

Indigenous Contemporary

REVIEW:

Crying Men

Black Grace

The Clarice, University of Maryland College Park

October 24, 2019

By Morgan Pravato

On the first stop of their 2019 North America tour, Black Grace presented *Crying Men* at the Clarice on University of Maryland's College Park campus Thursday, October 24. The New Zealand-based company founded by Neil Ieremia brought a unique blend of modern and Pacific Islander indigenous dance forms to the Kay Theatre stage.



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These dancers were unafraid to show how grueling the choreography was, unlike some performers who must master the art of smiling through pain. The dancers appeared superhuman in their sweat-soaked costumes, and powered through with heavy breaths that were audible from the back of the theater.

"Kiona and the Little Bird Suite" opened the show, and immediately locked the audience into a trance that lasted until the work's conclusion. This 20-minute opener combined indigenous dance styles with slap dancing. The performers spoke, sang and slapped their bodies to create incredibly satisfying rhythms accompanied by live drumming by Isitolo Alesana on stage. As the group moved together, their varied timings created beautifully layered sound.



Following the strong start, excerpts from Ieremia's full-length *Crying Men* brought the performance to its peak. Drawing from part of the company's focus on South Pacific traditions, the piece opened a conversation about toxic masculinity in Pacific Islander cultures.

Beginning with three dancers sitting in a triangle, clad in large headwear and black clothing, one continuously poured water into a bowl, filling the silence. Eventually, a deep voice boomed over the speakers and the other dancers began walking sharply, running and stomping while holding hands. Their footsteps complemented the driving beat to create a slightly ominous sound that echoed through the piece, giving it a trance-like feeling.

In one of the most memorable moments, a female dancer, dressed simply in a white blouse and black skirt, stood alone and stared directly at the audience. One of the male dancers across the stage began to yell, whistle and attempt to grab her attention. With no reply, the man's body tension built; his movement and voice eventually distorted into something otherworldly. With sharp flicks of his head and precise steps, he angrily contorted his body as he made his way across. When he got within inches of the woman, she exploded, responding with the same twisted expression. As she advanced, he

retreated to the other side of the stage, showing the overpowering effects that harassment can have.

Throughout the work, the dancers pretended to scream, their faces withered by emotion and their bodies twisted. The piece concluded with the group repeatedly rising to scream then collapsing while surrounding one man.

The program concluded with “Method,” featuring dancers dressed in white and moving to a more uplifting instrumental sound. Despite the lighter mood, these six minutes were the evening’s most physically grueling, demanding swift changes from high jumps to low rolls with ease. The dancers had no choice but to trust each other, as they would arrive just in time to catch another body flying toward them.

Black Grace’s production can appeal to all viewer types, regardless of their dance experience. If someone who does not understand football watches a game, they can still be impressed by the players’ athleticism. A Black Grace program is similar: Jeremia essentially guarantees that viewers will leave in awe of the dancers’ physicality.

He also succeeds in striking viewers with the tough yet undeniable reality of toxic masculinity through the third piece. The dancers’ raw emotion absolutely portrayed the damaging effects of gender expectations, as well as Jeremia’s continued focus on South Pacific culture.

Photos: Black Grace, courtesy Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center