

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Rachel Neville

Democratizing Dance

by Kristi Yeung

“Merde!” The Dance Makers Moment started not with programs but with ballots. The evening’s repertoire, featuring seven dance companies selected from more than one hundred submissions, was not only a showcase of local talent but also a contest with the potential for global exposure. The winning performance, chosen by audience vote, will perform at [Nickerson-Rossi Dance’s](#) Palm Springs International Dance Festival in 2021.

Though all seven companies performed work predominantly featuring contemporary or contemporary-ballet vocabulary, each was distinct in musical choice, emotional tone, and thematic ambition. The three duets in the showcase explored different aspects of intimate relationships. The dancers of [10 Hairy Legs](#) demonstrated dependence as they pushed and pulled each other through energetic battements and turning lifts. [Ann Corrao](#)’s choreography depicted the end of friendship with a torso-twisting motif that repeatedly turned the dancers’ backs to each other. [Tristian Griffin Dance Company](#), the contest’s runner-up, illustrated love as the two dancers physically supported each other’s weight through partner work that kept them in close contact.

While the duets explored realistic and relatable themes, other pieces veered into the abstract or whimsical. [Ariel Rivka Dance](#)’s work, the winning performance, derived conceptual inspiration from a box and featured dancers clustering into or breaking out of cubic formations with cathartic bursts of energy. At the opposite end of the spectrum, [MakensMove](#) incorporated familiar social-dance grooves in a breezy representation of two mermaids and their castaway.

[Yu.S.Artistry](#)’s performance was my favorite of the show. Combining breakdancing with ballet, ambient music with spoken word, and stark solos with a complex light display, the company experimented without detracting from the breathtaking skill of its highly-trained dancers. [Roxey Contemporary Ballet](#) gave another memorable performance. Replete with vermilion leotards, voluminous wigs, a skull, a wheelchair, and allusions to [Frida Kahlo](#), the piece ambitiously portrayed passion through visual surprises. In the opening, a contained

formation of two seated dancers suddenly exploded to reveal seven dancers as their chairs. These dancers expanded into formation across the stage so quickly that it was as though they had dropped from the ceiling or risen from the floor.

In an effort to include and educate the community, host [Michael Nickerson-Rossi](#) facilitated discussions of each piece by inviting the showcasing directors to briefly explain their work, encouraging the audience to share our thoughts, and asking three judges for their critique.

Though the audience exhibited timidity towards engaging in the conversation, I appreciated that the program designated time and space for our voices. With Philadelphia's dance scene growing more diverse, but also potentially more competitive and sectionalized, [as reported in a recent thINKingDANCE article](#), involving the audience can turn passive viewers into active participants, making dance more inclusive, accessible, and democratic.

[Nickerson-Rossi Dance Presents "Merde!" The Dance Makers Moment](#), Performance Garage, January 17.

By Kristi Yeung
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