

Dancing its way to something special

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Rarely do we experience artistic productions with historical weight, but CityDance Ensemble may have achieved such leaping heights at its “Catalyst” concert at the Lansburgh Theatre last week.

Still a teenager in age, CityDance has struggled with staying accessible and consistent in the D.C. arts landscape. Maybe this is because it is the one of the only modern dance companies in the District. Maybe they have had trouble establishing legitimacy. Maybe it is simply impossible to market modern dance. But after last week’s performance, CityDance may have found its foothold on the American modern dance stage.

“Catalyst” was the company’s final performance before its tour to Bahrain, where CityDance’s choreography and partnerships will serve as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, the concert served as a catalyst for the careers of two powerhouse choreographers and for the preservation of a modern dance legend.

With Artistic Director Paul Gordon Emerson, it was about curating more detail-oriented experiences, providing small snapshots of style. This is somewhat of a breakthrough for Emerson. I have always appreciated his visual ideas but found that he rarely knew how to challenge, adopt, adapt and exude true artistic style. The first act opened with “Little Adorations,” Emerson’s three-person web of hip-hop pops and locks, as well of rounds of funky, intertwined movement to the freshness of Radiohead. It was the pre-dinner mint, full of quirky, thorough design. Surely this couldn’t be Emerson - so polished, so well rounded? Surely, it was. Emerson also appended his politically poignant “Entangled” to the end of the first act in a last-minute decision. The original iteration of the piece was inspired by the controversies of Guantanamo Bay, but had since morphed into commercialized filler, leaving the bubbly, personable, beat-boxing stylings of D.C.’s Christylez Bacon un-highlighted. Despite this morph or even the last-minute feel of it, it was a delightful break for the overworked brain, letting us *enjoy* the charmingly casual love dance reminiscent of old-time Gene Kelly movies. Was it commercial? Yes. Was it accessible? Yes. Did it make the audience smile? Definitely.

Nestled between these two differing yet appreciated Emerson dances was the anchor of the first act — and possibly the anchor of the whole show: “+1/-1” by Choreographer-in-Residence Christopher K. Morgan.

Morgan is what you might call an epic choreographer. His works are usually long, drawn-out and completely over my head. They involve politics, poetry, props and costumes (that sometimes serve as props). He is a true creative, but he has yet to rein in his creativity to produce something everlastingly remarkable. However, Morgan’s “+1/-1” is a stunningly brilliant example of “less is more when you know what you already have,” especially when what you have are superb dancers. It is a piece inspired by relationships:

Dancing with and without a partner...a look at the challenges, beauty and inherent metaphors involved when adding or subtracting a dancer from movement. +1/-1 asks several questions: What happens when another person is added to a situation? What happens in the void left by an absent partner? How does one fill the void, or is it simply left empty?

“+1/-1” begins with claps of thunder, followed by a looming, chromatic cello. Kathryn Pilkington opens in a single spotlight, introducing the arachnid movement as well as the backless blue-black leotards that seem to add strength, length and agility to the dancers’ dance. Soon the entire company enters with these eerie moves, only adding more intrigue. It is the kind of crooked choreography where the simple quiver of fingertips is enough to spark goose bumps.

This style soon transforms into a balletic foundation, the crux of the piece. Alice Wylie and Maleek present us with the emptiness and completeness of the ballet partner, only to be followed by the exquisitely athletic *pas de deux* of Elizabeth Gahl and William Smith. These attitudes, jetés and pirouettes allow us to finally see the talents of the dancers. This was the first time every CityDance dancer pulled something challenging out of his or her technical hat in order to shine. I have never seen them so stylistically and physically strong.

Ballet began with structure, only to later abandon specificity and structure in the face of modern dance. In one way, Morgan’s choreography pays homage to ballet as a catalyst for his work. In another way, “+1/-1” serves as a mirrored catalyst into the future — placing the vastness and exhilaration of modern dance as an inspiration for future styles.

As one audience member said, “That will be performed for decades to come.” How fitting, then, that it premiered in the same production with Paul Taylor’s choreography: the revolutionary definition of modern dance.

Paul Taylor, 77, is a pioneer of avant-garde modern dance. His works are rarely performed outside of his own company, but he allowed CityDance to present two of his lesser-known classics, a never-seen-before occasion.

“Last Look” opened the second act with various mirrors and a colorful heap of bodies on the floor. The dancers suddenly trashed all of their technique in the name of uncanny modernism to “convulse,” “shake,” “flail” and “flop.” It is an apocalyptic world, where the characters are incapable of fully communicating with one another, using sexual, flimsy and awkward jabs. It is outwardly unattractive and strange, sometimes causing discomfort, confusion and pure emotional exhaustion. But the significance of this piece is not so outward as it is intrinsic. The audience may have squirmed and scowled, especially at William Smith’s disturbing facial expressions, but this was how Paul Taylor meant for us to react. It still feels innovative so many years later, but the real question is if it translates to audiences today.

Based on the rave applause and cheers from the audience, I would say it does. More so, it explains why Emerson is so intent on preserving Paul Taylor’s works, especially the ones that have never been outsourced before.

This is also the case with “Images,” the starkly opposite, futuristically tribal number of the third act. It featured selections from various Claude Debussy piano works paired with stoic yet fluttering dance positions. The multicolored skirts and Egyptian-like poses elicit genuine smiles, while the simplicity and statuesque images are readily understandable. All eight vignettes made me thankful that this work exists and established Paul Taylor as a diversely moving, preservation-worthy entity in the history of modern dance.

This production was the beginning of something momentous. The concert may have had one too many pauses and intermissions; it may even have been 10 minutes too long; and it may not have presented works that directly relate to one another. Yet in its entirety, the program represented stellar choreographical muscle, making us excited for the future of CityDance and the further preservation of historical work. Audience education has never looked so good.