

The Oregonian

Dance review: A work ripped from the headlines

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Suddenly there she was: stopped, standing, staring at us. It happened several times, each time a different woman, but each time just as intriguing and somehow vaguely unsettling.

These little pauses were hardly a major motif of Tere Mathern's new contemporary dance piece "Show Me the Body," which premiered at Conduit on Friday night, but they were a telling bit of punctuation. Amid the vigorous movement of the six-person ensemble, occasionally one dancer would sweep to the front of the space and simply fix the audience with a firm, calm gaze for a long moment before rejoining the fray.

Seen simply as a brief repose, it was a striking contrast to the brittle physicality continuing behind this one dancer. But it was at the same time the most directly engaging action of all.

But what did it signify? A confrontation, a challenge? Perhaps, but however stern the stance, there was nothing aggressive about it. It felt more like a silent declaration of independence, "Don't tread on me" spoken in the subtlest of body language.

To state that a dance performance is about the body might seem obvious, but from Mathern, one of the city's most probing dance makers, that subject gets an uncommon twist. Though you might think the title has overtones of exhibitionism, "Show Me the Body" is a rough translation of the legal term habeas corpus

-- centuries old, but in the news of late in relation to Guantanamo Bay detainees and other controversies.

And Mathern's abstract-art response to the phrase isn't about the body as beautiful object but the body as source and setting for a person's identity and autonomy.

Taking advantage of a pleasantly warm summer evening, the show was prefaced by a trio of brief satellite performances nearby -- in the South Park Blocks, in front of the Mark O. Hatfield U.S. Courthouse, on top of a SmartPark garage. Though the courthouse component featured a separate cast of five dancers, performers for the main piece rushed back, along with audience members, for the action at Conduit.

There, at the back of the room, drummer/composer Tim DuRoche (an occasional contributor to The Oregonian) led a jazz quartet through a saxophone-focused score that was at once loose-limbed and stately, his percussive direction shifting readily from propulsive swing to expressionistic clatter.

Under the amber glow of Malina Rodriguez's lighting, Mathern and five other dancers -- Robyn Conroy, Jae Diego, Jim McGinn, Elizabeth Nalley and Laura Nash -- pursued similarly tricky rhythms. Like her Conduit co-director, Mary Oslund, Mathern shifts the tempo of her dancers' movements frequently. One moment, outstretched limbs are slicing swift lines through the air; the next, some slow, taut gesture has taken hold, such as one in which she cups her palms overhead, wrists cocked, then jerks her elbows down into a 90-degree angle, a move at once defiant and internal.

Often the movement seemed determined to resist the call of lyricism. Shapes were suggested, but then quickly collapsed in on themselves. Phrases began fluidly, then were sharply redirected or simply stopped before the expected resolution.

It was body language speaking of trying times.

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