

Christopher K. Morgan & Artists: 'Limited Visibility'

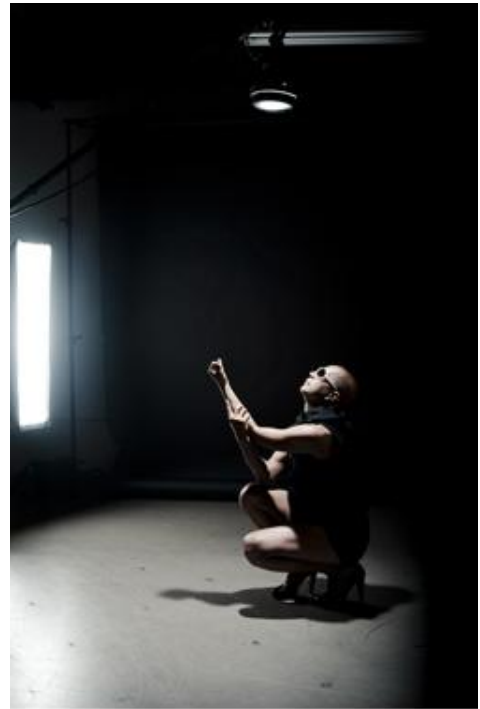
by Carmel Morgan

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at Strathmore, Bethesda, MD

It bears repeating that I'm not related to the artist whose company I'm now reviewing, despite our shared last name. However, I'd be proud to be related to him. Christopher K. Morgan is a gift to DC, and his gift extends beyond just his choreographic abilities. The recent performance of a new evening length work, "Limited Visibility" by his recently formed company Christopher K. Morgan & Artists, showed off some of Morgan's impressive skills outside of the choreographic realm.

Morgan, who is terrifically articulate, began the performance with a brief talk addressing tools for watching dance. He delivered a very important message, and in doing so he put his guests at ease. Morgan explained that the viewer cannot get it wrong. Whatever meaning you find in the dance is correct. I can't count the number of times people have told me that they don't understand modern dance, and that they feel intimidated by it because they don't know what they're seeing. Morgan is absolutely right, of course, that what you see is yours to interpret as you wish. Yes, the choreographer probably has specific things in mind when composing his dances, but most choreographers, including Morgan, don't want to impose their particular vision on those who fill the theater's seats. Instead, Morgan generously welcomed his audience to sit back, take in the dance, and let their own ideas spark.

Following the performance, Vincent E. Thomas, Artistic Director of VTDance, facilitated a discussion of "Limited Visibility" with Morgan and the dancers. Again, Morgan, with Thomas's assistance, helped the audience to feel completely comfortable. With some gentle prompting, audience members asked intelligent questions and shared their personal observations. It was really refreshing to see people so engaged with the performers and so eager to talk about dance. Morgan must be congratulated for getting not only heartfelt participation from his viewers, but also for winning new dance fans and for generating genuine excitement for dialogue about the arts. I was deeply moved by Morgan's aptitude for conversing about his work and for encouraging others to dive into watching dance. For me, the most successful aspect of "Limited Visibility" wasn't the dancing, but Morgan's flair for connecting with an audience and elevating their curiosity.



Christopher K. Morgan
Photo © Brianne Bland

As for the dancing, it was perfectly fine, if dark, and flecked with moments of awe. “Limited Visibility” explored secrets and fear and trust. I felt, as did many in the audience, significant tension throughout most of the work. The set and lighting design (kudos to Jason Arnold who should be doing more dance lighting in the future – please!) added to the anxious atmosphere. The dancers began in all black and graduated finally to all white costumes and brighter lights. The music selections varied, but Icelandic cellist Hildur Guðnadóttir predominated. Platforms in three levels, rolls of marley covered in silvery reflective mylar, a blindfold, and unorthodox handheld lighting made for a fascinating backdrop against which the dancers laid bare their souls.

The audience became voyeurs. We witnessed scenes that seemed meant to stay hidden from view. Men in underwear slapping each other (Morgan and Junichi Fukuda), in a section titled “Aggression,” provided a peek at a seething relationship. Another section, “Lights on at 2 am,” brought a much needed bit of levity in the form of a duet between Tiffanie Carson and Fukuda. Carson, tipsy and stumbling along a red stretch of marley in her glittery heels, and Fukuda, perhaps disoriented by his blindfold, joined in an amusing duet that kept up the tension while allowing you smile at the same time.

In “Limited Visibility,” Fukuda most often stole my focus. Sure, the fact that he intermittently was blindfolded and danced sightlessly across raised platforms was part of it, but his movement style caught my eye. Fukuda had a way of consistently tugging at my emotions. In the discussion after the performance, Fukuda replied that when he dances, he tries to be as “open” as possible. Unlike the other dancers, who talked about the feelings that inspired them, it seemed like when Fukuda was performing he transcended whatever might have been on his mind and simply let go. Rather than concentrating on the internal, which tends to distance one from the audience, Fukuda masterfully tossed aside the stuff in his brain and grabbed my attention. Zap, pow, boom, his dancing dazzled.

Overall, “Limited Visibility” was an interesting exploration, heavy with ideas, but I wanted a little more virtuosic dancing to accompany its wealth of props and drama. A lot of the movement translated as mushy rather than strong. Many of the dancers are young and have just started working with each other and Morgan. Here’s hoping that they can learn from veterans Fukuda and Morgan and unwrap themselves further.