

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bicking Photography

City of Dance

by P. Graham

Pictured on homepage: Rennie Harris Puremovement; on this page: Koresh Dance Company

Is Philly a city of dance? Is the time and space dedicated to dance anywhere near what's allocated to baseball? Not exactly, but in our way, we dance enthusiasts are also parading down the avenue as another Festival brings local dance makers to the fore. The second annual Come Together Festival, produced by the Koresh Dance Company brought together a range of dance genres – hip-hop, jazz, modern, ballet – in five days of concerts. The night I attended, I found a surprising cohesiveness in the program, expressed through the ferocious energy and skill of the performers and warm reception from the audience.

Rennie Harris' sophisticated hip-hop and accomplished dancers stood out in terms of layered artistry. *Nuttin But a Word* swung propulsively, like great jazz, combining moments of virtuosity without losing the forward momentum of the dance's theme. The beguiling soundtrack by Osunlade and Raphael Xavier, which flowed hand in glove with the choreography, didn't detract from the power of the dance to tell the story. Harris knows how to combine a suggestion of narrative with some abstraction through the hip-hop vocabulary. The other hip-hop company on the program, Just Sole Street Dance Theater, led by two of Harris' dancers, Dinita and Kyle Clarke, presented a youthful and raw version of hip-hop. Multiple solos highlighted the yearnings and idiosyncrasies of individual dancers and brought encouraging hollers from friends watching.

Seeing contrasting approaches to movement by companies working in the same genre of dance is a point of interest created by the festival structure. This was evident in the contrast between the movement language of Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers and the Koresh Dance Company. KYL/D's velvety performers reveled in airy suspensions. Slide-y horizontal unwindings signified a refreshing martial arts-inflected approach to movement. Choreographically though, the piece seemed meandering. Judicious pruning would go a long way to clarify the work's intention.

Whereas KYL/D's dancers spin and float, crafting an alchemy of flesh, bone and air, Koresh brings on the compressed push of muscle

with the feeling of coiled springs just below the skin. In *Gates*, they appeared as an army of synchronized powerhouses advancing forward in well-spaced lines that threatened to spill into our laps. Their machine-like approach guaranteed accomplished execution of all dance tasks; land on one foot and rise to releve with extension to the ear? No problem.

Taking another tack, choreographer/dancer Destany Churchwell's *Malefic Tumult* combined the magic of theatrical stagecraft with an emphasis on melodrama. Posing on and manipulating a traditional wing chair, she enacted inner demons with one dramatic shape after another. Fun to see a weighty chair reeling about, acting as a surprisingly nimble partner. Churchwells' staging deployed figures in black who skittered into view and disappeared again. These dark wraiths were most effective when they surprised us – seeming to materialize out of the shadows. Driving music by Phillip Glass kept the action similarly driving.

Introspective Movement Project presented music and text by Maya Angelou and Nina Simone, artists delivering a strong message in words. The dance seemed designed to serve the text as a visual accompaniment to the soundtrack's proud declarations of feminine power. The well-trained, all-female cast was incandescent onstage. But I wonder: could they tell this story more through the dancing without a literal connection to every word?

A commonality on the program was that soundtracks dictated every movement and a relentless over-abundance of dancing filled every single moment and beat with activity. Editing in these areas and variations in the density of these elements would serve many of the companies to attain a new level of artistry.

The Come Together Festival not only gives opportunity to the artists but offers the larger community the chance to witness and celebrate the abundance of well-crafted local dance. It also points to the savvy of entrepreneurial choreographer/company directors in Philly. Just this year we had an amazing Flamenco Festival emphasizing the evolution of the form presented by Pasion y Arte; the Re-Mix Festival, a fascinating examination of choreographic choices and the paths they can lead down, curated by choreographers Annie Wilson and Susan Rethorst as well as the experimental Music and Dance Fest at and others. Practitioners bring all of their experience and creative know how to create festivals with a purpose, making our town a mecca of significant DIY artistic accomplishment.

Come Together Dance Festival, various artists presented by Koresh Dance Company, Suzanne Roberts Theatre. Evening reviewed: July 26. Festival ran: July 23-27

By Patricia Graham
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