

S.F. Dancers Waterboarded...!



"...it was a reenactment of water-boarding thru dance..."

There is a neat segment of choreography that is used a few times every year in the S.F. local dance scene and yet no two implementations are ever alike. BayAreaDanceWatch refers to this series of movements as a *D-Column* - short for dancer's column. It is when a choreographer positions the dancers into a single column, usually facing the audience, and it's not to be confused with a row of dancers stretching from stage left to right, as if in a chorus line.

The *D-Column* really falls into two main types: one type involves a single dancer who starts moving and others join in, one at a time, as if they are dominoes and the other type is when all the dancers start their individual *dancing-in-place*, but at the very same time and remaining within their column formation.

Raissa Simpson, founder and artistic director of San Francisco's *Push Dance Company*, did something I had never seen before in a dance piece - she moved the *D-Column* to the very start of her dance, *Bitter Mellon*, which was held at Union Square over Memorial Day Weekend 2012. In so doing, Ms Simpson reminds us that in most cases the originality of a segment of choreography comes from the infusion of one's unique personality onto movements that have gone before.

The above photo, by *Marisa Aragona*, is the opening of *Bitter Mellon* and it's literally a re-creation of water-boarding thru dance. With no music, the first dancer starts with a jerking motion backwards while gasping for air - gurgling almost - then falling forward with just the upper body and feet planted in place. After a few long seconds, the next dancer starts her gasping motion, violently swinging her upper body forward and back, up and down. This continues right along the line as if the dancers were dominoes of pain. In a Q&A afterwards, the dancers themselves talked about the challenge of using one another's breathing as the cue for when it was time to begin their segment.

I also admire the image Ms Simpson creates with all her *D-Column* dancers dressed in white, later explaining she "...wants each dancer to create and feel their own individual characters." It reminded me of the young choreographer from the Smuin Ballet who recently had all his dancers dressed in black so audience members would envision their own characters. A simple and very creative method with one dance designer using white to help dancers create meaning, and another using black to help viewers create meaning.

Another *D-Column* I love is one created by Alyce Finwall, founder and artistic director of Alyce Finwall Dance Theater. It's part of her dance *Enter Demeter* which was a closing dance performance in one of Joan Lazarus's annual dance festivals entitled *Westwave*, held at Fort Mason's Cowell Theater in San Francisco.



The photo above, by *David DeSilva*, is really a view from the front row and it's the exact view I had from my seat at the Cowell Theater. I was amazed how perfectly aligned I was with Emmaly Wiederholt, the dancer visible above. It was as if I was an extension of the formation itself. Better still, I witnessed the arm of the far dancer slowly raise and begin to make a full, arch-like circle. Once the first arm began to move, the next dancer moved her arm close behind, with each dancer following the next, all down thru the column in a cascading affect. With the arms moving within the the *D-Column* like that, it gave the impression of a fine-tuned Swiss watch.

Talking with Ms Finwall about this *D-Column*, she related that she uses columns a number of times throughout this dance. With this particular *D-Column*, pictured above, "...I think of its use in two ways: first, as a way to set boundaries and to create a wall, because it's performed on an open stage with the wings taken out; and second, to create a sense of the eleven women essentially being the same person."

We talked further about the feeling of time coming from the formation and Ms Finwall explained how the arm movements represent a canon, the passage of time, and although that was not clear at the time she choreographed the movement, she described how, "...it came to be that instinctually." She also revealed that it's loosely based on a favorite poem of hers entitled *Waiting* by Faith Wilding - a work about women and motherhood. And it's a bit of a Fosse send up, per Ms Finwall, especially since she loves his choreography as much as anything done in contemporary ballet and dance today. For me, her *D-Column* was BayAreaDanceWatch's doorway into *Alyce Finwall's Dance Theater* - didn't know it at the time, it became that *instinctually*...