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Mathern's 'Elements' is electric, exhilarating

By CATHERINE THOMAS
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

The jarring orchestral thunderclap that opens "Earth," the first of Tere Mathern's four-part modern dance suite "Elements," is only the first clue that Mathern isn't interested in transforming the intimate Conduit studio into a universe of order and harmony – although her trademark architectural precision is everywhere in this evening-length dance.

But a brooding unrest reigns here, too, brought to stunning realization by a live sound score on instruments almost too numerous to list: glockenspiel, marimba, timpani, thunder sheets and gongs, played against electronica that conjures a dense symphonic soup of blood pulsing through veins, wind sucked into an acceleration tunnel, subterranean churns and inchoate grumbles.

Composer Joe Waters and percussionist Joel Bluestone put the chaos to the edge of Mathern's crisp kinetic control, and some of the most electrifying moments are when the pair's instrumental manipulations collide with Mathern's abstract, angular whirlwind of movement.

In "Earth," it's the moment when a crash of shotgun and shattered glass strikes the air at the exact moment dancers Robyn Conroy and Jae Diego slice the space with a pair of rapier roundhouse kicks. "Earth" is not a gentle settling but a furious beast, built in rigid, almost martial spins, legs grazing other bodies, the dancers twisting into a collapse as one. Necks open, heads launched back, they're caught in a clockworks spinning into retrograde, halted in half-arcs and thrust back to the melee.

Mathern's refusal to be literal is a boon to this work. The final, circling movements of "Earth," for instance, only allude to the inexorable pull of gravity; the audience is left to make its own connections. "Elements" is much more about creating a mood through pure movement and sound, and Mathern has found a kindred spirit in her musician-collaborators.

With no set to speak of and only scant use of lighting and costumes, the spotlight is on the movement. "Elements" is a work more than two years in the making, and the payoff is an ensemble – along with Conroy, Diego and Mathern, the dancers include Jennifer Hong-Berdine, Jim McGinn and Minh Tran – that has mastered Mathern's vigorous pacing and complex directional shifts and made it look silken.

In "Air," that translates to perfectly synchronized leaps caught mid-air, to the boom of a kettle drum that seems to signal danger on the ground. Diego's serenity in the midst of a

central trio, arms held wide, has the feel of a hover; she's inside the movement, not just marking it.

Conroy's sharp extensions are notable throughout, most memorably in "Fire," where they're set against the harsh cold-steel sound of a sword unsheathed, and where fasdt flashes of arms and legs flicker and recede in the section's brief solos. Mathern's surprise in this section is movement we haven't anticipated: a bump that sends another dancer moving, lunges that stomp the floor and suddenly switch back.



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THREE LIVE REVIEWS



ELEMENTS BY TERE MATHERN

Tere Mathern's two-plus years of preparation for elements is evident in the dense choreographic material. In this elemental work, the dance is broken into four sections: earth, air, fire, and water. Accompanied by the live Waters/Bluestone duo, elements is performed by dancers Robyn Conroy, Jae Diego, Jennifer Hong-Berdine, Jim McGinn, Minh Tran and Mathern herself. Compositionally, the underlying movement vocabulary behind elements includes curving, cutting arms, quick turns, asymmetrical lunges, leaps, lifts and kicks. Mathern's shifting patterning of her sextet along with simple light and costume changes creates a distinct feeling for each section: Earth's opposing duets, fire's flickering solos, the unison trios of air, and water's fluid quartet. Mathern and collaborating composer Joseph Waters expressed interest in exploring "the less noticed or cherished aspects of the elements." This is evident after the challenge of earth and air. The dancers wind down with a simple group revolution creating that particular still, electrically charged feeling in the air after a tornado has hit. Rather than a sophomore stab at theme, elements is an intelligent rendering of a motif so often explored in art, with very complex choreography. By the end of water, the dancers have been burning up energy on stage for over an hour. It's at this point that Mathern herself appears most fully in the movement. Surely she must be exhausted, but it doesn't register. Pushing through difficulty and resistance to create a moment of beauty is both consummate craft and an inspiration to the viewers. (Elizabeth Ward)

TERE MATHERN DANCE AT CONDUIT DANCE, 918 SW YAMHILL ST.,
4TH FLOOR, 221-5857. 8:30 PM THURSDAY-SATURDAY, MAY 20-22.
\$12 (STUDENTS/SENIORS/ARTISTS)-\$14 OTHERS