

Afro-Caribbean Jams

REVIEW:

Jammin

Juanita Maria Dance Company

Jack Guidone Theatre, Joy of Motion

October 26-27, 2019

By Ramona Harper



The Juanita Maria Dance Company premiered in Washington, D.C., in *Jammin*, a sparkling splash of Afro-Caribbean and jazzy modern dance at Joy of Motion’s Jack Guidone Theatre on Saturday evening. Under the direction of the company’s namesake, Juanita Maria Winston, an appealing dancer and choreographer in her own right, the company was simply delightful in connecting community to its love of dance.

Eight works in 40 minutes is no small feat, but the Juanita Maria Dance Company succeeded in showcasing pieces that appeared to be the foundations for further choreographic development. Music played an important part in enlivening every one of the works. And the choices were spot-on. The titular “Jammin” was set to pumping Stevie Wonder with a winsome trio of dancers -- Anastasia Johnson, Caitlin Mitchell and Samantha Sevilla.

“Reminiscing” included three sections and the same trio of dancers from “Jammin,” each part performed at a different tempo and featuring a spectacular solo by Winston, who flowed to Bob Marley music in a sexy burgundy knit dress that well-accented her beautifully precise turns. Several of the pieces had the same repetitive iteration of jazzy straight arms, undulating shoulders, torso-to-shoulder roll-ups and backward runs that made you want to dance along.



And who can't use a few more salsa lessons? “Marcando La Distancia” and “Meneando La Cola,” both choreographed by Barbara Bernstein, added unexpected salsa fun as duos and trios performed intricate salsa steps, turns and partner changes. These two pieces most reflected the Afro-Caribbean beat in the program, perhaps influenced by Winston's Guyanese heritage.

The program moved from fast to slow with a more sensitive motif in the luscious “/point/(n.(v.),” choreographed and danced by Covenant Babatunde and Mason Storm Prince to a passionately lyrical composition by Ludovico Einaudi. Daring trust falls and repetitively pointed index fingers led the way to the lovers' inevitable end.

“We” was another piece that added to the more emotionally evocative works on the program with its sullen faces and moody, awkward movements danced intensely by the duo of Lauren Armstrong and Babatunde.

“Grief,” choreographed by Winston, was black cat sexy and jazzy. The black unitard costume, black feather plumed headdress and red strobe lighting was right on time for Halloween. However, the mellow instrumental music by Beyonce, per the program, seemed confusing and incongruous to the flirty movement in this piece. But dancers falling splat out on the floor in drop dead exhaustion at the end was, perhaps, a subtle subtext to the title.

“Feeling Like Myself” closed the evening returning to the brisk, jazzy modern flashiness that opened the performance.

Sometimes the program felt like a fun Jazzercise class or a challenging salsa lesson. Much of the choreography uses the same movement in a group, which challenges the dancers to better synchronize. But it was uncomplicated and, perhaps, its simple unpretentiousness is its appeal. This ensemble of community dancers simply loves to dance and their passion for movement was felt and just as easily enjoyed.

Photos: courtesy Juanita Maria Dance Company