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Photo: Steven Pisano

Intrepid: Complexions Contemporary Ballet Dances Freedom

by Dana Nichols

Complexions Contemporary Ballet, headed by Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson, returns to the Joyce Theater for its 28th season. The packed theater buzzes with the collegial energy of an audience full of dancers. Two Ailey dancers chat behind me in line, I sit next to a retired Complexions dancer, and all around I hear excited comments from dance students. As the lights dim, someone cheers joyfully, as if reuniting with a dear friend. In program A, the company performs two full length ballets choreographed by Rhoden: *Snatched Back from the Edges*, a world premiere, and *Love Rocks*, from 2020. The dancers in Complexions are aptly all different shapes, sizes and colors, but somehow still made in Desmond Richardson's image: statuesque and muscular, with hyper-extended legs and perfect feet.

Originally a pandemic dance film that has now been adapted to the stage, *Snatched Back from the Edges* chronicles the pandemic and uprisings around the murder of George Floyd. The beginning is full of frenzied and sharp movements that convey the numb busyness of the early pandemic months. At first, I do not feel the emotional weight of these events, but as the choreography moves quickly between a never-ending stream of solos, duets, and trios, I feel a constant play with risk. The dancers unflinchingly fling themselves off-center in spite of the danger. Later, the movement softens in the dancers' torsos and heads. The ensemble gestures more--they point their fingers to accuse, point to show, point up to a god. A dry voice sings with a thumping beat and the strictly contemporary ballet aesthetic relaxes into syncopated stomps and rooted pliés as the music shifts into gospel and hip hop. Despite the feeling that the choreography relies heavily on music and description to convey its message, joy arises from watching the dancers move dare-devilishly, expressing the full endurance of their bodies and spirits.

Love Rocks is set to a suite of Lenny Kravitz hits and the choreography fully embodies his multicultural utopic aura of free love. The women don black leather and mesh bustiers with skirts, while the men are adorned with black feathers and leathery pants. The piece begins with the company members holding each other. As they break apart, the dancers playfully relate to one another as if they are in

the club, twisting their hips sensuously. Rhoden's choreography is deeply technical, but also laced with an edge of sweaty, carefree sexuality. Between ferocious lifts, dancers bump and grind, salsa, and the women strut en pointe. Under feverish red lights, the frequency feels like the late part of the night when everyone stops thinking and finds the collective groove. The women throw themselves into countless high tilts with sickening precision while the men effortlessly spin off-balance. The group choreography features cascading canons in and out of each other and solos break out, flying into duets and trios with constant chaos. An elevated dancer tumbles forward in the air with swift velocity. Dancers throw their bodies with liberated abandon. In contrast to *Snatched Back*, Rhoden offers a different antidote to pain and oppression beyond fearlessness: loving someone.

The strength of this show comes from dancers who embody freedom. Watching April Watson's animated, unapologetic dancing leaves me wanting for nothing. With her full afro bouncing freely, she serves legs and feet that ballerinas around the world would envy. In *Snatched Back*, she throws her head back and pantomimes a scream while being carried away. As a Black woman, I am proud to see this dark-skinned woman thriving on stage, and overjoyed to see her artistry powerfully maximized by Richardson and Rhoden. Brandon Gray's beaming presence and storytelling abilities single handedly shift the emotional tenor of *Snatched Back* in his gospel solos. Thomas Dilley's liquid torso elicits screams and claps from the audience. Larissa Gerke slides across the full length of the stage on pointe. The dancers do not falter in this series of seemingly death defying acts of physicality. The company reminds us not to live timidly, but with everything we've got.

[*Snatched Back from the Edges and Love Rocks*](#), Complexions Contemporary Dance, The Joyce Theater, November 16-28.

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