

La Mama Moves!

'New Virtuosity': Downtown Puts on its Dancing Shoes!

by Cecly Placenti

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La Mama Experimental Theatre Club has been the melting pot for creative risk taking and exploration for the past 45 years. Add to the pot the pizzazz of dance, and you have the La Mama Moves! Festival, bringing 50 companies and choreographers celebrating the breadth, depth, wit and originality of the downtown dance scene in all its eclectic glory! The choreographers that make up the "New Virtuosity" program give their artistic mentors a grateful nod while taking their work in new exciting directions.

Patrick Corbin, long-time Paul Taylor principal, and his CorbinDances presented the world premiere of "Reach," in which Corbin returns to the stage with his eight dancers in a work set to Philip Glass's "String Quartet #5." While a long time lover of Taylor's work and fan of Patrick's mastery of it, I was delighted to see him working in a style not reminiscent of Taylor at all.

"Reach" has a driving physical power and raw edge. It built in intensity and scope from slow walking and pausing entrances, like the dancers were telling each other secrets, to explosive movement phrases that charged on and on, mirroring the music. As a reference for the eye, suddenly an arm or two would shoot up amidst the organized chaos, or the dancers would suddenly pick up one then another as they traveled across the space, building the kinetic architecture of the piece as they flew along. While it is often difficult for seasoned performers steeped in a certain style to break out of it, Corbin is proving that he has his very own voice to share.

The two pieces presented by Nicholas Andre Dance Theatre were refined and elegant. True "dancers dances," each piece was full of pleasing contrasts and sophisticated phrasing. "Etched," a quartet performed by strong, dynamic women (most notably Anna Hillengas with her vivacity and electrified presence), and "Last Man Standing," a quartet

for equally strong and versatile men, suggest a very zen-like quality to Nick Seligson-Ross's work.

Even when the movement was strong and percussive, there was a feeling of the dancers riding along on top of it, accomplished by the inherent contrasts in the choreography. Seligson-Ross provides a softness punctuated by angles, sweeping breathy moments cut with jagged edges. These qualities offer a pleasing way of phrasing the music, by Z. Keating and C. Mansell respectively, and extremely expansive and sculptural dances. Seligson-Ross is a creator who seems to ride the wave of his creations, finding out their mysteries as he moves along, rather than using movement to solve a certain problem.

The kinetic poetry of Dusan Tynek Dance Theatre draws on an athletic lyricism and smart design. "Fleur-de-lis," set to the stirring violin sonatas of Heinrich Ignaz von Biber, began with a gentle insistency, three couples slowly easing into the space, the men waiting with outstretched arms as the women walked, eyes closed, gently into their grasp. This slow, pedestrian imagery did not last long – Tynek's choreography gave way quickly to a surge of kinetic energy.

The force of Tynek's movement lies in its well thought out intention and clarity of shape. His phrases are strong and often call on the performers to connect in exhilarating moments of partnering, the women often supporting the men in daring lifts, as when the men pitched onto their shoulders, suspended parallel to the floor. There is much of the classical style in Tynek's work, but only enough to be refined, to serve the propulsion into the new.

In sharp contrast to the previous works in the program, Robert Battle's "Hunt" exploded on the stage with four men running, jumping, stomping, screaming and falling in a ritualistic frenzy. Costumed in long black skirts lined with red satin, they suggested dervish dancers or tribal warriors. As the quartet escalated from combative two-against-two formations to a tightly choreographed war of each against all, the punching, pounding fists and stamping feet resonated with an animal energy that could not be contained.

Battle's choreography often involves dancers dropping fiercely to their knees or throwing themselves to the floor unexpectedly and with abandon, only to quickly resurrect and keep going. Visually breathtaking, kinesthetically bold and physically exhausting, "Hunt" requires the total commitment of its performers, and these four power-houses were more than up for the challenge. Set to a fury of percussion by the Bronx Sound Machine, "Hunt" does not merely entertain. It viscerally involves the audience with its fever pitch, graceless plunges and physical dexterity.

There is definitely much going on in the downtown dance scene. As these four choreographers prove, there are new voices rising.