

The Dancing in the District Blog!



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BOWEN McCAULEY DANCE CO. at DANCE PLACE by LUELLA CHRISTOPHER

24th SEASON ENCORE PERFORMANCE
BOWEN McCAULEY DANCE CO.
DANCE PLACE
Washington, D.C.
November 17, 2019
By LUELLA CHRISTOPHER, Ph.D.

Lucy Bowen McCauley can't resist a penchant for wryness even when her subject matter is somber and poetic, as is the case with "Sneak Peak" – offered to last weekend's audiences (November 16-17) at Dance Place. Not a final title, this new work will take center stage at the Kennedy Center on March 27-28, 2020 with live music by vocalists Nikola Paskalov and Karin Paludan. German language songs by Nikola Glassal (Hunoltstein/Moericke) recall Gustav

Mahler (“Songs of a Wayfarer”) yet sound achingly modern. To wit, “My heart is homesick again . . . [but] you are so far away from me”. And, “All my dreams are so long drawn to home by this moonlit night. Pulled to you” (“Abend” and “Mondnacht”, respectively).

With Bowen McCauley, one might be tempted to venture that it’s all about the music, except that her choreography consistently pushes the boundaries of both ballet and modern dance technique, especially when the two genres are intermingled. A very modern-looking floorbound tableau – variously crouching trio with backs to the audience – transitions to the balletic leg extensions and straight angles of a female dancer (Elenaluisa Alvarez) lofted over the heads of her male companions (Aaron Bauer and Justin Metcalf-Burton).

A flick of the hand by one male dancer on the flexed foot of a second male dancer’s leg extension changes that foot to a pointed one. Simple loops by the female, then weaving loops through the two male dancers, evince fluidity and grace. They are followed by simple shoulder hikes, further conveying Bowen McCauley’s subtle “bite” when it is least expected. Finally, one man’s forward rush with arms folding into the body – culminating in tightened wrists – exerts an abrupt change in the dancer’s stance. Some of the choreographer’s movements even give a petite nod to the genre of music-free mime.

More overt in its humor is Bowen McCauley’s opening work for four men and four women, “Preludes for Clarinet and Strings”, the title of music by George Gershwin. This piece also features a male dancer flicking the outstretched heel of a woman in demi-arabesque penchee (albeit in the second slow movement). In the first of the three preludes – music that is rollicking in its syncopation – the dancers lob a brief series of piquant shoulder shrugs. The eight dancers infuse the Gershwin with a flirtatious early-twentieth century feel, but the presentation ends all too soon. One caveat: basking in the choreographer’s movement flow and paean to nostalgia caused this writer to neglect the process of memorializing many of the specific technical details!

“Petit Four”, to Antonio Vivaldi’s Cello Concerti, capped the first half of the program. Ilana Goldman tweaks signature movements typical of Denishawn (Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn), Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, evolving in due course to the core of several mid-twentieth century masterpieces by the late choreographer Paul Taylor. Ensclosed in costumes of pink, rose and violet shades that are amplified by occasional headbands and torso patches, the dancers execute “Esplanade”-style hops and turning stag leaps along with “Aureole” dips and scoops, embroidering the piece with Tayloresque touches.

We also see a sideways-moving row of figures that evokes ancient Greek icons. In this writer’s view, Goldman breaks fewer boundaries of dance technique than the first two works of the evening accomplished. Yet her derivations please the eye and at times replicate Bowen McCauley’s deployment of humor, as in quirky movements of the chins and hips.

“Crossing,” a premiere by Goldman in collaboration with the dancers, commands the second half of the program. Set to music by Patrick McKinney, Logan Castro with Daniel Smith and, lastly, by Stephan Thelen, the piece is introduced by the choreographer as a depiction of the European refugee crisis. (Actually, it could be any continent.) Smart, graphic stagecraft establishes context through a starkly lit elongated rectangle that fills the space on a diagonal.

Dancers move slowly down the diagonal from upstage to the orchestra pit location. Every step forward seems to be followed by one or two steps backward, capitalizing on the prospect that the journey will prove arduous. Even the crouches of one woman are tentative. At another juncture, she pedals the air while held aloft in what might be a desperate effort at swimming through treacherous waters to reach the band of refugees’ destination. An extended duet between two females ensues.

(https://dancinginthedistrict.com/2019/11/19/24th-season-encore-performance-bowen-mccauley-dance-co-at-dance-place/img_1057/)With the second segment of “Crossing”, the music becomes percussive, pulsating rhythmically as the characters appear to be fighting through brush or perhaps a mountainous trail. They sometimes move as a group or in alternate pairings. In the final scene, the most petite as well as most featured member of the cast (Alvarez) is pulled away by another (Alison Bartels) in an obvious effort to avert harm. Other dancers in the



piece include: Alicia Curtis, Patrick Green, Eve Holmes-Varner and Dustin Kimball.

(https://dancinginthedistrict.com/2019/11/19/24th-season-encore-performance-bowen-mccauley-dance-co-at-dance-place/img_1058/)

Clearly, Goldman’s ballet is less about intricate technical moments than the creation of an overriding mood of fear, apprehension and

cautious discovery. And so, it delivers a powerful narrative among the compendium of interpretations through dance by numerous other choreographers of the ubiquitous refugee crisis.

All in all, the contributions to Bowen McCauley’s “24th Season Encore Performance” run the gamut from whimsical to cerebral, never missing a chance to fully engage her audience. My singular beef concerns the paucity of younger generation-members in the audience, at least on the second day’s performance observed by my daughter Sylvana (a former dancer with her company) and me. We have watched “our Lucy” mature and diversify over the last decade or so, marveling at her unabashed musicality and propensity for making a fresh statement about the joys and perils of contemporary existence. She eschews the manufactured, tortured moment and the appropriation of ideas advanced by other choreographers. Consequently, she is thoroughly original: “one-of-a-kind” who deserves the multi-generational audiences that participate in many of the community outreach programs mounted by the company. We delight in the affirmation that her dance-making, as well as the collaborators she taps to extend the company’s choreographic reach, are of the very highest caliber.

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