DANCE REVIEW

Jan Van Dyke and John Gamble Choreograph the Evening

By Brandon C. Jones

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The beloved Jan Van Dyke Dance Group has been thrilling local audiences for years with its heightened ability to provide artistic commentary for social and emotional components of life. The recent performance of choreography at UNCG, true to form, was a lovely evening of profound dancing. Three of the four selections were works presented by Jan Van Dyke, with one creation of Professor John Gamble.

The first selection of the evening, A Sense of Order (1990), is sure to be a favorite of audience members familiar with the company’s work over the years. Choreographed to the instrumentation of local musician Frank Vulpi, three dancers explore the varying dynamics of concepts such as form, structure, and rhythm. Vulpi’s steady, vaguely tribal percussion beat reinforces the element of control, especially when coupled with the movements comprised of sharp staccato bursts and mechanical formations. Dancers Virginia Freeman Dupont,* Laura McDuffee, and Kelly Swindell – dressed in black, with colorful adornment along the pockets and collars of their costumes – navigated the piece with effortless comfort.

Lament, which originally debuted in 1984, chronicles the human experience of desperation and frustration. Staged to the haunting music of the German artists Tangerine Dream, the dance is a duet which swirls from despondent floor work to sailing leaps and arabesques. Seasoned dancers Kelly Swindell and guest artist E.E. Balcos conveyed a tortured gentleness to one another indicative of how one approaches and relates to hurting and being hurt. Balcos is currently the Associate Professor of Dance at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he teaches modern technique, choreography, and improvisation. The level of connection and emotion both dancers articulated with their bodies was truly captivating to watch.

Jan Van Dyke’s final offering of the evening was 1990’s Slow Retreat from Center. This dark industrial piece illuminates the workings of oppression and aggression in community. The five dancers – Virginia Freeman Duport, Laura McDuffee, Anne Morris, Nicole Ramsey, and Christine Bowen Stevens – wore tattered black and red clothing with headscarves as they frequented circular formations that mimicked the monotony of factory assembly lines. Peter Gabriel’s driving music effectively underscored the collective agony present in the world of the dance.

The closing selection, John Gamble’s premiere piece Sub-Text, unfortunately seemed to get lost in its attempt to be artistically abstract. The roughly 20 minute piece consists of 16 dancers entering and exiting the stage, apparently at random with very little structure or perceivable direction. It appears that each dancer may embody a character with relative consistency, but no arching story or motif is clearly evident. Most of the movements are free form, set to sounds referred to as a “cartoon collage.” Designed by Gamble, the sounds consist of animated explosions, buzzing, animal noises, flatulence, and sloshing. There are a few short lived moments of depth in the piece where two or three dancers connect and express something honest, such as desire and rejection, yet for the most part, due to the lack of focus from the dancers and correlation with the discombobulating sounds, the piece feels immensely like controlled chaos.

Overall, the evening showcased the artistically free and transformative nature of the body while in motion. Observing such creativity, even when a bit incomprehensible, is always a delight.

*Bios of company dancers are here: http://www.danceproject.org/group/company.html.