance.org/modern-moves-festival

Editor CriticalDance

Atlas Performing Arts Center, Washington DC; January 4, 2014

Carmel Morgan

alight dance theater

Bowen McCauley Dance

Christopher K. Morgan & Artists

Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Company

Daniel Burkholder/The Playground

Human Landscape Dance

Dance fans in DC know that Dance Place, the longtime bedrock of contemporary dance in Washington, is presently undergoing a transformation. Dance Place's studio and performance space is being expanded and renovated. While these exciting changes are ongoing, shows and classes must go on. Therefore, different venues across the city are playing host to Dance Place's usual activities. The Atlas Performing Arts Center provided space for a special two-day event – the Modern Moves Festival – featuring 12 local modern dance companies. The performances were sold out, a testament to the strong support for contemporary dance in the DC area.

Although the need for a performance venue during Dance Place's major upgrades spurred the festival at the Atlas, I hope to see not only more contemporary dance at the Atlas, but also a repeat of the festival at the new and improved Dance Place. It was fantastic to be able to see so many DC-based modern dance companies in back-to-back performances. It would be a shame not to attempt the festival again, especially when the shows were sold out. Not only did the audience benefit from the opportunity to see so many contemporary dance companies at once, but I'm guessing the companies also benefitted from working closely with each other. I'd also guess that the companies will see a boost in attendance at future performances due to this joint exposure.

On a chilly Saturday night, I attended the first evening of the festival, which showcased six local dance companies: alight dance theater, Bowen McCauley Dance, Christopher K. Morgan & Artists, Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Company, Daniel Burkholder/The Playground, and Human Landscape Dance. Sunday's afternoon performance also had six DC area companies dancing: Company E, Dance Exchange, Jane Franklin Dance, Naoko Maeshiba/Kibism, Rebollar Dance, and VTDance/Vincent E. Thomas.

Some similar themes emerged from Saturday night's diverse performances. For example, there were dances revolving around heroes, fairy tales, and myths. Bowen McCauley Dance, in "Fire and Air," tackled the final act of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, complete with a venomous scarf snake. Lucy Bowen McCauley, the choreographer, was Cleopatra, and she demanded attention. She danced with the utmost seriousness and poise. Her eyes pierced as she writhed and contorted. Dustin Kimball as Mark Antony, and her two attendants, Alicia Curtis and Liz Clain-Stefanelli, took a back seat to Bowen McCauley's high drama. Presenting a new take on Cinderella was Human Landscape Dance's piece by the same name. Malcolm Shute, the choreographer, in a clever twist, shared the role of Cinderella with Mary Szegda. Shute emphasized the physicality of Cinderella's labor, while Szegda got to wear the ball gown and go to the ball with Alexander Short, her prince. In the beginning, in a section called "Broom," Shute's long hair practically swept the floor as he swung like a pendulum in the grip of Short, who

before becoming the prince, took the role of Mother. Instead of offering a coherent narrative, Human Landscape Dance's Cinderella seemed aimed to provoke dialogue about gender roles in its deconstructed version of the classic storybook tale. In alight dance theater's excerpts from "Stargazing," Angella Foster read aloud recollections of childhood stargazing and told the story of the Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters. Foster, the youngest artistic director of the companies on Saturday night's program, is charming and ambitious, and she appears to have real vision and heart. An earlier work by Foster, "Speechless," about how children with disorders that prevent them from communicating verbally (like autism) and their parents navigate without words, deeply touched me and made me think she's one to watch. I continue to think Foster has a knack for thoughtfully weaving together spoken word and movement.

The remaining works on the program were bound by their ability to compel. Daniel Burkholder's solo, "Solo #14," brought genuine freshness. Like Foster's "Stargazing," his work was interspersed with narration. Burkholder queried an audience member before starting his dance. He asked about a favorite place. When the young man in the audience answered that he likes New York City, Burkholder asked why, and the man commented on his love of partying with friends there and the adrenaline high of being in a city where something is always "happening."

Burkholder then announced that his dance was, coincidentally, about being in a place you love, with people you love, and the accompanying rush of emotion. He danced fluidly, lyrically, and unrelentingly toward one side of the stage. Next, he suddenly stopped dancing and breathily told of a trip to the Grand Tetons, where as a solo traveler he reveled not only in the wide open space he observed and the peacefulness he experienced, but in the company of other travelers, whose presence energized him. When he began dancing again, he moved expansively across the stage, yet still in liquid arcs. One last interruption occurred. Burkholder reminisced about performing in a certain dance piece with a group of 10-12 others. He was certain, he said, that he stood in this spot on the stage, or maybe not. He was certain that he performed this movement, or not. He struggled to recapture the exhilaration he felt from dancing a work that had so clearly left a mark on him. Finally, Burkholder rapturously recalled, with sudden confidence, the steps he had executed, with shouts of "Yes, yes, yes" as he danced them.

"Khaybet," a 2003 work choreographed by Dana Tai Soon Burgess, was expertly performed by Connie Lin Fink-Hammack. "Khaybet" is a masterpiece, and although I have seen it multiple times, it never grows old. Fink-Hammack, in head to toe semi-sheer dirt-colored fabric (costume by Judy Hansen), including a veil that fully covered her face, maneuvered along a diagonal, starting in a back corner away from the audience and moving closer, but slipping back now and again. The smallest of movements – the turn of a palm, the curl of a toe, the rotation of a shoulder – captivated, in part because only the dancers' feet and hands were exposed. As well, one's attention naturally went toward the shapes made by the body underneath the fabric. Gorgeous sculptural poses were frozen for brief moments. The diagonal line along which Fink-Hammack slowly danced served as a sort of cage, not unlike her costume. As always, in the final seconds of "Khaybet" when Fink-Hammack lifted the veil from her face, my heart leapt. Since her back was to the audience in this parting moment, her face remained invisible. The message seems to be that in her release from life (an Egyptian poem from the program notes is about death), she was ultimately freed.

Closing the evening was Christopher K. Morgan's "De-Generate," a piece from 2012. I had also seen this work previously, and I liked it better upon this viewing. When I first saw "De-Generate," which was commissioned by the American University Dance Company, I was uncertain about the use of ping-pong balls. Yes, spoiler alert, ping pong balls play a prominent part in "De-Generate." A whole mess of ping pong balls, in fact, litter the stage.

Morgan is an accomplished choreographer, and I worried that rather than being creative, he had grown lazy by relying heavily on gimmicky props like ping pong balls. My worry was compounded by the fact that the opening of "De-Generate" was so extremely lovely sans ping pong balls. The little orbs, I thought at the time, were little more than a distraction. This time, though, I grew fond of the ping pong balls. Maybe it was the luminescent lighting

(original lighting design by Jason Arnold, subsequent design by Brian S. Allard)? The balls looked pearly and seemed to glow. I also appreciated the way the balls added aural and visual interest. Furthermore, I began to see the balls as symbols for life's complications. Dancer Tiffanie Carson rounded up countless little balls, but try as she might, a few pesky ones were left behind. As hard as we may try to corral the messiness of life and strive for neatness, some things stay messy! Most of all, I sensed an edge of your seat tension that propelled the work and raised it above merely a dance with cute props. The emotional undercurrent supplied by the more mature dancers in Morgan's company, versus the college dancers, won me over.