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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bill Hebert

In "Swan Songs," Heavy Concept and Lithe Execution

by Kilian Kröll

Meredith Rainey's Carbon Dance Theatre opened its inaugural season on Thursday with an intriguing concept: four contemporary ballet dances set to songs written by composers shortly before their deaths. A thoughtfully curated music selection, spanning time periods and Western genres, set the choreographic bar high – in some cases too high. The intensity of the physical interactions often overpowered the music's subtle profundity.

Most successful at stitching together dance and music, guest choreographer Matthew Neenan's *Tell Me What's Next* embellished Nick Drake's rhythmic cluster chords with classical poses and contemporary body rolls in tightly choreographed vignettes. Among the four-person ensemble, Sun-Mi Cho and Daniel Moore pushed, pulled, lifted and spun, at once in tender embrace and suddenly interrupted by eye-popping splits and frantic tumbles to the ground. The piece portrayed moments of memory and mortality as an exhausting struggle. Meanwhile, Martha Chamberlain's maroon and denim costumes and Oona Curley's orange-pink lighting underscored the homespun Americana of Drake's waning voice, and this compact dance of ever-increasing acrobatic drama hit a sweet spot.

Rainey's opening and closing dances shone most in their balletic grace but fell short of honoring the music's depth and sensitivity. In *Through The Wake*, Jessye Norman's lyrical soprano conveyed the evening glow of Richard Strauss's "Im Abendrot," while the performers strung together turns, jumps, splits and counter-rhythmic crashes to the floor. The song's final transcendent notes hardly called for unrelenting split-turns, no matter how gorgeous the dancers' long extensions.

The restaging of this year's *A.W.A.R.D. Show!* winner, *Waiting Room*, redeemed Rainey's mission of portraying "grace, emotion, physicality and soul." Set to excerpts of Schubert's "Schwanengesang," Cho, as the central character, matched singer Ian Bostridge's heartbreaking timbres with eerie flexibility and a vacant stare. Three benches demarcated the back third of the stage, symbolizing a hospital waiting room, death-bed, and boundary of the world beyond. As the lights dimmed and Cho crawled creature-like under the middle bench, the dance briefly transcended the stage to the realm between life and death where Schubert's final notes resound.

A second guest choreographer, Kate Watson-Wallace harnessed this weekend's Halloween theme to present *i spiral into water*, which featured music by Broadcast and the Focus Group, Jeff Buckley, and Amy Winehouse. Her ghoulish pop portrait complete with black hoodies, spandex shorts and synchronized robot arms challenged the performers to release swiftly to and from the floor, pull and share weight, and slip into off-balance lifts. The piece pushed the dancers out of their upright comfort zones, but this shallow experimentation delighted nonetheless by way of its recognizable contemporary radio tunes.

Seated in an antique armchair to the right of the stage, Jaamil Kosoko played the charmingly pompous character of "Jeremiah," who emceed "Swan Songs" with insider jokes and nasal giggles. Recounting life stories and reading poetry, Jeremiah shepherded the politely amused audience into a grotesque twilight zone.

Ultimately, the performers' relentless agility and stamina dominated the evening at the Performance Garage. The cast, including Felicia Cruz, Anna Noble, DuJuan Smart, Jr. and Alex Ratcliffe-Lee, commanded their finely-tuned classical moves, while gamely trying the contemporary body rolls and floor phrases. Cho, the muse of the production, portrayed with a tender severity characters ranging from back-bending zombie to hyperflexing, exasperated lover. Her duets with Moore showcased his long and immaculately extended limbs and reminded us of why we still love ballet. However, the superimposed contemporary dance aesthetics felt, at many points, forced and disrupted the transcendent spirit of the timeless music.

Swan Songs, Carbon Dance Theatre, The Performance Garage (New Stages for Dance Initiative), October 27-30, 2011. No further performances.

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