



## SATURDAY AT THE EPIC CENTER: BEWARE THE DANCE ECHO CHAMBER — COME TO RAD FEST



BY [LAUREN WARNECKE](#) ON MARCH 10, 2019

KALAMAZOO, MI — In 2017, Fox News dropped the slogan “Fair and Balanced.” [They claimed](#) it was because the motto had been written by its dismissed chairman Roger Ailes, swapping the phrase for “Most Watched, Most Trusted.” Whatever you think about Fox News, the change certainly provides a more accurate picture of the network’s essence.

I thought about this watching RAD Fest’s final evening of short works, which boasted 14 more pieces representing all corners of the country (including my hometown). We tend to trust the things we watch the most, right? “Most Watched, Most Trusted?”

There’s a chicken-or-egg question in there: do we watch things because we trust them, or are we just more apt to believe content to which we’re repeatedly exposed? It’s perhaps a silly, obtuse, existential question, and not exactly my point, but one reason why I love coming to the Midwest Regional Alternative Dance Festival (RAD Fest) is that it exposes me to dance I wouldn’t otherwise see.

Sometimes this leads to delightful surprises; the privilege of watching dances from outside your local bubble honestly cannot be overstated. Two duets by local Kalamazooans Saturday — Marisa Bianon and Lauren Donahue’s “Phased” in the early show, and at 9 p.m. Michael Arellano and Jeremy Blair (with contributions by Alyssa Brutlag) in “A Familiar Room” — reminded me that Kalamazoo is a dance town. The residue of Western Michigan University alumni and Cori Terry’s long-time influence in the local dance community is present in both these works, which boast some of the prettiest lines of the festival. But they’re different, too: “Phased,” danced by two women, is pointed, leaning on a contemporary aesthetic informed by popping and locking. “A Familiar Room,” by contrast, is a gorgeous treatment of the Andante from Benjamin Britten’s “String Quartet No. 1,” brilliantly composed to rise and fall at just the right times, intertwining the men’s bodies as they share weight, emblematic of the give-and-take in relationships.

New Orleans-based Paris Cian Williams opened the evening with “(Mute) Conversations with a Black Girl,” accompanied by a live-mixed score by DJ Blair Ebony Smith. Smith blends loops of John Coltrane and Duke Ellington with text from Jacqui Alexander’s “The Signified Project” as Williams traverses the stage. She starts in short shorts and a bra, standing atop a slew of printer paper. She softly pulses her upper back, hunched over from the waist. She dons a red shift dress, then dances away from her post on those papers with a reckless abandon that is sometimes tempered by jumping jacks and other calisthenics. She smooths her hair against her scalp as she does this; despite an apparent struggle navigating societal constructs around beauty and black bodies, Williams looks to me as one ultimately unapologetically embracing her own. She returns to her paper pile at the end, crumples a few of the sheets into a wad, and gags herself with it. In the piece’s most salient moment, Williams breathes heavily against the strain of that paper in her mouth, pressing her hands in prayer to the sky and ground, stopping along the way to cup her hands beneath her breasts.

Closing the first show, Jesse Factor of Slippery Rock, PA offered “Relic,” a fantastically divalicious solo channeling Joan Crawford. Factor’s the star here, backlit by an old-fashioned can light and made up in white face make-up with exaggerated eyes and lips. But it must be said that Andy Hasenpflug’s looping of a 1975 interview Crawford gave at Town Hall makes all the difference. (Indeed, Chicago misses you, Andy.)

There’s another layer, though, to “Relic” which relies on Hasenpflug’s cheeky repetitions of Crawford’s text. They provide a perfect excuse for Factor’s contractions in the collar bone and gut. His dancing is unmistakably informed by Martha Graham — long skirt, top knot and all — creating a harmoniously fabulous hybrid of two queens in what was, for me, the most memorable piece of the night.

These were the most pleasant of Saturday’s novelties. Two of the dances from the night’s 7 p.m. program were repeats for me, and looked equally great at the Epic Center: Chicago Repertory Ballet’s “[Trees, Melody](#)” by Shannon Alvis, and “Sherman’s Neckties” by Eric Mullis.

Aside: I first saw Mullis [here at RAD Fest last year](#). He’s from North Carolina, but danced “Sherman’s Neckties” in [last fall’s Harvest Chicago Contemporary Dance Festival](#). I’d be lying by omission if I didn’t mention I’m a fan.

Hip-hopper Alex Gossen returned with a silent duo called “Broken Rhythms,” performed with Anna Brouwer. Gossen’s is a lanky, free-flowing, laid-back aesthetic, and a crowd favorite here in Kalamazoo. Ziyao Yu and Daniel Gwizman likewise lean into simplicity, with “I am a piece” and “Doodling,” respectively. On the surface they share little in common — Gwizman is a tall, lanky guy while Yu’s a petite woman. But there’s a somewhat refreshing level of restraint each exhibits in keeping to the point, and when moments of subtle virtuosity peek through, these are two lovely dancers.

By contrast, [Jodie Randolph of Ann Arbor, MI holds nothing back in “Two Twelve,” a hard-hitting, powerhouse trio danced by Christina Perry, KP Pollack and Megan Scheppelman. As they pounded on a flimsy folding table, I envisioned the rat race of women in a board room, the three tumbling over, under, and around their rattling prop.](#) Scott Crandall and Maddy Rager, collectively known as Thank You So Much For Coming (TYSMFC), likewise go all out, though this is a very different dance than “Two Twelve.” Picture Saturday Night Live’s Spartan cheerleaders (Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri) in a routine imagining the inauguration of Hillary Clinton, had it turned out that way, and

you'll get a little idea of what Crandall and Rager's duet called "I'm disappointed in myself, I'm disappointed in others" looks like.

From there, the stage littered with TYSMFC's left over confetti, feathers and other inauguration party droppings (having carried their life-sized Clinton cut-out off with them), dancer Christine Wyatt led a processional into the Judy Jolliffe Theatre for "Portrait of an Imagined Deity." This capoeira-infused trio first meticulously draws a ritualistic symbol by sprinkling what looks like bread crumbs out of refashioned milk jugs, and then proceeds to muss it up with swirling kicks and rollicking rolls around the space.

Finally, one more trio, "Mental Kingdoms," was repeated in its originally intended slot at 9 p.m., having filled a last minute opening in Thursday's Long Works Performance. Angela Dennis, Jessica Lynn Fox and Laurie Bohren take the prize for the most direct swipe at a critic I've ever experienced, changing their piece almost entirely as [my words](#) about it flashed across the back wall like a psychedelic screen saver. Don't change your art on my account, ladies. But if you decide to stick with this version in the future, please credit me in the program.

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*Header photo: Jesse Factor in "Relic," photo courtesy of RAD Fest*

**Link to full article:**

<http://www.artintercepts.org/2019/03/10/saturday-at-the-epic-center-beware-the-dance-echo-chamber-come-to-rad-fest/>