

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lois Greenfield

Straight Outta' Philly: Illuminated, Dancing

By Sara Graybeal

Five men and five women lie down onstage, their heads together, their bodies extending from a single point, like the delicate petals of a flower. Whether they arrived here in harmony or animosity is not completely clear; but they are here now, together. It's the climax of "A Movement for Five," performed by The Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) in Straight Outta' Philly, a collaboration with Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM).

The moment doesn't last. The women leave the stage. The men thrash robotically, their bodies a broken or timeless machine. Five cages of light appear; each dancer is propelled into one of them. They struggle to move; they fall. One writhes and leaps in protest and still ends up sprawled like the rest, hands bound at his back, face hidden. These men are all in the same predicament, and despite this, they are all utterly alone.

At the pre-show talk at North Carolina State University, people pushed into the meeting room until there was barely space to stand. Children leaned against their mothers; older couples crowded in; entire teen dance troupes lined the walls. PHILADANCO founder Joan Myers Brown addressed the group humorously: "I think I have a founders' problem; I'm always founding things." Then again, she considers, most of the time, they're things that need to be founded.

PHILADANCO, her case in point, was created in 1970 to provide training and opportunities to Black dancers denied access to other schools. In 2005, it commissioned Dawn Marie Bazemore to create "A Movement for Five," the above choreography portraying the plight of the Central Park Five, New York teenagers imprisoned for a crime which it was later proven they did not commit.

RHPM is another Philadelphia dance company that needed to be founded. Manager Rodney Hill told the pre-show audience that when he ran into legal trouble as a young man, founder Rennie Harris told him that if he dedicated himself to dancing with RHPM, Harris would "take [him] around the world twice." He offered the same opportunity to many street dancers in Philly, providing housing and a career path to talented performers for whom finding traditional employment was often difficult. Six world tours later, Hill explained that

the company prides itself on prioritizing authenticity, developing choreographies that depict the body language and demeanor of hip-hop culture rather than giving audiences what they expect and “just spinning on our heads.”

In *Straight Outta’ Philly*, the shared values of these two companies are evident. “Nuttin’ but a Word!!! Suite” is an RHPM sequence of bold hip-hop performed in unison, punctuated with individual bursts of theatrical movement. Dancers leave and re-enter; coalitions between performers form and dissolve. At one point, a man and woman appear to argue on the sidewalk: the woman tosses her curls contemptuously, the man thrusts out a silencing hand. Every movement is loud and staccato against a neon blue background. Later, Joshua Culbreath takes the stage for a solo performed to Christian singer Smokie Norful’s “I Need You Now.” In the middle of a passionate performance, the track skips and freezes; we are left in jarring silence, with the singular melody of Culbreath’s breath and feet. Then, just as suddenly, the song resumes; Culbreath hoists his body breathlessly airborne; the crowd erupts in genuine awe at the climactic moment. The recovery is flawless, and the message is clear: push forward, have faith, aim ever-higher, be the best you can be.

PHILADANCO’s “A Movement for Five” is devastating in its clarity of meaning and the brutality of the truths it depicts. “Folded Prism,” which takes the stage later, is less heavy and just as gorgeously wrought. A cast adorned in all white presents an exquisite ballet, culminating in a seamless duet. By the final lift, I find I am lulled into a state of serenity; it is an unexpected gift, after this night of mission and movement, to receive a moment of such simple grace.

The night ends with “The Philadelphia Experiment,” a Hip-Hop collaboration between the two companies. The program describes it as a “dynamic, energetic piece [alluding] to the rhythms, posture, physicality and speed of the city of Philadelphia.” Indeed, it is a colorful frenzy: a high-paced, joyous adventure. Watching a swarm of ballerinas, the Central Park Five, the quarreling couple, and all the other dancers dive into a sweaty, blissful finale brings home the power of Hip-Hop as a uniting force which welcomes, strengthens, heightens.

I think about this power hours later when, upon closing my eyes, I revisit an image from the end of “A Movement for Five.” The men are finally freed from prison, and the women return to the stage and scatter among them, each dancer pivoting toward a bright light that shines from offstage like a rising sun. Their figures are silhouetted, a community burning at the edges. Maybe it’s fear, or maybe it’s excitement, or maybe it’s determination that keeps them aiming toward that light. Then the stage floods yellow, day breaks, and they are all illuminated, dancing.

Straight Outta’ Philly, PHILADANCO in collaboration with Rennie Harris Puremovement, Stewart Theatre, North Carolina State University, October 18, <https://live.arts.ncsu.edu/events/17-18-season/philadanco-and-rennie-harris-puremovement/>

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October 28, 2017