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Review: Fusionworks forges a heady mix of dance styles at Courthouse

By Doug Norris/Features Editor

WEST KINGSTON - This year, for its annual spring concert series, Fusionworks Dance Company abandoned the traditional stage for the black box space of the Courthouse Center for the Arts, where it presented a dynamic medley of works from its repertoire to an appreciative South County audience. The dancers had the daunting task of breaking in the Courthouse's new dance floor and performing without wings (the windows were draped in black and dancers off-stage waited in the corners). The company brought in its own lights and lighting designer Tim Cryan, working with an assistant, moved around the room between pieces changing gels for the next dance.

The casual, informal nature of a Fusionworks concert seems to suit the company, composed of an engaging and energetic group of dancers who are devoted to its founder and artistic director, Deb Meunier. Fusionworks, with studios in East Greenwich and Lincoln, was founded in 1987. It has performed throughout the Northeast, including at Jacob's Pillow and the 92nd Street Y in New York, but made its bones in Rhode Island, building a repertoire of more than 50 dance works, half choreographed by Meunier and half by other choreographers, many of renown.

The company's first South County performances were met with enthusiastic response (all three concerts were sold-out, although horrible weather on the first night kept a few folks from getting to their seats). The eclectic program featured six performances - three in the first act by guest choreographers; three in the second choreographed by Meunier. The wide range of styles, moods and subjects were typical of Fusionworks, a company that lives by the motto, "Different is Good." For regular dance patrons and Fusionworks fans, the concert showcased the company's evolution and



Amanda DelPrete, one of the talented members of Fusionworks Dance Company, performed in a spring concert with the ensemble at the Courthouse Center for the Arts earlier this month.

maturation in technical skill and going deeper to explore feeling in the abstraction of movement. For those new to dance, it was an impressionistic, multi-sensory delight, spanning the spectrum of emotion in motion.

Fusionworks unveiled its popular "Unwrapped" format for these concerts. Meunier spoke briefly before each dance to give the audience context, sometimes referring to the lighting, the music or the origins of the piece. The concert opened with "Yoked," a work first choreographed last fall by company dancer Karen DiIuro Swiatocha, and significantly reworked into a more cohesive whole for the Courthouse shows. In it, five dancers, clad in simple, brown dresses, explore the bonds of the various relationships that make us who we are individually. Moving to the music of "Mining for Gold" by the Cowboy Junkies and "Tropical Goldfish Revival" by Barry Black, the women repeat several dance signatures, fleshed out as circular forms and lines that emphasize the work's themes of solidarity and universality.

The two most exciting performances of the evening concluded the first act. "Morning Song," choreographed by Andrea Woods, and "The Hunt," choreographed by Robert Battle, are extended dances - highly physical, requiring tremendous stamina from the dancers who performed in them (especially those who doubled up and danced in both). While both rely upon rhythm and percussive movement, they deviate in tone and intent.

"Morning Song" is a celebration of life - part-awakening and joyous homage to communal being. The dancers are clad in colorful folk dresses designed by Beth Bentley. The syncopated music of Phillip Hamilton provides the infectious backdrop for a melding of dance styles based on Afro-Caribbean rhythms and the highly-stylized jerking, slithering, bounding movements developed by Woods and more closely associated with cultures living intimately with nature. The jarring juxtaposition of sexy, sultry, hip-swaying, bongo-beating, hand-clapping motion with more primal, animalistic and angular gestures, including a recurring motif of face washes, provides constant visual surprise as the dance builds to a frenetic revelry.

Equally energetic but with an entirely different drive and vibe is "The Hunt," Battle's abstraction on the perils of living in hunt-or-be-hunted New York City. A loud, aggressive, tribal dance, with performers clad in black, the piece develops over three movements, starting with music that alludes to the kind of garbage-can percussion you might associate with "Stomp," except here the banging has a more malevolent feel. A dance of territory and survival, possession and rage, dominance and struggle, "The Hunt" is a performance allegory in which life is a fight, win or die. An elemental conflict of chaos and order is conveyed in several ways through the movement and the lighting, which alternates between shadows and the harsh glare of city lights. (Presented here, the lights often appear as the sudden flare of headlights, catching figures unaware.) Dancers scream, stalk, attack and drag their kills across the ground in a series of sequences that cycle back, suggesting an eternity of violence and exhaustion.

Whereas the first act focused primarily (though not exclusively) on external situations and themes, the three tone poems comprising act two - influenced, as they are, by Meunier's own feelings and experiences - moved inward to connect with the personal and the profound. The second act even had its own kind of symmetry, beginning with "Doublestop: Longshore Drift" and ending with "Vesperae."

The former, danced to the music of Pat Metheny, evokes awe, wonder and reverie as conveyed by the natural movements of the ocean - splashes and sprays of foam, crashing and curling waves, drifting dunes and seaweed moving along the edge of the shore. The dancers, wearing gorgeous blue-and-white costumes with chiffon accents designed by Bentley and company dancer Shauna Edson, parallel the music in the cascades, lulls and crescendos of oceanic activity. The title of the piece refers to a geological process along the shore that creates simultaneous movement in opposing directions.

The same mystery plays out in "Vesperae," a piece performed to three movements of an evening vespers composition by Mozart and inspired by the rituals and iconography of Meunier's French-Canadian Catholic upbringing.

ing. Once again, dancers reveal a range of emotions in their movements, expressing joy, somber concern and exultation in dynamic gestures and poses.

The dances are two sides of the same coin, discovering reverence and magic in nature and religious symbolism. "The Distant Aidenn," the fifth piece on the program, represents another departure from the rest. This work is an evolved version of three solos that Meunier had choreographed years ago, when she was going through a sorrowful time in her life. Also inspired by poems by Frost and Poe, the dance features three performers, clad in costumes that evoke the dreamy palette of Monet's "Water Lilies." The three figures, all representing aspects of Meunier, are unique in some ways and entwined in others. A final, evocative image shows one of the dancers in the distant center of the stage with her back to the audience, reaching out with her bare arms as the other two dancers approach from either hand, grabbing hold.

This poignant moment, synthesizing the duality of reflection and feeling that is as characteristic of Fusionworks dance as rough-and-tumble movement, served as a memorable signature for another illuminating evening by this talented and innovative dance company.

Note: Participating dancers included Amy Bardenhagen, Amy Marie Burns, Amanda DelPrete, Anne Gehman, Shauna Edson, Melody Gamba, Stephanie Stanford Shaw and Karen DiIuro Swiatocha. Fusionworks Dance Company presented its spring contemporary dance series earlier this month at the Courthouse Center for the Arts, giving three performances in two days.