

CityDance Ensemble presents: 'Multiple Personalities: An Evening of Dances by Christopher K. Morgan'

by Carmel Morgan

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As the end of May arrives, so does the end of the season for many dance companies, most of which are no longer able to afford to pay dancers year-round. Consequently, the end of May frequently brings interesting dance collaborations, since dancers winding up their regular season become free to engage in innovative works outside of their more typical contract obligations. It's a time of year that I find myself anticipating because of the riskier creative endeavors that often emerge. In DC, during the weekend just before the Memorial Day weekend, Christopher K. Morgan, resident choreographer for CityDance Ensemble (and no relation to this dance critic), presented an evening of new works, plus the area premiere of his 2004 signature solo work, "The Measure of a Man."

Morgan's cast included not only CityDance Ensemble company members and members of CityDance2, CityDance's second company, but also other dancers and musicians from the DC area. All of the performances were strong, but especially the performance of Morgan in "The Measure of a Man," a serious but persistently humorous look at cultural perceptions of men, in particular the judgments and assumptions society makes about men who don't fit the ubiquitous beer-recliner-power tools mold. Who are "real men?" Morgan challenges us in this dance/theater piece. Do real men cry? If a man cooks and cleans, does that necessarily mean he's gay?

The text, choreography, and costumes, all by Morgan, and the original score by MonstaH Black and Morgan, were clever. Together with Morgan's riveting performance, they thoughtfully explored questions related to measuring manhood. Do we want to define "real men" as those crotch-grabbing young guys with attitude who walk by in baggy pants, their bodies hunched over in a too-cool-for you slump? Or do we want to define "real men" as snooty Prince Charming-types, who completely brush women aside? Morgan convincingly becomes the amusing characters that appear in his work, morphing from one personality to the next with genuine deftness. The audience certainly benefitted from his sense of fun in playing these various roles. How could we not enjoy Morgan camping it up in tall wedge platform boots, wearing little else?

Morgan related well the journey we all go through in wondering how we measure up. As he stripped off clothing, his increasingly naked body reminded one of not simply human



Christopher K. Morgan
Photo © Paul Gordon Emerson

vulnerability, but also the triumph of the human spirit. When faced with painful name calling (voices on the soundtrack shouted “faggot,” etc.), the audience witnessed Morgan suffer. He even added to his suffering by pinching and slapping his own flesh. Yet Morgan ended “The Measure of a Man” on a brighter note. Stripped down to the essence of himself, he became bathed in brilliant light. “The Measure of Man” succeeded due to the abundant raw emotion Morgan supplied.

Another work I really enjoyed was “Compass Point(e)s,” a world premiere that befitting its title, was performed, primarily en pointe, by CityDance company members Giselle Alvarez, Elizabeth Gahl, Jason Garcia Ignacio, and William Smith. Only Smith, a long and slender male, donned slippers rather than pointe shoes, which was a bit of a surprise given his prior experience dancing with New York-based Les Ballets Grandiva, an all-male comedy ballet company that toured exclusively in Japan, where the men danced classical and contemporary ballets en pointe. The dancers represented the compass directions north, east, south, and west. Program notes indicated that the interpretation of each direction was loosely based upon traditions and tales of the Lakota Native American Tribes. Thus, each dancer, wearing a different colored short unitard, showed a unique personality. In sleek modern lines, to an original cello score performed live by Ignacio Alcover, the dancers conjured an atmosphere of changing weather. Often the quartet moved in a circle, evoking unity in nature as well as the roundness of an actual compass. Their arms would rise and fall, and nose-high knees proliferated. “Compass Point(e)s” was further enhanced by the mirrored walls of the studio where the performance was held. Gorgeous reflections shone everywhere.



Christopher K. Morgan
Photo © Paul Gordon Emerson

Morgan also premiered “Snapshots,” an uneven dance/theater piece that featured an odd assortment of characters and plenty of costume changes. Dancers primped facing the audience as their mirror. They stared at us, adjusting their hair, their fire engine red lipstick. Females strutted about in sunglasses like vapid fashion models. A dancer with purple plumes of fabric tucked into a waistband turned into a human Maypole. The best choreographic moments in “Snapshots” involved groups. Dancers beautifully flung their heads, arms, and backs way backward. Although “Snapshots” seemed like pure spectacle at times thanks to the wild costumes by Morgan and Kyle Lang, the dancers thankfully knew how to continuously engage an audience. The charismatic expressions of the talented cast saved “Snapshots” from being an utter mess. Morgan must be credited, at least in part, for excellent artistic direction here, even if the work fell short in terms of choreography.

To open his program, Morgan presented a preview of a work in progress titled “Pohaku,” the Hawaiian word for “stone.” In 2006, Morgan was awarded a Travel and Study Grant by The Jerome Foundation to study with Master Hula teacher, John Kaimikaua, his cousin. Tragically, Kaimikaua passed away just weeks after Morgan received notice of the grant. In 2009, Morgan used the grant to study with the remaining members of Kaimikaua’s hula group, which included Kaimikaua’s wife and mother. In “Pohaku,” Morgan used narration and props to convey elements of traditional Hawaiian culture. Stones played an important symbolic role in the work. One even rolled out of Morgan’s mouth and dropped to the floor with a thud. Morgan will no doubt further refine this work into both an intriguing history lesson and a compelling dance/theater piece.