

Themes of Joy and Appreciation of Art In DancEthos' 10th Anniversary Program

CONVERSATIONAL REVIEW:

DancEthos

Jack Guidone Theater at Joy of Motion

Washington, D.C.

November 16-17, 2019

A conversational review by Lisa Traiger and Valerie Oliphant



*A decade in the life of an independent dance company is an auspicious occasion, particularly in an era when building and sustaining small arts organizations is such a challenge. This season DancEthos, a modern dance company founded by Tiffany Haughn, celebrates a decade sharing a program of new and older works from its repertory at the Jack Guidone Theater at Joy of Motion, where the company is in residence. DC Dance Journalism Project Director **Lisa Traiger** and project writer and local dance artist **Valerie Oliphant** attended the Saturday performance and share their thoughts about the 10th anniversary evening, which included choreography by Haughn, company member Kelly Fisher and a piece from Motion X Dance DC.*

Lisa Traiger: I've seen DancEthos on several occasions, once or twice early in its development and more recently two years ago, but I never wrote on any of the performances because I felt the company was not yet ready for review. It is good to see growth as the company turns 10.

Valerie Oliphant: I saw last year's Handel's Messiah program. This time I welcomed the themes of joy, appreciation of the art and beauty of life, and of struggling with large life decisions, which were threaded throughout the show.

L.T.: I must say that the strength of the dancing has improved significantly. Choreographically, too, I am seeing development. Haughn often invites in a guest choreographer or another small D.C. metro area company to contribute to the program. This time, it was Motion X Dance DC; in prior years I've seen Gin Dance Company, darlingdance company, and choreographers from Matt Elder to Vladimir Angelov.

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L.T.: "Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major" was a fortuitous opener. Kelly Fisher, who also dances with the company, favors music visualization to the oft-choreographed Bach cello suites, allowing the dancers' bodies to replicate and "play" the music through the movement. The first two solos featured little embellishments -- cartwheels, skips, quick-footed triplets, wiggling fingers and hands crisscrossing like scissors. Alas, ungainly rolls and less than graceful falls weighed down the final duet section.

V.O.: I really enjoyed the playfulness of this piece. The dance interpretation of classical music was reminiscent of Disney's *Fantasia*, heads bobbling to the beat, one leg lifted in a flamingo-like stance.

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V.O.: Motion X Dance DC's "Turning Point," by Stephanie Dorrycott, examined the decision-making process one faces when presented with a life-altering choice. Handheld lights, representing the myriad options available, lit up the dancers' faces like someone reading on their cell phone at night. The themes and movement quality have coalesced significantly since the first time I saw this piece. The dancers moved in perfect synchronization, flowing in and out of each other's orbits as if one. This time the piece focused in on one dancer who seemed to be struggling with her options as she isolated herself from the other dancers, then let them pull her into their group and lift her overhead. After exploring all her options, she confidently walked toward a single light, set on her course of action.

L.T.: We had both seen this piece before and this time the company dancers were so much more committed to the work allowing the choreographer's statement to be more fully realized.

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L.T.: “Reverie,” a solo danced by Fisher and created by Haughn with the dancer, drew its inspiration from four watercolors by Virginia painter Megha Mehra. Inspired by the works, Fisher danced with, before, beneath and around them, expressing in movement imagery and ideas from each painting. Alas, the artworks were too small for us to see from the audience – future performances could benefit from projecting them, or at least showing them in the lobby prior to the performance. A premiere, “Reverie” could have wallowed in cliché, yet it was well put together. Fisher emulated ideas from each work, emphasizing lightness and lift in her gentle interpretations, cradling and partnering a painting of a daughter, allowing sand to slip through her fingers. The final image, Fisher draped through an empty frame, is memorable for the Vermeer-like lighting by Quoc M. Tran.

V.O.: Looking at the set, we knew the piece would end once the dancer reached the empty frame. The way Fisher interacted with it, a deep backbend through the frame to look towards the audience before assuming her final pose, was striking.

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V.O.: “From Within” closed the program by exploring the spiritual journey of a woman questioning her faith and the legitimacy of organized religion in a world that includes human suffering. Lights rose on a large group of dancers in earth-toned outfits sitting in two concentric circles undulating together. Two dancers, Vanessa Rowan and Elizabeth Odell Catlett, depicted

body and soul in matching white dresses. Rowan's stiff movements mimicked human imperfection as she frantically flitted between the other dancers, jumping on their backs and falling into their arms. She looked supremely uncomfortable as she was lifted overhead, moments later crashing to the ground when they purposely dropped her. Eventually, her ethereal self, beautifully danced by Catlett, embraced her, delicate fingers tracing her arm and guiding her movements.

L.T.: I had a harder time with this piece, but I loved the opening image of a churning whirlpool created by a group of ten seated close together on the floor like a congregation of undulating buddhas. The interplay between the group and the singular figures emblematic of the struggle of spirit and flesh suggested Christian overtones.

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L.T.: In her introductory speech, Haughn expressed her desire to demystify modern dance for novice dance goers. Rather than a post-show talkback, she invited each choreographer to answer questions after their piece. With Haughn's able facilitation, this format worked surprisingly well, allowing the choreographers to articulate fundamental ideas about the works' processes and meanings and enabling audiences to ask some perceptive questions.

Photos: Da'Shawn Rawl's "Make the Sun Sweat"; photo by Stephanie Vadala
Tiffany Haughn's "From Within"; photo by Colin Hovde