

Jazz Dance – Then, Now and Always

By Barbara Angeline

For two powerful evenings, Jazz Choreography Enterprises, Inc. provided both a home base and a launching pad for jazz dance performers and choreographers at the company's "New York Jazz Choreography Project." An eclectic cornucopia of Africanist to contemporary jazz styles and fledgling to veteran creative works was presented for the pleasure of the passionate aficionados gathered at The Ailey Citigroup Theater on October 17 and 18, 2015.

Artistic Directors Marian Hyun and Merete Muenther purposefully curated the diverse program. "It's important to us that we give opportunities to new choreographers and veterans and showcase talented dancers of all ages and levels of experience. Whether it's classical, codified styles or edgy, fusion explorations, we try to support every type of jazz dance!" the excited Muenther exclaimed just before the show began.

Truer words were never spoken. The show's opener "Snap Out of It", choreographed by Fatima Logan grounded the program in the origins of American jazz dance. The sinuous freedom of movement through the spines of the dancers, their magnetic connection to the earth and the rhythmic call from the solo drummer all paid tribute to the African American roots of jazz dance. Individuality and community were simultaneously celebrated in the athletic ease of the performers.

Dances of many styles were represented. Historical tributes were paid via swing dance, lindy hop and theatrical jazz dances. Noteworthy, was "Why Don't You Do Right?" a theatrical jazz work, choreographed by Lisa Biagini. Years of training and artistry oozed out of dancer Renee Raiche's fingertips. When a simple arm gesture elicits emotionally charged admiration, you know you're watching a well-seasoned performer work her craft. And those legs!

Veteran choreographer Bob Boross smoothly expressed the aesthetic of the cool—essential to jazz dance—through the dynamics of his dancers' movements. In the piece "Big Man on Mulberry Street" classic, 1980s studio jazz was reborn via the youthful ease of Boross' dancers and the same-titled song by Billy Joel. The dancers layered their cool over magnificent, angular jazz lines, eloquently capturing both small, restrained articulations of limb and larger, charging escapes across the stage. It was stirring to see the camaraderie of the suave, all-male cast.

An August 2015 article, inquiring about the current state of jazz, asked: "Is This the End of Jazz Dance?" I reply to the author, definitively, "If you saw this concert, you would be reassured that jazz dance is alive and kicking!" Our next generation of jazz dancers and choreographers was expertly represented in the evenings' offerings. The teen dancers of The Jazz Unlimited Dance Ensemble skillfully scintillated in "Desperate Measures", choreographed by Jaclyn O'Rourke. The performers' technical ability was exceptional, but I was particularly impressed with their expertise in bottling up the inner tension—so foundational to jazz dance—and meting out doses according to the intent of the piece. Contemporary jazz is a label often given to kitchen sink dances rather than to new ideas of dance with jazz at their core. This jazz dance was expressive without being over-performed, dynamic without being violently attacked, and subtle without being ungenerously internal. The female dancers of the corps, led beautifully by their soloist, Charlotte Greenberg, are jazz dance artists with skills well beyond their years.

Young artistry also prevailed in the last dance work of the evening. "La Madrina (The Godmother)", choreographed by Darius Drooh, was a masterpiece. The explosive, athletic piece called back to the heritage of jazz dance origins while firmly writing its own chapter of contemporary jazz dance history. "La Madrina", all knowing and all-powerful, surveyed her minions. The impeccably placed length of

Khalia Campbell's legs alone was enough to establish her as the leader of the dance! Her impressive sensuality compelled compliance. The youthful ephebism of the cast carried them through powerful attacks, flights of athleticism and equally impactful floorwork. The driving, unrelenting rhythms of the music by Nathan Lanier, Woodkid and Bernard Herrmann pulsed through the bodies of the audience as each section of the piece took us on a journey through tribal altercations and internal struggles. From start to finish, the combination of physical skill and emotional commitment seemed to proclaim: "I've got a highly trained, fiercely strong, young body and I'm not afraid to use it!"

Any doubts about the current state of jazz dance and those who appreciate it were laid to rest. A chronicle of jazz dance played at the theater. Thanks to Jazz Choreography Enterprises, Inc., dancers and choreographers with decades of jazz flowing through their veins shared the program with young, eager artists who reverently look back before dancing jazz towards its future.

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