

The Oregonian

Dance review

Conduit's festival format a hit

The dance center ends its 10th birthday party with divergent looks forward, back

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

CATHERINE THOMAS

The Oregonian

Conduit danced, and that was just the beginning.

The Portland contemporary dance center culminated its weeklong "10 Years Running" birthday celebration over the weekend with a slew of performances that sparked some vital response: In a series of formal and informal exchanges, audiences didn't hesitate to say what they thought.

Friday's heady "Bam-Bam Performance Series" delivered a rapid-fire glimpse of Conduit's future: two separate programs of short pieces by 22 choreographers who've set or performed work at Conduit. From the absurd to the unnerving, the showcase crackled with the added tension of requiring its performers to navigate the transitions between wildly divergent work.

Saturday's intimate "Core/Work Performance" cast its gaze back in a stage-and-film retrospective by Conduit's founding dance makers, Gregg Bielemeier, Keith V. Goodman, Linda K. Johnson, Tere Mathern, Michael Menger and Mary Oslund.

As a barometer of audience allure, the critical mass of choreographic artistry on view over Conduit's celebration weekend told only half the story of what's required to draw the curious public to contemporary dance.

In an era that has jettisoned the arts from educational curricula, Conduit's success as an incubator site for contemporary dance also is a cautionary tale: As Johnson put it, but for the persuasive powers of a well-timed football metaphor during lease negotiations, Conduit's generous

headquarters on the fourth floor of downtown Portland's Pythian Building could well have been an office cubicle.

Conduit needs this festival format. Audiences see a lot of work in a short time, sample a wide swath of aesthetics, hone their tastes.

And they opine, during post-performance parties and open forums aimed at what Mathern called "demystifying" the dance-making process. That's a healthy sign for Mathern and Oslund, Conduit's current artistic directors.

A few highlights from two saturated nights of performance:

Johnson's opening salvo to the founders' showing -- an expansive oral history of the past decade delivered with the acerbic phrasing of Spalding Gray and the kinetic thrust of political commentary sketched on Johnson's tack-sharp body. On the heels of Johnson's chronicle, choreographer Goodman breaking his three-year hiatus from the stage with a trio that conjured the funk and hedonistic excess of a gritty Big Easy in its pulsing prime.

The terrifying: Dawn Joella Jackson's violent solo "Loss of Privileges," a fury of spasms and body slams to the floor that also managed to fix the eye to the detail of a finger investigating a waistband. Carla Mann and Jim McGinn in a grim "little humans" that evoked martial combat and the mounting body count of war. The extended silence that greeted Minh Tran's harrowing excerpt from "Forgotten Memories."

The Oregonian

The lyrical: Mike Barber's tragic clown, written on the landscape of his mutable face. McGinn's choreographic debut on the Conduit stage in his brilliant deconstruction of an awkward man-child. Jae Diego in Josie Moseley's "Amen," an operatic choreo-poem of dervishlike ecstasy that swept the realms of the sacred and then tilled baser soils. Catherine Evleshin and Vicente Elejarde's tender samba.

The outrageous: Amber Martin, "fresh from the bowels of New York City," channeling an indefatigably opportunistic but inexpressibly road-worn street diva. Linda Austin's surreal five-chapter narrative, in which our protagonist chases a porthole, whispers indecipherably to an imaginary friend whom she also plays, and becomes caught in a matrix of fishbowl lens and strobe-like scatter. Angelle Hebert's and Phillip Kraft's avant beatbox of retching, screaming distortion.

The nostalgic: Mathern's immaculate spiraling twists, the momentum that gathers power in her slow-to-blistering spins; Oslund in the fearless splay and slash of "Terrifying Grace"; Bielemeier's mercurial bodily squiggles in "Drop Waltz"; Menger's siren tango with an inflatable dinosaur.

Exciting dance is being made here. Conduit's imperative in charting the trajectory for its next decade is to leverage the community buzz they've generated, and pop the cork on a sequel to this movable feast of contemporary dance.

conduit
dance, inc