

Modern Moves Festival to feature D.C. area's most established dance troupes

By Rebecca Ritzel

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This being an Olympic season, you could call the 12 dance companies performing in next weekend's Modern Moves Festival Carla Perlo's Dream Team.

More than a year ago, Perlo, the co-director of Dance Place, asked a dozen modern dance companies and choreographers from the District, Maryland and Virginia to participate in a two-day festival at the Atlas Performing Arts Center. All 12 said yes, no alternates necessary. As a result, the festival marks the first time in 20 years that the region's three largest, most established modern troupes will appear on a bill together.

Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company, Dance Exchange and Bowen McCauley Dance are among the companies you can see performing five- to 15-minute works this coming weekend. For people interested in getting to know local troupes, Modern Moves offers one-stop after-Christmas shopping rather than an evening-long commitment.

Try these companies, then consider buying tickets for their full-length performances at the Kennedy Center or Theatre Project.

For some of the smaller troupes participating, however, Modern Moves stands in for what would normally be weekend-long run at Dance Place. The Northeast venue is closed and undergoing a nine-month, \$4 million facelift that will expand the theater, add a studio and bring the building up to the standard of other performing arts venues in the District.

The closing, Perlo says, "was going to leave a big hole in many local companies' seasons," a hole she hopes the festival will help fill. Several choreographers said they view Modern Moves the other way around — that they said yes to support Dance Place, rather than because they needed another gig. Those include two companies recovering from busy Novembers: [Dana Tai Soon Burgess](#) attracted hundreds of people to its show at the National Portrait Galley, and Bowen McCauley spent nine days touring China. Granted, Washington's diplomatic community opens doors for local arts groups to negotiate embassy-sponsored travel, but Perlo still says Washington should take a bit more pride in its ambassadorial arts organizations.

"Many of them have extensive travel experience. They are highly regarded around the world," she said. "Why don't you want to see them in your own town?"

Pointed rhetorical questions aside, Perlo also acknowledges that Modern Moves doesn't cover the full spectrum of D.C. dance — there's no ballet, tap or world dance, genres that are welcome at VelocityDC, the annual fall festival produced by Washington Performing Arts Society.

"That's not what [Modern Moves] is," Perlo said emphatically. "If you don't like contemporary dance, don't come to this." But she added that, within the genre, there's still a wide range of styles and themes. "While they are all contemporary dance, they all have varied approaches. Each is a little gem. Well, I shouldn't say 'little,' I should just say, each one is a gem."

Here's more information about six of the 12 companies participating, and what makes them distinct from others in the Baltimore-Washington dance scene.

Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company

The company: Burgess was barely out of college when he moved to Washington and founded his company in 1992. His choreography tends to be lyrical, contemplative and methodical. Over the past 20 years, he has partnered with many of the city's art museums, often exploring "hyphenated" cultures and ethnic identity through dance.

The work: "'Khaybet' represents a woman at the moment of facing death," Burgess says. He choreographed this solo, which will be performed by Connie Lin Fink-Hammack, in 2002, after traveling in Pakistan, "where the completely covered women seemed to appear and disappear like phantoms in the streets."

What's next? The company performs at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theatre on Feb. 7 and 8. The company is also in residence at the National Portrait Gallery through July.

Bowen McCauley Dance

The company: Founder Lucy Bowen McCauley is probably the only contemporary choreographer in town who will come out and say, "I am not exactly cutting edge." You won't find her hanging from a trapeze or crossing over into performance art, but her talented dancers have steady, part-time contracts and classical ballet training. Whenever possible, the troupe performs with live music and engages regional musicians and composers.

The work: "Fire and Air" is McCauley's distillation of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," as directed by the Shakespeare Theatre's Alan Paul. Bowen plays the suicidal Egyptian queen herself, dancing to an original score by film and opera composer Patrick Soluri. Three other dancers portray Antony and two attendants.

What's next? The company's annual Kennedy Center season comes six weeks early: McCauley plans to debut two works Feb. 12 and 13 at the Terrace Theater.

Human Landscape Dance

The company: "We are an experimental dance troupe," says member Malcolm Shute. "We often take familiar stories and deconstruct them, making substitutions and exposing glitches that show the work in a new light." Several members of the collective contribute choreography, both rehearsed and improvised.

The work: Usually, if you're seeing "Cinderella" in dance, you're seeing a ballet. This abstract version of the fairy tale will feature both male and female Cinderellas, asking pointed questions about which gender should be home scrubbing the floors.

What's next? The company is planning a Central American tour for May and is at work creating dances to be filmed and released online.

Naoko Maeshiba/Kibism

The company: Although Maeshiba has performed at Dance Place before, this weekend marks her first time participating in a D.C. festival. As the director of Towson University's Theatre Arts MFA program, she views her performances as dance-theater hybrids, and describes her work as "interdisciplinary" and "undefinable."

The work: “The Visit” is a reworking of a previous solo performance piece that finds Maeshiba confronting an invisible intruder and navigating a series of Plexiglas set pieces onstage.

What’s next? From Feb. 27 through March 2, Maeshiba will be in residence at Baltimore’s Theatre Project, creating a new work for deaf and hearing audiences with four members of Wings Company/Quest Visual Theatre.

Dance Exchange

The company: Formerly known as Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, the Takoma Park-based company offers classes to dancers of all ages and abilities. Many of the company’s projects are long-term works-in-progress. Most recently, Artistic Director Cassie Meador took a long hike and explored surface coal mining in “How to Lose a Mountain.”

The work: “From the Desk of Rachel Carson” is another dance- theater piece with an environmental sciences bent, named after the author of “Silent Spring.” What audiences will see at Atlas is an excerpt of “a multiyear, multidisciplinary, multilayered project,” says the company’s communications and development director, Emily Macel Theys.

What’s next? Dance Exchange has received the National Endowment for the Arts “Our Town” grant and is spearheading efforts to link the arts with economic development in Takoma Park. In November, the company travels to Dallas to debut a work about race and community.

VTDance/Vincent E. Thomas

The company: Thomas is a man about towns. In both Washington and Baltimore, you can find him emceeding events for or performing with other companies. He teaches at Towson, and his own choreographic works probe issues of race, gender and sexuality.

The work: “Shadows” is an evening-length work that audiences had a chance to see in full at Dance Place last year. He has been tinkering with it since, but it’s still about “essences of masculinity,” Thomas says. At Modern Moves, he will debut revised duets with Thomas Moore Jr., accompanied by projected animations.

What’s next? VTDance performs “Occupy” at Baltimore’s Theatre Project from Feb. 14 to 16.

Ritzel is a freelance writer.

Modern Moves Festival

Saturday at 8 p.m. and Jan. 5 at 4 p.m., with a different lineup of companies both days. At the Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H St. NW. Visit www.atlasarts.org or call 202-399-7993.

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