

Between SHADOW and light

Fusionworks Fall concerts explore emotional depths

By Doug Norris
Features Editor

An edgy, energetic exploration of metaphor through movement highlights the Fusionworks Dance Company's fall concert series program. Comprising a series of four works by the main company and one piece by Fusionworks II, the concerts include the Rhode Island premiere of internationally acclaimed choreographer Pascal Rioult's "Wien" and an original, 24-minute work titled "Finning" by company artistic director Deb Meunier.

The concerts will take place in Providence Nov. 20 and 21 at 8 p.m. at Rhode Island College's Sapinsley Hall. Collectively the program is darker in tone than in previous years – with one prominent exception, the reprise of the infectious, colorful and life-affirming "Buenos Dias." But Fusionworks fans will recognize the company's trademark emphasis on provoking emotion and illuminating ideas through innovative physical movement.

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COURTESY: ALISON SWIATOCHA

During a Halloween afternoon rehearsal at the company's East Greenwich studio, the dancers moved through a program that features at least three pieces that test the limits of exertion.

Fusionworks II will open the concert with "Bushasche Etude" (2003), choreographed by Pearl Primus and staged by Stephanie Stanford Shaw, assistant director of the company. Featuring dancers Dana Albanese, Cassidy Dekreon, Hillary Hecht, Andrea Martin, Shannon Norquist, Alyson Reigstad, Gianna Rodriguez, Alysia Sjoberg and Allison Smith, the piece is performed to traditional music arranged by William Middleton.

The main company will follow with "Freedom in the Box," a work choreographed by Stanford Shaw last year, featuring dancers Amy Bardenhagen, Amanda DelPrete, Shauna Edson, Sheramy Keegan-Turcotte, Karen Swiatocha and Mallory Walker. Movement is accompanied by music composed by Rhode Island musicians Ron Schmitt and Emily Smith and performed by Ron Schmitt Synergy.

"Basically it's the idea of 'be careful what you wish for,'" explained Stanford Shaw, prior to rehearsal. "Everybody

point and feels the same way, after working so hard to achieve something, putting all of yourself into it, sacrificing and driving yourself, and when it finally comes you feel that there's something missing. So at that point you're left with having to decide what you're going to do about that, whether you're going to change it, or accept it, or somehow figure out why you wanted it so badly in the first place and how to get back to that feeling."

The ambiguity of the dance is part of its strength. The piece begins with a solo dancer with her back to the audience while piano music plays. Gradually, other dancers come and go and the music eventually transitions from the single instrument to a rhythmic sound with bass, percussion and voice. Motifs include repeated attempts to round out shapes and bodies falling and lifted in the cycle of movements. The dancers, dressed in capri-length khakis and pedestrian shirts, suggest the universal, everyday quality of the theme, which has an underlying melancholia.

Next up is "Wien" (which means "Vienna"), originally choreographed by Rioult for three men and three women in 1995. Not only is this the first time the dance has been

but Meunier requested (and received) permission from Rioult to stage it with six female dancers, with only minor alterations in the original choreography.

Set in the 1940s to the music of Maurice Ravel, the piece is a stirring, disturbing work that deconstructs the Viennese waltz, transforming it from a symbol of gentility to a false façade, hiding a broken civilization and the ugly nature of humanity. Under Rioult's dark vision, it is nothing less than a waltz into Hell, as the repeated structured circling motions of the dance give way to staggering stutter-steps, with bodies colliding and falling, and gestures that include goosesteps and "Hell Hitler" salutes.

Movement is at times intentionally mechanical, slumping and uniform, or angular and violent. Bodies fall and are left behind. The waltz explodes into something sinister and savage, decadent and dispiriting. Costumed in, according to Meunier, "the archetypes of women of that time – Rosie the Riveter; the everyday girl in the flower dress; the woman wearing a string of pearls," the dancers paint a portrait of the times that also serves as a timeless lesson.

Anastasia Soroczynski

includes costume design by Russ Vogler and lighting design by David Finley. Dancers are Bardenhagen, DelPrete, Edson (who also created the costumes), Stanford Shaw, Swiatocha and Walker.

"Buenos Dias," a work of vibrant color and sheer exuberance originally choreographed by Meunier to the music of Carlos Santana in 2002, closes out the first act. It's an infectious, joyous crowd-pleaser, filled with Afro-Caribbean rhythms and sensual movement danced by the main company plus Lauren Sowa.

One work comprises the entire second act. "Finning" is a piece in three movements that originated when Meunier learned about the widespread practice of hacking off shark's fins and throwing the live bodies back into the water to starve, drown or be eaten by other fish.

"My family doctor and his wife scuba dive," Meunier said. "They told me about this practice of finning, and at the same time I had been wanting to choreograph something to the music of Takashi Yoshimatsu. He's a classical composer who mixes symphonic orchestra, jazz saxophone soloists and percussion, and his music is very programmatic. So the two

ined this as a piece that could be done in three movements."

The sections are titled "Entrapment," "Grief" (Without a witness we simply disappear) and "Play (In a perfect world without pain)." Performed by the six dancers who make up the main company, with costumes designed and created by Beth Bentley, the dance makes a powerful moral statement through evocative and empathetic movement.

"I just kept wondering how can we be so cruel and so elitist to so completely disregard the suffering of another species," Meunier said. "So it's a piece really of strong metaphor and abstraction. We walk the line of metaphor in the body of the human and the piscine."

The first sequence, "Entrapment," offers an array of visual surprises. Five of the dancers move fluidly together, dressed in tropical lime green costumes with iridescent sparkles on their arms, legs and shoes, conveying through gesture and synchronicity the beauty of movement in the aquatic world. It's a place and a dance of harmony and light. Eventually the dancers separate and form a ring around a column of light ("The lighting is the seventh dancer," said

Suddenly Del Prete enters "as the evil figure, the bait, the lure, the sexual seductress," costumed in coppery blues and purples and moving with lurid purpose. The other dancers sway in rhythm, attracted and compelled by the dramatic interloper. By the second movement, "Grief," the scene turns ugly and violent, represented by slashing and thrashing gestures and one particular movement, a long vertical blade-slicing motion made by Del Prete. But the dance doesn't end in the darkness of reality. Instead, it imagines an alternate reality in "Play," offering a hopeful vision of all species as part of the same dance, moving their limbs in accord rather than tearing them apart.

Admission costs \$25 for the general public or \$20 for seniors. Saturday's concert (Nov. 21) will follow the "Unwrapped" format, featuring Artistic Director Deb Meunier introducing the audience to each of the dances, explaining the choreography, costumes, music and technical information. For tickets, call the RIC box office at 456-8144 or Fusionworks at 946-0607 or log on to www.fusionworksdance.org.