Dance review: Black Choreographers Festival

Allan Ulrich, Chronicle Dance Correspondent
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As usual, verve and vivacity drove the concert at the sixth annual Black Choreographers Festival Friday evening at the Dance Mission Theater, where a full house hollered its approval for anyone and anything that moved. The problem here wasn’t so much talent, or the dearth of it, but the possible misdirection of creative gifts.

Of the seven artists or companies participating in this oddly curated program, which continues next weekend, too many seemed to be auditioning at one of those college-circuit performing arts conferences, where everybody attempts to convince potential presenters of how sincere and "relevant" they are. Not all were capable of fusing social concerns and appealing theatricality.

If only they were all as endearing as Chloe Arnold who opened the evening by juxtaposing a vigorous reading of Maya Angelou’s poem "Exceptional Women" with improvised tapping episodes. Somehow, Arnold, a class act, managed to imbue her staccato attacks with the rage simmering under the surface of the text.

The premiere of Robert Henry Johnson’s "Safety of Abstraction" occupied far more stage time than any other work, which doesn’t mean it was superior to its program mates. This once-precociously gifted choreographer remains an undisciplined artist, though there was a seed of an idea in this piece: The world has eased its conscience about the slave trade by objectifying it.

But how do you sustain such a conceit for a half hour? Johnson musters a few potent images: a china teacup balanced on a slave’s extended leg epitomizes long-abandoned colonial attitudes. Yet, once he lays out the situation, the choreographer, with the help of four dancers and a collage score, allows it to diffuse before our eyes. Give this guy a dramaturg, please. Noted with pleasure, however: the improbably high extensions of dancer Byb Chanel Bibene.

Brevity has its virtues in long programs like this. Raissa Simpson of Push Dance Company did not outwear her welcome with "Judgments in Milliseconds." This wry study in African American identity finds the soloist cavorting in a straight-haired wig. It falls off, she dons an Afro hairpiece and contentment reigns. Marlon Sagana Ingram’s projections of tonsorial instruments were an asset.

In "Resilience" from "Mudizmu," Deborah Vaughan has incorporated material from
Cuba and Zimbabwe into the group forays, ruggedly dispatched by members of Dimensions Dance Theater and accompanied live by an unrelenting percussion consort. More beguiling was the excerpt from Rosangela Silvestre’s "Oya," restaged by Kendra Kimbrough Barnes. This Afro-Caribbean number boasted elegantly articulated unison performances from the company of eight women ablaze in crimson and wonderfully delicate contributions from percussionist Taji Maalik and vocalist Delina Patrice Brooks.

It is hard to fathom the plan behind Reginald Ray-Savage’s assault on Stravinsky's "Agon," premiered last month and here given its San Francisco premiere. Even if this shimmering atonal music had not been composed expressly for George Balanchine (who was inspired to make a neo-classic masterpiece), Ray-Savage’s limited modern dance vocabulary would have been woefully inadequate to the task. His five committed performers somehow locked into a rhythm, but their flailing arms couldn’t begin to mirror Stravinsky’s lapidary construction and impeccable organization.

Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now 2010: Friday through Sunday.

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