

# Taking Up Space

REVIEW:

*Gallery*

S.J. Ewing & Dancers

Source Theater

October 4-6, 2019

By Nanda Srikantiah

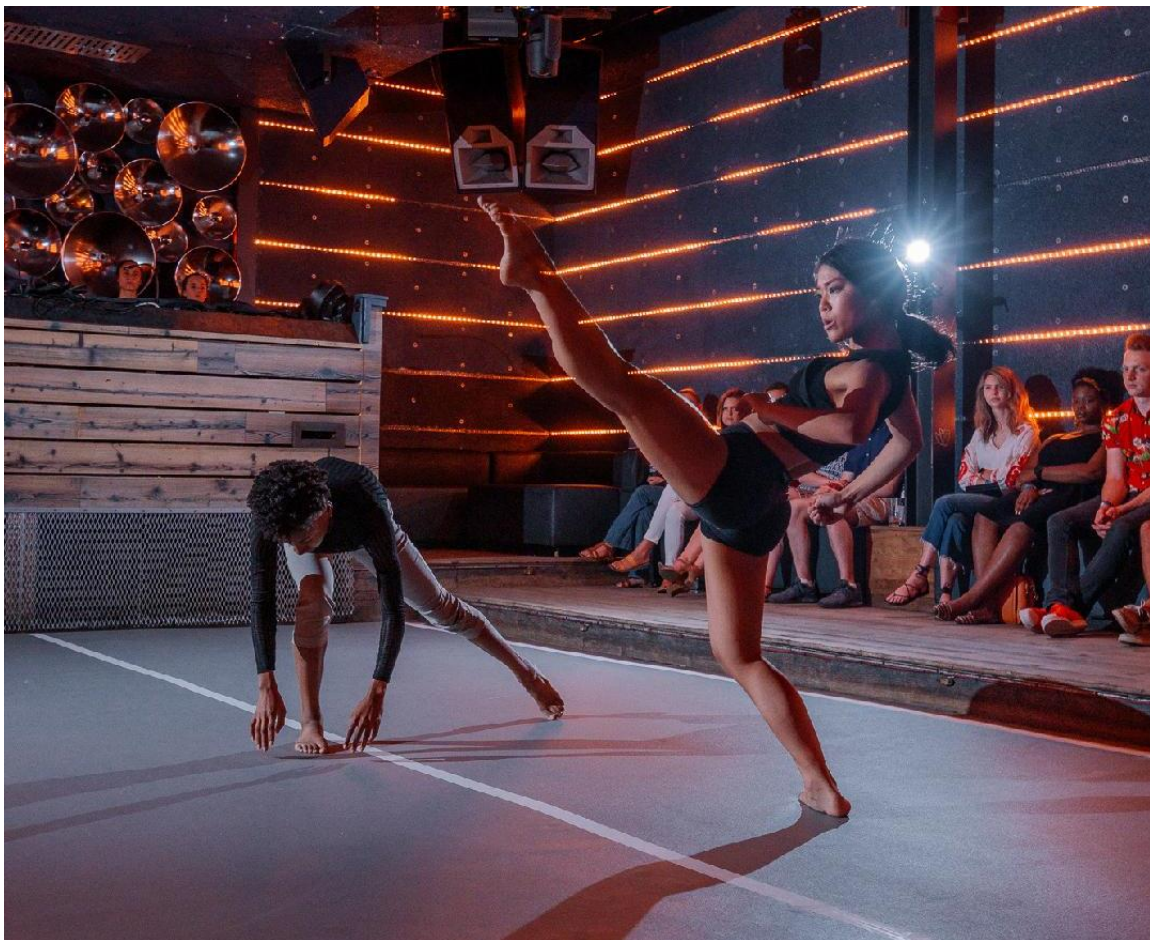


*Gallery*, S.J. Ewing's evening of dances, feels like performance in its rawest, original form – imaginative, personal, and, in Source Theater's black box, just a tiny bit confrontational. The title piece of S.J. Ewing & Dancers' *Gallery*, presented October 4-6, takes on the difficult task of depicting multiple facets of the female experience. Where most performance art defaults to the big themes, *Gallery* also considers the more abstract issues of strength, vulnerability, grace, and intensity. Australian-born Sarah J. Ewing is known for her work at the intersection of dance and technology, most recently with *Analog: Install* at the REACH Opening Festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts last month.

*Gallery* showcased two pieces primarily choreographed by Ewing. *From Where She Started*, featuring guest dancers from Bethesda's CityDance Conservatory, emphasized contrasts – group formations against solos, striking colors against neutral tones, and bright lights against

darkness. By creating dynamic lines with their bodies, the dancers did not tell the audience how to follow their movements; they guided the audience to where the movement would next go, creating an anticipatory energy throughout the performance.

This anticipatory energy made for a seamless transition to the title piece, *Gallery*, featuring six female-identifying dancers. Darker in tone and stage design than *From Where She Started*, *Gallery* highlighted connection among the dancers, via hand gestures that framed transfers of energy from one dancer to the next, and then from a pair of dancers to one. The motif could have been repetitive, but in an otherwise energetic performance, the performers displayed a grounding and calming presence. The recurring motif of these movements brought to mind not just the endless cycle of reproduction, but the passing of humanity from one woman to the next.



Unique among depictions of the female experience, *Gallery* juxtaposed portrayals of strength and vulnerability, and gave equal footing to the expression of female anger and pain. The dancers' depiction of these emotions could be highly frenetic or completely stationary – as when one dancer collapses into another dancer's arms, spent from the intensity of the choreography.

It was a joy to watch extremely able and graceful female dancers engage in the kind of contemporary *pas de deux* that would have ordinarily involved a heteronormative partnership. Watching pairs of dancers mirror each other, entangle with each other, and lift each other with enormous strength was intriguing and unexpected.

Each dancer also held her own with extended solos that pushed each to the edge, physically and artistically. In one solo, a dancer sat on the ground in a butterfly stretch, then drew herself up straight into a standing position exhibiting her indomitable core strength. The judicious presentation of these challenges emphasized their importance. The difficulty involved seemed to make them as much a journey for the dancers as a presentation to the audience. Unlike in classical ballet, where the emphasis is on downplaying the strength involved for female dancers, the contemporary dancers in *Gallery* celebrated and embraced the power involved in particularly challenging movements.

Prior to the performance, the audience was told that those in the first row were in the “splash zone,” and that the dancers would come very close during the performance. This turned out to be true, but it was neither about asking for permission, nor forgiveness. It was a warning that *Gallery* was not about shrinking, retreating, or conforming to the expected experience of being a woman. The performers in *Gallery* proudly and unapologetically took up space and it felt as if the performance demanded engagement with the audience.

Photos: David Nguyen, courtesy S.J. Ewing