

The Boston Globe

DANCE REVIEW

Provocation and playfulness in Boston Contemporary Dance Festival performances

By **Karen Campbell** Globe Correspondent, August 11, 2019, 5:12 p.m.

From a 17th-century religious reading to dated texts on treatments for mental illness to a reference to “ecstasy through suffering,” the evening showcase of the seventh annual Boston Contemporary Dance Festival had a lot of words and a generally dark and serious tone. But overall, it was not only provocative but quite engaging, well-paced, and smoothly run, a varied sampler of contemporary modern dance styles.

Urbanity Dance designed the one-day festival to create networking and performance opportunities for artists from across the country — 35 in all selected from more than 100 applicants. While an afternoon showcase featured Greater Boston artists, the evening concert brought together a diverse range of performers from as far away as Michigan, North Carolina, and Texas. Clocking in at under two hours, it packed in a whopping 15 short works, though many of the excerpts lacked self-contained integrity and cohesion and didn’t fare well out of context — that may bear some rethinking.

Dallas-based Mark Caserta’s “Solo for One in Doubt” was the evening’s most riveting work. Clothed all in black, only his legs bare from mid-thigh to mid-calf, with a ball cap obscuring his face, Caserta was

a moving target for the play of shadow and light as he unfurled tensile isolations and rippling extensions that snapped into sharply etched poses and convoluted shapes.

Michigan's Alyssa Brutlag was similarly compelling in her "Do Us Part." To a text about "a holy and virtuous life" and Eric Whitacre's lovely choral "This Marriage," Brutlag vividly danced the conflicted supplicant. Beseeking reaches and anguished falls sent her body writhing, torso contorted and limbs jutting. Rosie DeAngelo gave a terrific performance of her twitchy, quicksilver "Neuron," and Vincent E. Thomas followed a roving monologue about the need for change with an earnest, if not always persuasive, solo from his "iWitness."

Many of the duets were beautifully danced, but slightly similar in dynamic. Jodie Randolph's "Two Twelve" stood out for its echoes of contact improvisation and capoeira, each move perfectly calibrated to Andrew Harness's "Found Sounds" percussion score. Cirio Collective's Lia Cirio and Paul Craig, both Boston Ballet principal dancers, gave a polished, impeccably controlled performance of Jeffrey Cirio's "Tornerai?" Sweeping, fluidly luxurious phrases were punctuated by mysterious gestures, often framing the face, hands quivering, fingers splayed. The tight partnering in Bonnie O'Rourke's duet with Sam Assemany complemented muscular, molten lunges and tumbles. Teddy Tedholm's duet with Jordyn Santiago seemed merely a foil for his eye-popping solo in the middle, a rapid-fire explosion of jangly, convoluted isolations.

Ryan Pauzé's "Stillness" was anything but, with his three excellent dancers throwing themselves into aggressive thrusts and spiraling turns. Two large ensemble works in all black couldn't have been more different. The spidery crawls, slicing limbs, and menacing face-front bravado of Moriah Markowitz's "S7AGES" suggested a coven of witches, while Bekah Joy Howard's octet "Permanent Reverie" portrayed a sense of sweet community. As formations split apart and came together, dancers supported and embraced one another.

Two of the works that dared to attempt humor fell decidedly flat. (What is it with appropriating exquisite music for deliberately clumsy and unimaginative movement?) The evening's one piece with

a genuine spark of clever levity was Urbanity Dance’s playful, jazz-inflected romp “The Run Before THE Run,” choreographed by Chantal Doucett. As Meg Anderson, Haley Day, and Katie Grenier practiced their routine, Grenier slipped carelessly out of sync, took a moment from supporting a lift to stifle a sneeze, and finally broke away entirely to snack on a bag of chips. She just couldn’t seem to take it seriously. OK by me.

Boston Contemporary Dance Festival

At Huntington Avenue Theatre, Saturday night

Karen Campbell can be reached at karencampbell4@rcn.com.

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