

Christopher K. Morgan & Artists
By The Inch
An Evening of Mixed Repertoire

American Dance Institute, Rockville, Maryland; May 30, 2014
Carmel Morgan

Christopher K. Morgan (no relation to this reviewer), artistic director of Christopher K. Morgan & Artists (“CKM&A”), may have just hit his choreographic stride. Since moving to Washington, DC, in August 2007, I’ve enjoyed being introduced to local choreographers and being able to watch them grow. While it isn’t nice to play favorites, maybe, Morgan has certainly earned a place at the top of my list of young choreographers with promise. After seeing his most recent show, “By the Inch,” I can confidently call him among the best, if not the best, of the Washington area’s choreographers. In particular, his trio “In the Cold Room,” is the most sophisticated and accomplished of his works I’ve seen to date. If I headed a dance company, I’d be beating down Morgan’s door to acquire “In the Cold Room,” or another new work by Morgan, for my dancers.

“In the Cold Room,” is a spectacularly challenging and achingly pretty piece that any company would be proud to produce. That this work comes from Morgan and premiered in the DC area should be a huge point of pride for the nation’s capital. Actually, it’s the American Dance Institute, in Rockville, Maryland, and the Arts & Humanities Council of Montgomery County, Maryland, among others, who get to boast about their support of Morgan. I’m incredibly thankful that Morgan continues to get funding for his choreography, and it’s great to see that in the fall of 2014 he will become the Dance Artist in Residence at the University of Maryland. I’m positive there are more fantastic things to come from him.

Anyway, “In the Cold Room,” struck me as near perfection. The lighting design was spectacularly executed by Jason Wells. The costumes, simple pale slip dresses with high cut side slits by Dorothy and Amanda Engelhardt, moved elegantly and showed off the dancers’ muscular thighs, which the lighting design, replete with shadows, also emphasized. Wytold’s original score for electric cello, performed live, filled the theater with a hard-to-describe ambience, which made the dancing all the more mesmerizing. Everything came together to make a remarkable whole.

Among these impressive elements, Morgan’s choreography remained the standout. The program gave the performers (Giselle Alvarez, Tiffanie Carson, and Amanda Engelhardt) choreographic credit as well. I sensed a tremendous amount of hard work and vision behind “In the Cold Room,” and all the hours put into creating this piece undoubtedly paid off. As a dance critic, I’m usually happiest when I see movement that’s truly new. I especially love quirky gestures that travel from awkward to sublime, and “In the Cold Room” delivered these in spades. A palm faced outward right in front of a dancer’s nose seemed at once odd and exquisite. A chin rested on the shoulder of another dancer, intimately and innocently like a child. Dancers crawled backward in a bent-legged squat. One dancer’s hand atop another’s head pushing it down brought images of a gentle dunk under water. Hands and feet twisted and shook like seedlings striving for the sun. A wayward foot wiggled in the grasp of a dancer, as if reaching for sustenance above. From a wide sunken second position, dancers shifted weight evenly as if gliding on



silk. They gracefully curved arms above their heads, arched back toward the ground, or flexed a single foot skyward without disturbing their balance. The movement, while mostly abstract, felt timeless and life affirming. So much caught my eye, and Morgan knew what to repeat and why.

In the few moments I feared Morgan's choreography might have taken a misstep, I was quickly proved wrong. Wait, oh no, I thought, when the gorgeous music ceased, and one of the three dancers, acting alone, strode over to a beam of light that stretched from ceiling to floor and began, in silence, to run various parts of her body through the narrow column – foot, nose, shoulder, face – searing them with golden color. The change seemed abrupt and disconnected at first, but soon enough the other dancers, and even Wytold, the musician, smoothed the transition and led the work to an even deeper place. Only the most gifted choreographers can create such surprise and beauty that you sigh, feel satisfied, and are left longing to see the dance again. Morgan is this kind of dance master.

Following “In the Cold Room,” was “Bruised,” a sensitive duet by two male dancers on loan from the Washington Ballet, Corey Landolt and Andile Ndlovu. Original live music by Wytold also accompanied this work. Although these male dancers adeptly performed “Bruised,” “In the Cold Room” was a hard act to follow. As trained ballet dancers, there was something rather restrained about the ways in which Landolt and Ndlovu, wearing all black, moved. I'm aware that some of this was probably due to choreographic intent. Indeed, the men seemed to be in a relationship in which neither was able to fully express his love. A voice in the beginning whispered about crashing into each other, and the dancers literally did this; however, this bumping into one another seemed less accidental than a tactic motivated by desire and the inability to express feelings. There were a lot of lifts and a lot of wrapping around each other, but more moments of passing by each other than actually sharing passion. At one point a dancer's hands made a round cage through which his head charged. This pair felt trapped in a love that was doomed to fail from the start, and although at the end the couple grew closer, that they walked away in opposite directions was not a shock.

Speaking of artistic growth, not only did I get to witness Morgan's ascendance as a choreographer, but I was able to see Tiffanie Carson bloom, too. Each female performer in “In the Cold Room,” gave an outstanding performance, but Carson, who was recently named Assistant Director of CKM&A, eclipsed all I've seen her do in “Selling Out,” a 2011 solo originally choreographed by Morgan for himself. It was intensely interesting to see “Selling Out,” a very personal work which has an abundance of masculine sorts of movement (flexed arm muscles, for example), performed by a woman. Carson shone as a someone conflicted about how to please others while maintaining one's integrity. While she struggled with the selling it/selling out problem, she absolutely ripped the solo to shreds. What a joy it was to see Carson powerfully tackle this piece. Honestly, I preferred the solo set on her, rather than on Morgan.

Morgan is a fine dancer, but I do feel his biggest strength is as a choreographer. He closed “By the Inch,” with his 2004 solo “The Measure of a Man,” a brave look at finding peace as a man, a man who happens to be gay, and who happens to be forging a career in dance. “The Measure of a Man” might be fairly referred to as a theater piece more than a dance (Morgan does plenty of speaking, trying on clothes, injecting humor), but the distinction isn't terribly relevant. The punch-in-the-gut response to “The Measure of a Man” comes from Morgan's vulnerability as a performer. His skill is at its height when he's able to hit upon global truths – like real men do cry, and hopefully they get to a better spot when they're allowed to do so. One couldn't help but be moved by Morgan's raw emotion. In the journey he presented, being chastised about his pursuit of manhood and trying out different identities (the audience is treated to Morgan as a ladies man, a guy with attitude, a renaissance man, and a queen with pull-on platform boots, among others) ultimately culminated in rebirth and self-acceptance. It was difficult to watch Morgan, nearly naked and sweating profusely, slap and pinch himself and shout “Shut Up!” to the demons that plagued him, but the stripping down of himself (he took off every clothing item at the end and, walked, in the dark, toward a bright light) made it possible for him to be built up again.