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RACHEL HOWARD • REVIEWS

Take a Seat

SFDanceworks presents season five



Dores André in "Deep Song" by Martha Graham. Photograph Dana Genshaft

A healthy-sized crowd swarmed ODC Theater's lobby for SFDanceworks' closing matinee in the Mission District, and word from the box office was that attendance the previous nights had been robust. This was happy news for San Francisco dance fans who appreciate a Nederlands Dans Theater-esque aesthetic: sleek, spine-roiling movement, virtuosic in balletic ways yet weighted, often set to contemporary music with a tinge of the ominous and intellectual.

No other repertory company in the Bay Area, including San Francisco Ballet, offers much of this kind of rep—no Crystal Pite or Alejandro

Performance
Performance:
SFDanceworks: Season
Five

Place
Place: ODC Theater, San
Francisco, June 10, 2022

Words
Words: Rachel Howard

Cerrudo, no Jiří Kylián and only an occasional bit of Hans Van Manen. This may change as SF Ballet's new artistic director Tamara Rojo takes charge this year, but SFDanceworks would still fill other important voids. As interim artistic director Dana Genshaft announced before Sunday's show, SFDanceworks began in 2014 with a mission to "present the past, present, and future of world-class contemporary dance." The company accomplished this with a smart, stimulating, and substantive program that also provided a chance for a few early-career choreographic forays.

The brilliance here was to anchor the program with a rarity by Martha Graham—you can't trace any contemporary dance lineage back much further than that. "Deep Song," from 1937, was lost for many decades—the Graham company literally lost the score by Henry Cowell, then found it behind an office desk in 2003. (The dance had already been reconstructed from Graham's memory, without the original score, in 1988.) I suppose Graham specialists might quibble over whether the choreography is her top-drawer work, but the solo was freshly compelling Sunday as danced by Dores Andre, who sat on a long white bench, then spread her legs startlingly wide and pointed her feet with the tense eloquence of claws.



Dores André in "Deep Song" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Dana Genshaft

The flaring of her black-and-white dress brought to mind the cartoonish-yet-graphic images of Picasso's *Guernica*, and this was not an incidental effect. Like *Guernica*, "Deep Song" was created in response to the Spanish Civil War, with Cowell's chilling music evoking the flamenco style of *cante jondo*, the most serious variety of flamenco singing. Perhaps there is the smallest suggestion of flamenco influence in the way the solo woman clasps her hands defiantly overhead before crawling beneath the bench (which then poignantly suggests a coffin) and turning it perpendicular to the floor, skittering with a tense back up against the plank to rotate it 360 degrees. Andre, a well-established principal at SF Ballet, is often cast there

in pretty tutu roles, but feminist intensity is her superpower. Moving from the strength of a deep Graham contraction, she had never seemed more herself. Due credit to regisseur Miki Orihara.



From left: Brooke Corrales and Amelia Shultz in “Mutual Comfort” by Edward Clug. Photograph by Lindsay Clipner

It amazed me (though perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised) to see how the newer works on the program seemed to radiate naturally from the Graham. Most impressive among them was the West Coast premiere of “mutual comfort” by Edward Clug, the director of Maribor Ballet in Slovenia, and a choreographer with work in the repertory of—no surprise—Nederlands Dans Theater. Working with a coolly minimalist score by Slovenian composer Milko Lazar, Clug created a world where four creaturely humans jut their chins at one another to the beat, as though in thrall to sheer instinct. They tip-toe like insects, and combine in beetle-like ways with a peculiar, intensifying logic in their geometries. The whole cast was mesmerizing, and mesmerizingly diverse, ranging from tiny Brooke Corrales’s spitfire speed to tall Ben Simoens’s aura of mystery. Amelia Shultz, one of the younger dancers on this season’s 13-member roster, was especially enthralling in her liquidity and focus.



Babatunji Johnson, center, in "Just Above the Surface" by Yin Yue. Photograph by Lindsay Clipner

2020's "Just Above the Surface" from New York-based Yin Yue was also a work of impressive choreographic solidity, and made an invigorating closer with its fiercely rhythmic alterations of partnering and unison work for an ensemble of nine. But the more intriguing news here was in the new works by far greener choreographers.



From left: Amelia Shultz, Matt Wenckowski and Lani Yamanaka in "Within Where" by Laura O'Malley.
Photograph by Lindsay Clipner

Laura O'Malley's work is really promising. A former standout dancer with Alonzo King LINES Ballet, she worked with lighting designer Jim French to create a simple but wonderfully clever effect in her new quartet, "Within Where." Along a stark line between shadow and darkness, dancers seemed to float through the air carried by invisible hands—the black-gloved hands of Erik Debono, as it turned out, obscured in the dimness. (Excellent costumes by Lauren Strongin.) This had terrific potential as Debono moved from partnering Shultz and then Lani Yamanaka, the dividing line between dark and light shifting from diagonal to horizontal to perpendicular. But then this whole idea was abandoned for the second half of the dance. The commissioned score by Kristina Dutton also felt less than fresh in passages.



Ben Simoens and Brooke Corrales in "Began Again" by Babatunji Johnson. Photograph by Lindsay Clipner

Babatunji Johnson, another LINES Ballet star (he is still actively performing with the company) unveiled his first-ever dance work, "Began Again." Clothing the four dancers in baggy pants and launching with floorwork that seemed to draw on capoeira and breakdancing, this was a short but auspicious creative debut.

Dani Rowe, meanwhile, is not really a fledgling choreographer, having moved on from experiments in Nederlands Dans Theater's dancer/choreographer lab to multiple commissions from San Francisco Ballet, including a slot on their Next@90 festival this coming spring. But the recent works I've seen by Rowe fall short of the full potential in her 2017 SF Danceworks creation, a powerful duet called "For Pixie." Her new SF Danceworks duet on this program, "Little Scratch," used a dramatic, Baroque-tinged vocal score by contemporary composer Joby Talbot, and featured breakneck partnering and quirky gestures for Katerina Beckman and Simoens, but felt curiously pointless, though a program note intimated it was about "inner

chatter and the feedback loop of memory.” Too loopy for me late on a Sunday matinee, evidently.



Katerina Beckman and Ben Simoens in "Little Scratch" by Dani Rowe. Photograph by Lindsay Clipner

Nonetheless, I'm looking forward to seeing what Rowe does for SF Ballet's Next@90 festival. And though that festival might suggest new repertory directions for our city's big company, I sure hope the small but true-to-mission "world-class" SFDanceworks will continue. The group seems to be dancer-driven, with a choreographic incubator, open rehearsals, and masterclasses on things like Graham technique leading up to this season. Founder James Sofranko has moved on to lead Grand Rapids Ballet. Could Genshaft be persuaded to take the SFDanceworks helm permanently? Come on, dancers, please talk her into it.