

Fusionworks Dance Company

By Bill Gale

Fusionworks Dance Company
Courthouse Center for the
Performing Arts
Kingston, RI
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Reviewed by Bill Gale

Photo by Laurie Gaddis. Deb Meunier's Vesperae.



Rhode Island's Fusionworks may be an all-female company, but the most vibrant work in their spring concert was originally created for men.

Robert Battle's *The Hunt* is a pulse-quickenning, iron-hard piece that says life can be nasty, brutal, and short. Right away, two dancers throw their arms into the air and fall back as if shot. Others leapfrog over each other in a never-ending need to be numero uno, and to hell with other people. Aggression remains the theme as the movers fall and fall and fall again. Drums pound, and the pace does not relax in this jagged place awash in unrelieved tension. Fight or flee is the order of the day.

Their eyes forever fierce, the dancers (Amanda DelPrete, Shauna Edson, Melody Gamba, and Karen Swaitocha) assure us that women can be as intense and bellicose as men any day. *The Hunt* also shows that this 22-year-old company, which has outlasted all competitors in Rhode Island, is dancing better than ever (wider range, more technical ability, real dedication, strong partnering) under the leadership of founder Deb Meunier.

The five other dances on the program ranged from powerful to mundane. The evening opened with *Yoked*, by company member Karen Swiatocha, a piece filled with swooning dancers rocking back and forth and clutching their heads. Too many repetitions of collapse and support made for a generic feel. The second work, Andrea Woods' *Morning Song*, was all Caribbean colors—reds, oranges, yellows. Dancers patted bellies, shifted weight, and generally feigned predictable joy to little effect.

Meunier's pieces were more engaging, such as her autobiographical *The Distant Aidenn*, from 1986, inspired by the work of Edgar Allan Poe. She fleshed out the work in 2008, but the theme remains the same: a woman despondent. The small, intuitive Stephanie Stanford Shaw began as a lost-looking figure, never sure, never looking ahead. A second dancer, Anne Gehman, performed balletic leaps and turns that kept returning to the idea of a woman living in an internal wilderness. Amy Bardenhagen drew the piece to a close with slower movement, small gesture, a lack of life. It was like watching a therapy session sink deeper and deeper into despondency.

Meunier's more peaceful side surfaced in her 2008 *Double Stop: Longshore Drift*. Wearing blue and foam-white dresses, the dancers move as if hypnotized, embodying the kind of ocean current referred to in the title, a drift that runs parallel to the shore. *Double Stop* was pleasantly sentimental, a rumination on something as simple and profound as sitting by the sea.

Vesperae, also by Meunier and set to choral music by Mozart, closed the program. The piece was leap-heavy, nothing new, and followed the music almost too simplistically. But the Fusionworks dancers gave it their all. They looked like they were truly enjoying themselves, transmitting through their bodies and their faces a love of dancing for its own sake.