

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Susan Kettering

Momentary bliss in Northern Michigan

by Ellen Miller

Across from the grass and concrete amphitheater, the sun shimmered on the water as boats rocked gently in the breeze. On stage, dancers stretched and lengthened, using ballet barres to warm up. To the side of the stage, [Jordan Hamilton](#), a cellist, played, accompanied by [Grayson Nye](#) (keyboard) and [Andy Catlin/ The Lasso](#) (production). As the audience trickled in for the pre-show music, they carried picnics, beach blankets, chairs, leftovers... even their shoes. The casual atmosphere became communal as Hamilton engaged the audience in a call-and-response:

Long day/ long night, out of sight/ out of mind.

Traverse City Dance Project (TCDP) hosts a cohort of dancers (freelance and from various companies) and choreographers each summer for a brief season in Northern Michigan, where most performances are free. TCDP offers aspiring dancers a critical opportunity to see professional dancers embodying different kinds of dance and envision themselves on the stage— at no cost, ensuring dance is accessible to all audiences. This year's choreographers included Philadelphia's Matthew Neenan, co-founder of BalletX.

Neenan's *The Foxes* opened the program. Dancers dressed in brown, gray, and white jumped lightly around the stage in deer-like movements, prancing with both legs in attitude like the letter Z. Later pointework felt more foxlike, with dancers en pointe deliberately, sharply picking up each foot, one by one to the ankle as they moved intently forward, as if hunting. The dancers' movements mirrored one another throughout the piece, in harmony but not always matching exactly. As Annia Hidalgo and Zach Guthier partnered, Sarah Simon Wolf, the only dancer in white, bourreed intensely across the stage. Soloist Colin Heino bounded effortlessly, his curly hair and playful air evoking Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neenan's choreography was notable in its sharpness and precision; for a company only together a few short weeks, the exactitude felt particularly impressive.

The program continued with Rachel Harris' *In Due Time*. Harris danced in the piece, along with Nick Fearon and Colin Heino. Dressed in earth tones, socks, and knee pads, the dancers' connection with one another was emphasized by rotating partners rather than being limited to specific pairings. For example, in one instance, Fearon and Heino shook hands, and then clasped their hands on each others' bodies, taking turns moving their hands down each others' sides and legs. In another, Fearon ran in place while Harris and Heino took turns trying to pull him back to them. The piece ended with Harris facing the corner and Fearon and Heino walking backwards away from her.

In *Lilies*, choreographed by TCDP co-founder Brent Whitney in memory of his friend Bryan Bussan, dancers Sarah Simon Wolf and Zachary Guthier executed a technically flawless duet. Guthier dragged Simon Wolf in an arc shape that mirrored the grounded movements they both made. In closing, she stays on stage while he walks away, and the sense of goodbye is apparent.

TCDP co-founder Jennifer McQuiston Lott's *SunDown* closed the show. This "homage to Michigan summers" was visible from the get-go as dancers entered and surrounded Jordan Hamilton on stage wearing vivid colors and outfits that evoked summertime, from printed shorts to tie-dye to lime green mesh pants layered over a swimsuit-like crop top and briefs. Hamilton began singing, returning to the "*long day/ long night*" repeat-back from the pre-show.

SunDown pulled inspiration across dance genres, bringing in movements from hip-hop and ballet as Hamilton rapped and the dancers spun around him. Throughout the piece, joy was evident: the joy of performing, of summer, perhaps of Michigan itself. Regardless of the reason, the brightness and smiles throughout brought a different tone to dance, a discipline that often takes itself (too?) seriously. Dancers moved backward in sync with one another, popping a hip to bend one knee with just the toes on the ground. The music changed, and Hamilton returned to his cello, playing the rest from the side as the dancers cycled through small groups before returning to finish the piece together in triumph.

The sun was only just beginning its slow descent across the sky as the audience dissipated. In the warm summer air, McQuiston Lott's *SunDown* summer dream held on a little longer.

Traverse City Dance Project, East Park, Charlevoix, July 27-August 6, 2024.

By Ellen Miller
August 18, 2024