

## CityDance Ensemble

### 'Crush'

by Heather Desaulniers

December 5, 2009 -- Music Center at Strathmore-  
Bethesda, Maryland

Intimate performance settings have the power to transform an audience. In a big theater, dance audiences become invisible and anonymous; nothing more than a sea of faces. In a small venue, there is no place to hide. As an audience member, more is expected of you and you can get much more in return. Close proximity alters perception, provides new chances for observation, and magnifies risk within the work. This weekend, CityDance Ensemble presented "Crush" in the education wing at Strathmore. This mixed-rep program proved that small spaces provide enormous opportunities. "Crush" was an invitation to engage and converse with the art and the artists. It celebrated a responsibility that is not always possible in large performance venues. Challenging performances deserve an equally challenged audience.

"Souvenirs" by Meisha Bosma is not a new piece for me, though this time, I found new revelations in it. The nearness of the performers made the off-balance suspensions clearer and more impressive. The five female dancers were constantly pushed to their maximum point of equilibrium, followed by a visible decision: to give in or to maintain. Through their commitment to the movement, these women taught the audience that you have not taken a risk until you allow yourself to let go.

"Souvenirs" was followed by Alex Neoral's "Trajectory", performed by the CityDance conservatory students. These kids are promising dancers, who are being given a great technical education. More importantly, they are being taught to follow CityDance's ethos of pushing limits, taking chances and moving beyond the comfort zone. There was one particular moment toward the end of the piece that deserves mention. Neoral had almost two dozen enthusiastic teenagers onstage, at different facings, executing balancés and swivel turns. Just the sheer number of bodies moving and turning only a few feet from us was quite something.



Giselle Alvarez and Maleek Mahkail Washington  
Photo © Paul Gordon Emerson

Christopher K. Morgan's "Unusable Signal" featured my new favorite trio of dancers: Jason Garcia Ignacio, William Smith and Maleek Mahkail Washington. I thought nothing could top their recent performance in Larry Keigwin's "Mattress Suite", but their appearance in "Unusable Signal" was even better. This is credited to a forward thinking choreographer, who is willing and able to move beyond the traditional interpretation of the pas de trois. Working with odd numbers, especially three, is much tougher than it seems. Morgan made it work. There may be nothing better in DC modern dance than seeing these three men together onstage.

The second half of the evening brought "Wishes of the Sailor", a new work ushering the plight of Iraqi refugees into our consciousness. By participating with Intersections International's Iraqi Voices Amplification Project, choreographers Paul Gordon Emerson and Kathryn Pilkington were able to interact with Iraqi refugees in three different countries. They were charged with creating a responsive work reflecting what they had learned from these dire and largely, undiscussed circumstances. "Wishes of the Sailor" is the powerful result of their journey. There is much in the piece that requires comment, but what I found particularly moving was the narrative honesty. Too often, when faced with social or political subject matter, choreographers feel the need to transplant the topic and essentially, turn the audience into the characters. While I understand that this is an earnest attempt to help people relate to the work, it actually creates more distance from the issue. Artistic endeavors can still be personal, and deeply affecting without having to revolve around us. In fact, true empathy comes from moving outward, not inward. Emerson, Pilkington and the entire CityDance family have managed to successfully reveal genuine experiences without losing authenticity. This is because they had the integrity, respect and courage to leave the story with those who had experienced it. "Wishes of the Sailor" provided an accurate, informational account while retaining the level of artistic depth that CityDance Ensemble possesses.

Today, the pairing of social issues and art is desperately needed. Art has the unique ability, unlike anything else, to show social issues as human issues. This distinction is important and often overlooked. A social issue is our theoretical understanding of a need, problem or inequality. These do not become human issues until we somehow connect with them. Not in a selfish or self-interested way, but through a heightened awareness and deeper comprehension of the particular injustice. An uncensored portrayal of real events and personal stories is what can transform the social into the human.