

REVIEW

Wellspring dancers create conditions for beauty

By Elizabeth Clark

Kalamazoo Gazette, Friday, May 19, 2006

The dichotomy of Cori Terry's fluidity of forms and Wellspring artistic associate Michael Miller's jumpy, jerky approach has long provided a beautiful balance to concerts presented by the local modern dance company, Wellspring/Cori Terry & Dancers. Call the troupe's latest choreographer, Rachel Miller, the curvy line between that yin and yang -- a dual citizen who's beginning to choreograph a continent all of her own.

``Recommended Habitat" is Rachel Miller's first work choreographed for the Wellspring company, although several members participated in her memorable performance-poetry-meets-modern-dance event ``Prose in Motion" at Wellspring Theatre last year.

``Recommended Habitat" is less cohesively compelling than the other pieces in Wellspring's Spring Concert of Dance, which opened Thursday, but it does touch again on the promise ``Prose" showed. Its opening and closing segments, and particularly the segments in which stacks of dancers emulated the laborious motions of sloths, were wonderful.

Terry's latest premiere, ``Pulse," also touched on animalistic themes as it examined and celebrated the intricacy of the lives of modern women, featuring music from around the world -- AKA Pygmies, Gyorgy Ligeti's flamenco-like laments, Steve Reich and Lhasa -- and moods spanning a vast emotional longitude. The connection between the female dancers -- Alexis Harris, Jennifer Hudson, Rachel Miller, Francesca Pileci-Bates and Paula Rinaldo -- was palpable and reflective of the Rilke quote with which Terry introduced the piece: ``One cannot create beauty. One can only create circumstances favorable to it."

If one can create fun, or circumstances favorable to it, it's certainly Michael Miller, whose latest work, ``The Favorite Toy Of" is exactly that. The romp prominently features an unlikely dancer -- a mischievous kickball that mercifully behaved itself through most of the puckish work. The dance touches on school yard games like keep-

REVIEW

Wellspring dancers create conditions for beauty, cont.

away and hide-and-seek in its first half and merges modern dance movement with swing in its fast-stepping close. Particularly clever is the choreography in which the dancers seem to become the inner machinations of a wind-up plaything, particularly the tumbling and synchronized movements of the two Millers.

Fans of Michael Miller's playful "Java Jive" are likely to drink in "Toy" as merrily as did a group of Boys and Girls Club members in attendance on Thursday. They gave "Toy" a hearty, whooping ovation, although they did express a collective "ew" at spying one dancer's leotard bloomers.

At least as welcome as the new works was the troupe's revisiting of the pieces that premiered at the 2005-2006 season's Fall Concert of Dance. Michael Miller's "Do Not Remove" -- sort of the modern dance equivalent of a David Lynch movie -- was all the more wonderfully perplexing and spasmodic on a second viewing, and Terry's triumph "Seeking Elsewhere" all the more moving, which is truly saying something.

Dance review

Wellspring Spring Concert of Dance -- Opened Thursday. Continues 8 tonight and Saturday night and 2 p.m. Sunday, Wellspring Theatre, 359 S. Kalamazoo Mall (Epic Center). \$20, or \$10 students, free for children 5 and younger. 387-2300.

REVIEW

Terry pays tribute to her teacher in thrilling Wellspring show

By Elizabeth Clark

Kalamazoo Gazette, Saturday, November 13, 2004

Typically ovations are gradual, like slow sprouting of crocus buds in spring. Occasionally, they're as sudden as a fire drill. Such was the case when the audience uniformly leaped to its feet at the close of Wellspring/Cori Terry & Dancers' Fall Concert of Dance debut Thursday.

The performance wound up feeling like a retrospective of Wellspring founder Terry's career and a poignant resurrection of her own teacher's most seminal work—the late Erick Hawkins' awe-inspiring “Classic Kite Tails.”

“Tails” premiered at Ann Arbor's Meadowbrook Festival in 1972 and was once performed on the Carnegie Hall stage with a young Terry performing one of the delicate, wispy female roles. It's hard to imagine the exquisitely crafted choreography was any more moving than in Thursday's premiere of Terry's own homage to her mentor.

Following intermission, Terry provided background before the performance that would comprise the second half of the program. As she explained, the resurrection wasn't from ash but from the well-preserved bones of the original program. Hawkins' notorious gray notebooks that Terry recalled lining an entire wall in his office detailed each performer's every move during each musical phrase.

Those were sent to Wellspring by the Library of Congress, which also shipped off the original sets, the now-tattered original costumes, reproduction costumes for performance and three videotapes of performances over the years. Terry recalled opening the costume box in hopes of finding her own gown inside and shared with the audience the yellowing dress that still held her initials inside.

Terry also shared a black-and-white photo of the Carnegie staging, projected to cover a wall in Wellspring's Epic Center studio, and laser-pointed to Hawkins and herself. The coupling of her touching background with the piece and the poignancy of the program itself made for an extremely compelling understanding of the dance.

Guest artist Joseph Mills likewise has a history with Hawkins as a principal dancer in Hawkins company for four years. He worked closely with him as an assistant choreographer on “Many Thanks.” While Wellspring dancer and Artistic Associate Michael Miller seemed more flexible

REVIEW

Terry pays tribute to her teacher in thrilling Wellspring show, cont.

and comfortable on his toes than Mills, Mills' commanding stature and clear comprehension of the artist's intention contributed greatly to the panache of the piece.

The male roles seemed almost like a rococo frame, their gild intended mostly to draw the eye to the kite tails themselves—the fragile, wispy swirls and arabesques of Wellspring dancers Alexis Harris, Jennifer Hudson, Rachel Miller and Paula Rinaldo. In A-line dresses slit to the thigh in four quarters that lilted around the waist mid-spin, the dancers indeed looked like kites in mid-flight or flowers in a dizzying wind.

The troupe was ably accompanied by a five-piece ensemble of Western Michigan University music students (Kimi Hamaguchi, Karen Rambert, Justin Eichler, Ellen Nehleton and David Story) performing David Diamond's "Rounds" as conducted by Bruce Uchimura.

Terry's own three-part piece "What Went Wrong," which debuted as the close of the first half of the program, also seemed a nod to Hawkins' technique, which delights in side-holds, languid phrases and loose arm movements. Perhaps working both programs simultaneously influenced the new piece, whose disparate parts correspond to the three score elements by Jocelyn Pook: "Migrations," "La Blache Traversee" and "Goya's Nightmare."

While "Wrong" and "Kite Tails" were Wellspring debuts, they weren't the only pieces that blew audiences Wellspring's way for Thursday's performance. Some said they'd been intrigued by "Doubts About [Waking,]" a Brian Jeffrey-choreographed piece performed by Michael Miller and Rachel Miller. A group of audience members said they'd seen a preview of the performance at Friday's Art Hop and "had to see it" in its entirety.

"Doubts" is probably as modern and unromantic as "Kite Tails" is old-fashioned and balletic; image if bizarre "Eraserhead" director David Lynch was schooled in dance instead of film. The piece, flawlessly worked by both dancers, seems to aim at discomfort as much as "Tails" aspires to ease.

The program was rounded out with a well-received encore performance of Terry's popular 2001 ensemble piece "Family Altar."

As Wellspring celebrates 25 years of contemporary dance, it seems the only thing missing is a few extra seats in the auditorium. Thursday's show was sold out, with a few patrons sitting on the floor and others turned away disappointed at the box office. Arriving early to ensure a seat is advised.

REVIEW

Wellspring Dancers, Blue Dahlia put on a one-of-a-kind performance

By Elizabeth Clark

Kalamazoo Gazette, Sunday, January 30, 2005

Get ready to have your nose rubbed in it.

It's like boasting about getting a Dolce and Gabbana skirt at 90 percent off and then saying: "It was the last one." Or vividly describing the experience of seeing a comet's fiery surge across the night sky, then dropping the news that it won't be visible for another 40 years.

The Blue Dahlia/Wellspring Cori Terry & Dancers collaboration "This Floating World" was exquisite—but you can't go.

By show time Friday, both that night and Saturday's shows had sold out, and hopefuls seeking tickets were sent away at the door. Those who lined tickets up ahead of time were treated to an otherworldly experience in which both dancers and the music truly seemed to float.

The title composition, "This Floating World," blended Japanese and English lyrics over delicate flute-driven rhythms. The seemingly simple dance emphasized expressive arms, as the dancers very limbs seemed to be plucked with the thick strings of the electric bass.

"Floating" was followed by Dahlia performing two songs without dance accompaniment, as the 2002 program that had comprised one half of a Wellspring concert was fleshed out with Dahlia performing several songs by themselves. "Girl in the Sack" conjured Cocteau Twins-like ambient melting of three female voices (vocalist Leslie Boughton and guests Cara Lieurance and Debra Wassenaar), while "Le Tango Dangereux" was worldly without conjuring any particular locale. The snake-charmer-like flute intro stamped its passport in Asia, while its sultry French vocals writhed over a spicy Latin rhythm – a musical Epcot.

The worldly sounds Dahlia's incorporated into its vast repertoire paired perfectly with the

REVIEW

Wellspring Dancers, Blue Dahlia put on a one-of-a-kind performance, cont.

interpretive dance of Wellspring's ever-improving corps of dancers. Paula Rinaldo in particular imbibed a grace tenfold that of the 2002 showing, both her technique and her physique perfectly honed.

"The Curse," a Michael Miller choreographed compelling dance set to Blue Dahlia's "Rue Dauphine" (in which Boughton's moaning vocals make Meg Ryan's "When Harry Met Sally" dinner table outburst seem timid), easily ranks among the best of the collaborations as the dancers pretzel and pile together to a surging erotic backbeat. It's unideal for youngsters, although a 4- or 5-year old girl seated near me seemed to enjoy it the best, and bounced cheerily to the music unaware of its implications.

The show closing "Traveling" just barely bests "Curse," with Terry's 25 years at the Wellspring helm culminating in a dance my companion called "epic" and which ranks among the most expert ensemble pieces I've ever seen the Terry troupe undertake. The uplifting and affirmation piece's highlights are in its unique carries, lifts and leaps, particularly when the female dancers execute upside down carries of the men.

The show was followed by a quick Q&A session with Blue Dahlia (Boughton guitarist Derek Menchinger, bass/guitarist Levi Strickland, and the ever awe-inspiring percussionist Carolyn Koebel) and the Wellspring troupe. Dahlia then played its Poe-inspired "Anabelle Lee" and invited the crowd to join the now street clothed Wellspring women on state to dance. A mother and her young daughter accepted, ending their spinning dervish with a deep dip. Perhaps at Wellspring's 50th anniversary season, she'll be on stage again.

REVIEW

Wellspring performance makes powerful anti-war statement

By Tom Springer

Kalamazoo Gazette, Sunday, April 11, 2004

A Marine rifleman crouches by a concrete barricade in Falujah. He sprints across a rubble-strewn street, drops a knee, fires a burst from his M-16 then pirouettes and darts into an alley to join the rest of his patrol. He's filthy, exhausted, terrified and no doubt wishing he was somewhere else.

So what could modern dance possibly have to say about that? After a hellish week in Iraq, how can the arts help us ponder hard questions about war; love, healing and possible solutions to hopeless situations? That's a tall order to fill. But Cori Terry and her Wellspring Dancers offered a thoughtful counterpoise of current glum events during Friday night's Spring Concert of Dance.

Terry's premier performance for the evening was "What Went Wrong?" which was billed as a three part anti-war statement.

The piece's opening segments, "Before Prejudice and What Could Be," depict a world of constructive harmony. There's a sense of co-creation that makes the dancers more than the sum of their parts. There are bodies suspended aloft, bodies cradled and comforted with no hint of malice. The scene is cast in the cheery light of morning, when clear minds and rested muscles make all things possible.

But the final segment "A World Fallen in on Itself," the dogs of war have been unleashed. A menacing sun bleeds red on the rear screen, like the war god mars ascendant. The music, "Goya's Nightmare" by Jocelyn Pook, sets a stage— this time alone— they seem painfully isolated, as if wounded in body and spirit. And maybe I've been watching too much CNN, but even their sand colored tights vaguely resemble desert camouflage fatigues.

The piece ends with a coming together of sorts, but the dancers' shared purpose has been lost— another causality of the senseless strife that tore them apart.

REVIEW

Wellspring performance makes powerful anti-war statement, cont.

Yet interestingly enough the most hopeful performance of the night was a repeat of “Lilt.” This classic Wellspring number made its debut in the relative innocence of 2000, when all we had to worry about was Y2K. What “lilt” does so guilelessly is capture the joyful possibilities of cross-cultural creativity and cooperation.

”Lilt” is half Indian Ashram, half Memphis blues joint. Two soulful acoustic guitar tunes by Taj Mahal- “Tunkaranke” and “Ol’ Georgie Buck”- come together perfectly to unify the whole. The lighting and Elaine Kauffman’s costumes are stunning. It’s all peach and saffron, with dancers wearing batik-print pajama pants and vest that resemble something from an “I Dream of Jeannie” rerun. And the choreography’s no less beautiful: the dancers are a human kaleidoscope that forms and dissolves into geometric patterns and constellations.

All the while, there's this gravelly background voice singing about “Ol’ Georgie Buck and his cornbread” or something. Like a sushi taco, this cross-cultural hybrid doesn’t sound like it should work. But it does– and in a weirdly upbeat way.

So East meets West and the audience discovers that a common thread really does run from the Mississippi Delta to the sun-splashed minarets of the Mideast. It’s no wonder everyone hooted and hollered so loud afterwards. When modern dancers can lead us to such discoveries, then we owe them much more than the price of admission.