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NEW DEFINITIONS

SFDanceworks performs only a short run once a year, but it fills a big void in San Francisco. Unlike Chicago or New York, we in the Bay Area have no Hubbard Street, no Gibney Company or Cedar Lake (RIP) to offer works by Ohad Naharin or Alejandro Cerrudo or other internationalist contemporary dance makers. When it comes to avant-gardism, our local behemoth, San Francisco Ballet, serves only an occasional dash of what you might call the Nederlands Dans Theater or NDT-adjacent aesthetic. (Though this is poised to change next year, with a commission from Azure Barton on SF Ballet's horizon.) Enter SFDanceworks. Founded in 2016 by former SF Ballet soloist James Sofranko, a Juilliard grad, the company is driven by its dancers' hunger for exploration. And that hunger was evident throughout the company's sixth summer season.

Performace

SFDanceworks, Season Six

Place

ODC Theater, San Francisco, June 30,
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Words

Rachel Howard



Benjamin Freemantle and Kick Korkos in "What's Left Unsaid" by Alexander Anderson. Photograph by Valentina Reneff-Olson.

What focused, vulnerable dancing! And how ideal to see it up close at the black box ODC Theater. Former San Francisco Ballet principal Benjamin Freemantle was back in town with his surreal combination of muscularity and tenderness, but Nick Korkos equally captivated in Alexander Anderson's new duet "What's Left Unsaid," so natural with his fretting hands (never mind the sculptural precision of the couple's complicated spoonings and nuzzlings). Lani Yamanaka, a former member of the Akram Khan Company, is clearly practiced in intense self-possession. But Emily Hansel, who performs with smaller local troupes, matched Yamanaka's visceral abandon in "Before You Land," by the rising Spanish choreographer Alba Castillo. What I mean to say is that dancers with fancy resumes and recent graduates of training programs alike made for one cohesive, bonded company in this program.

SFDanceworks' mission is "to present the past, present, and future of world class contemporary dance." Dana Genshaft, who became artistic director last season, works with that "past, present, and future" bit smartly. Last year's program launched with a rare Martha Graham solo. This year's offered three world premieres, a US premiere, and a gorgeous (and well known on the East Coast but never seen in California) Pam Tanowitz quartet. But the lynchpin, to me, was two excerpts from José Limón's "Danzas Mexicanas."



MJ Edwards in Jose Limón's "Danzas Mexicanas." Photograph by Valentina Reneff-Olson

MJ Edwards, a former student of Genshaft's at the San Francisco Ballet School and now a member of the Limón troupe, flew out from New York to offer "Indio" and "Peon" from the original suite of five character sketches. What looked so refreshingly simple on stage brings with it a complex context: Limón created these solos early in his dancing life, at Mills College, just across the Bay from San Francisco, each solo representing a figure from Mexican society in a reclamation of his Mexican-born heritage. The music by Lionel Nowak was played live, adding to the freshness.

In "Indio," Edwards circled the stage in ecstatic freedom, then punched a hand to the earth as he balanced on one knee. In "Peon," more serious, he removed a red sash and worked the land, and

pulled up into a spectacular feat of core strength and balance. (The choreography is “reimagined” by Limón artistic director Dante Puleio, former dancer Sarah Stackhouse, and répétiteur Risa Steinberg based on films and Limón’s notes, but it convinces me.) Edwards etched the torque of every gesture with wonderful clarity. Fine-boned and small but sculpted and broad-chested, Edwards uses they/them pronouns. How encouraging to see an early solo by Limón, who felt the need to claim a place for masculinity in dance, performed with gender-transcending dignity by a dancer who breaks down the binary. We *are* in different times.



Pam Tanowitz’s “Gustave le Gray No. 1” with pianist Danny Sullivan. Photograph by Valentina Reneff-Olson

True, it’s less than educational (though definitely Google-search inducing) to see these early solos with only minimal program notes. On the other hand, encountering the Limón mid-program, you didn’t experience it as a museum piece, and you could feel what is still contemporary about its ethos: the combination of a carefully pared formalism in both music and choreography with an elevation of what we once celebrated as the human spirit. Is it strange or aesthetically haphazard to sense a connection between the Limón and Tanowitz’s “Gustave Le Gray, No. 1,” as beautifully danced by Freemantle, Korkos, Stella Jacobs, and Brooke Corrales? Tanowitz is a cool deconstructor of ballet vocabulary, slicing asymmetrical arms above big battement tendus that make the stunning red costumes by Reid + Harriet cleverly drape and ripple. Yet there’s a community atmosphere and a value of unpretentiousness among the dancers as they circle and listen to the pianist (in this case, Danny Sullivan, a faculty pianist for the SF Ballet School) play Caroline Shaw’s score, and later push the piano across the stage while he continues to play, helpfully offering him a new bench.

Among the world premieres, the greenest work actually excited me the most. Laura O’Malley, a former LINES Ballet star, has made less than a dozen dances and still squarely qualifies as “emerging.” For “The Tone Inside,” she commissioned new music, a lightly electronic and piano work by Alton Allen, but even bolder was her theatrical scheme. Yamanaka danced furtively in a black wrap before approaching the piano, whereupon the fabric billowed from the instrument, manipulated by dancers underneath who lifted the now-exposed Yamanaka from behind the

covering, so that she hovered against darkness. You've got to love a simple prop cleverly used, and O'Malley kept working with it, eventually exposing the whole cast of five. Even better was the section when they danced fabric-free, twitching and glitching in positions that looked almost primordial. I did not quite follow the arc of the allegory when Yamanaka returned to the piano again and stared into its open workings—I suppose she was looking at her true tones inside—but O'Malley is a choreographer to keep watching.



Isaac Bates-Vineuzga and Lani Yamanaka in "The Tone Inside" by Laura O'Malley. Photograph by Valentina Reneff-Olson

The premieres by more established choreographers left me with mixed feelings. The music by Jerome Begin for Anderson's "What's Left Unsaid" (the duet for Freemantle and Korkos) felt a touch too sentimental to my ear, but the shifting dynamics of the partnering—one dancer the primary lifter, then the other—produced some astonishingly lovely moments. Lauren Starobin's translucent, skin-like costumes suited it to perfection.

The program ended with Bryan Arias's premiere, "The Broken Glass," a meditation on the life of his Puerto Rican father. The soundtrack used live recordings of English crossover Puerto Rican singer/guitarist Jose Feliciano, and the ensemble choreography—floor work that suggested being tossed about, melting pauses that telegraphed psychological dissonance—implied, understandably, an uneasy relationship between the US territory and American patriotism. But the choreography had little structure or contrast and dragged on.

Given Arias's portfolio of commissions for Nederlands Dans Theater, the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and the Bolshoi, he must have seemed a safer bet than O'Malley, but every commission is a risk. This is one aspect of SFDanceworks that I love, seeing the works of emerging voices next to higher-profile artists, with a dancers-among-dancers sense of equality. I hope the company keeps growing under Genshaft's loving leadership. And I hope it always keeps its communal, dancer-driven feeling.