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VelocityDC Dance Festival offers a smorgasbord of troupes and styles

by Sarah Kaufman

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Who could resist the extraordinary range of performers at the VelocityDC Dance Festival on Thursday night? There were ballet dancers, modern dancers, hip-hop, flamenco, Indian . . . And puppies.

These folks were playing hardball.

"It makes no sense," acknowledged Peter DiMuro, the evening's host, cradling a surprisingly placid pup against his suit jacket as he addressed the audience, "but they're cute and they move."

Tiny as they were, the two critters on loan from the Washington Animal Rescue League had a big responsibility. The puppies were a proxy for how eager the festival organizers are to see this ambitious project succeed, with its inexpensive tickets and 29 local troupes spread over five performances. The pups made their appearance during DiMuro's enchanting opening act, where, aided by Gesel Mason Performance Projects, he presented the "Top 10 Reasons VelocityDC Is Better Than 'So You Think You Can Dance'" and all its TV dance-show cousins.

After "No British-accented meanness!" and the shameless (but blameless) display of pooches, DiMuro announced that Reason No. 1 was the audience, for leaving its couches and its remotes, for taking a chance on dance, for seeing it live, in three dimensions. (Hear, hear.)

Having been so expertly stroked, the crowd was then treated to a great big delicious casserole of works from 11 groups. If it was slightly jarring to see a gentle work of Sri Lankan traditional dance (from Asanga Domask) follow a tense urban love triangle (Company E's "Y"), the sheer abundance of solid-quality art more than compensated. All the pieces were approachable — no potentially off-putting remoteness here.

To spotlight a few of the many highlights: Christopher K. Morgan and Artists, with "C'est le ton qui fait la chanson," whose crackly French tunes lent a vintage-postcard charm to the romantic entanglements; the full-throttle "Jaleos" by Flamenco Aparicio Dance Company and Pastora Flamenco; and Vincent Thomas's elegant solo in VTDance's "Prelude/Frustration."

What this format makes clear is that shared programs work. The traditional formula in dance has always been one company per program — whether it's the Paul Taylor Dance Company or a smaller local group. But as it becomes more difficult to attract audiences — and financial supporters — to any single troupe's performance, it bears examining whether sharing programs is a better plan. It's unquestionably a plus for audiences: If you aren't moved by one piece, you know something else will follow. And, at the same time, your experience is broadened.

VelocityDC, with help from the Washington Performing Arts Society, the Shakespeare Theatre and Dance/MetroDC, has proved local troupes can work together and fill Harman Hall. It's a promising model for an uncertain future. With or without puppies.

VelocityDC Dance Festival

Saturday at 2 and 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. Programs vary. Tickets are \$18. RAMP!-to-Velocity, with works in progress by various artists, 90 minutes before curtain in lower level of Sidney Harman Hall, 610 F St. NW. 202-547-1122.
www.shakespearetheatre.org



Velocity DC Dance Festival - Dancers from 29 local troupes, including Vanessa Elder of El Teatro de Danza Contemporanea de El Salvador, are participating in the VelocityDC Dance Festival.