

## Christopher K. Morgan & Artists

### 'Reveal'

By Carmel Morgan

November 18, 2011 -- Music Center at Strathmore,  
CityDance Studio Theater, Bethesda, MD

On November 18, 2011, a special performance titled "Reveal" at the Music Center at Strathmore, in Bethesda, Maryland, featured two debuts at once: the opening of the new CityDance Studio Theater and the first concert of Christopher K. Morgan & Artists, the inaugural resident professional dance company of CityDance. The space, however, wasn't entirely new, nor was the company unfamiliar. Studio 405, in Strathmore's Education Wing, was revamped, and it emerged as a black box theater. Meanwhile, Christopher K. Morgan, the former choreographer-in-residence and rehearsal director of CityDance's now defunct professional modern dance company, CityDance Ensemble, accepted an invitation to partner with CityDance as their artist-in-residence. Among other things, Morgan and his new dance company (consisting of a number of members of the recently disbanded company) agreed to provide performance opportunities for the pre-professional students in CityDance's Conservatory.



Alvarez and Whitehead-Canterna  
Photo © Brianne Bland

On opening night you could feel the warmth in the sold-out space packed with supporters as both the new theater and Morgan were introduced. There never seems to be enough dance performance space, so certainly the black box theater is a nice addition that CityDance students and patrons alike will appreciate. One outing is not enough to judge Morgan's new dance company, but there's no doubt that CityDance will continue to benefit from its collaboration with him. Morgan offers not only choreographic skill, but a compelling personality and a keen creative style that local audiences adore.

Christopher K. Morgan & Artists kicked off the evening with "In Plain Sight," a puzzling piece that according to program notes was inspired by the plight of human trafficking. Morgan has a wonderful visual eye and, it seems, a huge heart, so it's understandable that he'd be drawn to the photographs of Kay Chernush, who has passionately documented the faces of human trafficking. The work he created based on that inspiration, however, came across as disjointed. The

projections of images competed with the dancers for attention. Overall, “In Plain Sight” seemed overly complex.

Morgan’s choreography, the images by Chernush, and an original score by Ignacio Alcover, together conjured an eerie atmosphere that brought to mind unfairness and imprisonment, and even malice. I didn’t read the program notes first, and upon viewing “In Plain Sight,” I interpreted the dance and accompanying visual imagery as referencing greed, poverty, and class divisions a la Occupy Wall Street. The coins that the two female dancers (Giselle Alvarez and Elizabeth Gahl) dropped onto the floor may have led me to this conclusion! The pennies had a marvelous sound as they spilled and rolled, but a little playing with money goes a long way. For me, the work rambled, and I was unable to grasp the narrative structure, if any. I had secretly hoped that the separate tall panels on wheels, on which the images were projected, would be pushed together at the end of the dance to reveal a single image that would make sense of the work. Alas, this did not happen.

The joys of the sober “In Plain Sight” included movements in which dancers manipulated and touched themselves. Hands grabbed feet, contorted fingers climbed up backs, a straightened digit slid past nose and ear, palms pressed and spread over upper thighs. Another joy was most definitely the music. Whiny, piercing strings evoked emotional pain, as did gorgeous sighs to which dancers slumped. Shadows also starred in “In Plain Sight.” Lanky dark figures moved over photos of windows and bars, and hands cowered and retreated in a narrow white space walled by black.

The next work on the program was “Selling Out,” a world premiere solo by Morgan, with an original score by MonstaH Black. In program notes, Morgan implied that “Selling Out” addresses his personal struggle to find genuine expression through movement while simultaneously striving to please an audience. At times, Morgan shook as if being electrocuted or moved jerkily like he was club dancing under a strobe light. At other times, he was the essence of smooth and suave. Morgan appeared to be struggling with something, probably the fear of “selling out.” Indeed, lyrics warned, “Watch yourself, you’re gonna be a sell out.” Morgan repeatedly posed and glanced at the audience, then moved again, executing a sort balletic battle of the artistic soul to thumping bass. It reminded me of the kind of dance a dancer might do at home alone, in front of a mirror, to replace of having a dialogue with oneself. Morgan ended the work muttering and stomping in a crouched position. We were left to wonder, will he work it out?

If the first two pieces left viewers scratching their heads, the next two made them believers in the church of Christopher K. Morgan. Both “Tarentella” (2006) and “Ties That Bind” (2002) are worthy of worship. I assume they were placed on the program because of their popularity with audiences and with Morgan. “Tarentella” – performed by Alvarez, Gahl, Junichi Fukuda, and Alicia Whitehead-Canterna – breathed sexiness into the little black box. The three female dancers, all washerwomen, were costumed by Morgan in printed dresses and head scarves. Fukuda, the lone male, enjoyed their spirited flirtations. The work blended classical lines and

traditional music with a contemporary touch. In bare feet, a woman stood on Fukuda's shoulder, his thighs, and his back. After two additional washerwomen entered, carrying tubs of water, Fukuda did an amazing leap, tossing himself open-armed into the air like a shirt on a clothesline being swung by the wind. The dancers employed flexed feet in folksy trots, in rhythm to the fun Neapolitan music, producing a room full of smiles.

To end the evening, students from CityDance's Conservatory performed Morgan's "Ties That Bind," which he had originally set on a troupe of Lithuanian dancers. The work is focused on the dual theme of restriction and freedom of expression, and it was drawn from the lives of the dancers and their experience with Communism. "Ties That Bind" is extremely physically demanding and psychologically deep -- not something most young dance students could pull off. I'm pleased to say that the students did CityDance proud. As they grow and mature, they'll be able to add more artistic nuance in place of slavish concentration, and add more power and self-possession, too. However, they absolutely delivered the beauty of Morgan's choreography and even managed to deliver some of the emotional impact as well. In some oft-repeated Morgan moves, the dancers did an upright worm from their heads to their waists, wavering in between; they also bent forward at the waist, with a leg floating out to the side in a menacing hover. Bodies later became walls, blocking access to the space behind. Actual ties (in red, of course) were puppet strings, used to direct the movement of another. In my favorite sequence, a quartet of dancers played ventriloquists and dummies. In pairs, one dancer sat on a chair, and the other sat on top of her or orchestrated the action from behind. The imagery and message in "Ties That Bind" could not have been clearer, or more effective.