

2010 BLACK CHOREOGRAPHERS FESTIVAL: HERE & NOW

Dance Review by J. Olauda Jackson

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One thing I have to say about the producers of Black Choreographers Festival is they are relentless in servicing the community by providing an annual showcase for African and African American choreographers. By doing this, black history remains current and alive. For this, I applaud them.

However, BCF's curatorial prowess has been sometimes lackluster. The programs are often uneven and the talent is somewhat uninspired. But when the festival gets it right, it blazes like the fourth of July. If Friday night's opening program at Dance Mission was any indication that the producers have begun to demand higher quality dance making from its pool of choreographers, I foresee the festival emerging into a nationally competitive one.

The evening offered a variety of dance styles. But it was the music that was the highlight of the festival. The live music accompaniment by Taji Hill, Mohammed Kouyate, Mosheh A. Milon, Jr. and James Rudisill for Deborah Vaughn's "Resilience" (performed by Dimensions Dance Theater) was indeed a highlight. Other highlights were Adia Whitaker's "Anba Dlo" in which six women in blue head scarves with melodic voices wailed like sirens as they beat shekeres and cowbells in rhythm, and Malcolm Garvey's sound design for Robert Henry Johnson's latest venture "Safety of Abstraction" was a delicious journey of world music sewn together with electronica.

"Safety of Abstraction" was the work that went beyond my expectations; a creatively wrought exploration of the transatlantic slave trade in which Johnson and four handsome dancers moved in and out of light executing a rigorous physical language governed by a set of choreographic rules. It was a disturbing and confusing work the first third of the way into the journey. However, it all came together in the most unexpected way. There's so much detail and intricacy in the work, you'd have to see it a few times in order to catch all of the symbolism.

Delina Patrice sang like a nightingale as she recalled the names of slave ships. **Raissa Simpson** showed off her sterling silver technique as she tore ravenously into Johnson's choreography before retreating to a dark corner for the remainder of the ballet to build miniature castles out of saucers and tea cups. Johnson was a sensitive but sometimes critical conductor of events in the world of this fragmented memorial. His recitation of a boy being sold on an auction block was a compelling finale.

My favorite moment in "Safety" was when three dancers holding tea cups stood in a triangle of light and began to perform a humorous tea ceremony. This section was a brilliant and edgy retelling of the occurrences between Africans of different tribes chained together in the bellies of slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage.

Another memorable moment in "Safety" was Byb Chanel Bibene and Juanita Brown's duet set to a score of traditional haunting pygmy chants. Bibene manipulated Brown's limbs while she sleeked through a series of continuous movements which seemed to spiral out of a literary world of mythic black humans shaped as monsters. The couple looked amazing. Bibene's sense of style was engaging, and the audience watched Brown intently as though under hypnosis, spellbound by the quality of her succulent movement.

I read Alan Ulrich's review of "Safety of Abstraction" published Monday in the San Francisco Chronicle. Ulrich has followed Johnson's career since the late 80s providing the young dance maker with glowing reviews. It appears his criticism of Johnson's work in the past ten years has been unfavorable. I consider Ulrich a mean-spirited, uninformed journalist who is quite often literarily irresponsible. How can we expect a sad white man to understand the depth and importance of a monumentally urgent work such as "Safety"? Calling Johnson "undisciplined" and speaking of him in past tense as though he is a has been is beyond inaccurate. Ulrich can kiss my ass with that type of language hurled at a choreographer who has a gift for bridging pop culture to the world of fine art without cheapening either aesthetic. I look forward to seeing more work from this prolific choreographer who never ceases to bring a refreshing perspective to difficult and provocative subject matters. And Ulrich, next time, stay home.

Reginald Ray Savage has grown immensely as a choreographer since his 1995's laughable attempt at constructing a ballet to Charlie Mingus's Black Saint and the Sinner Lady at Theater Artaud, and is able to pull off decent choreography that is finally starting to go somewhere. His SF premiere of "Agon Suite" was a series of vignettes set to Igor Stravinsky's score created for George Balanchine who choreographed the historically hailed "Agon" in 1957 for New York City Ballet. Savage's version was fun and delightful. Up to a certain point. Whatever merit the ballet possessed was drowned out because the choreographer seemed to have taken himself too seriously. The piece went on much too long. The movement phrases laced in western classical dance was sometimes unoriginal and looked like a dated Ailey piece or Jerome Robbins number for a musical. Nonetheless, it also showed the mind of an artist interested in form. But in order for "Agon Suite" to stand up as a world class work, it needs editing just as any play written by a playwright needs dramaturgy.

On a positive note, beautiful lead dancer Alison Hurley ran away with Olympian gold with her interpretation of the choreography. Her sinewy limbs and intelligent sense of musicality was enjoyable to watch. An over eager Jarrod Mayo boasted high extensions and a blank expression on his face. This green but undeniably talented dancer frolicked all night long like a lamb let loose in a pasture too big to conquer. He needs to find his artistry in subtlety. I can't wait to see him in five years.

The evening also included beautiful Chloe Arnold's "Phenomenal Woman", an improvisational tap dance solo. **Simpson's 2008 "Judgments in Milliseconds", a solo inspired by Afro-American hair, revealed choreographic prowess and comedic promise. Her performance was electrifying and impressive.**



Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now continues this week, February 26–28, 2010 at Dance Mission Theater, 3316 Mission Street (@ 24th Street). Reserve concert tickets by phone: 415.273.4633.

Festival information: 888.819.9106 or 866.898.2722. <http://www.bcfhereandnow.com>.

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