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Photo: Juan E. Contreras

Narrow Scope, Big Energy: Baltimore Dance Invitational

by Andrew Sargus Klein

The fifth iteration of the Baltimore Dance Invitational (BDI) presented performers and companies hailing primarily from Baltimore and New York. BDI, an annual adjudicated showcase of work by regional artists, is hosted by The Collective, a Baltimore-based dance company.

The evening was a full two hours, with 12 pieces in all, though there was not much variation in aesthetic and craft. A good deal of the work presented was rooted in contemporary and/or balletic modes that are pretty much par for the course, as were the moments of competition dance and hip hop. Big picture, that's disappointing. The earnest accessibility of these forms, with their emphasis on technique, form, and virtuosity (in the classically understood sense of these terms), gets cloying without much variation. A showcase of work from the mid-Atlantic region comes with the expectation of, well, variation.

Small picture, there was more than enough work to enjoy and celebrate at BDI. As hosts, The Collective kicked off the night with one of the more forward-looking pieces of the evening. "I Know I Can't Do This Forever," choreographed by Gianna Rodriguez, began with a dancer rolling across the stage, wrapping herself with a dramatically lit [battle rope](#). A second dancer held the other end of the rope and dragged her across the stage, passing the rope to a third dancer. A fourth dancer arrived and struggled for the rope, ending up completely tangled. The movement sequences were primarily grounded as the dancers used the rope as a source of tension and confinement. The work explored themes of connectivity—searching for or failing to find connectivity—as the dancers wrapped and unwrapped themselves in the rope, pulling at each other and letting go. Every time the rope hit the stage it sent up clouds of dust lit dramatically by the stage lights, a happy accident that added depth and a gentle, ephemeral quality to a work defined by such a heavy prop.

"Inner Palate," choreographed by Nicole Martinell of Deep Vision Dance Company, was a bridge of sorts between contemporary,

balletic, and modern explorations. Soloist Lia Karagianopoulos gave a technically stunning performance with a rich movement vocabulary, but there was little meaning making and narrative outside of the physical, which was given structure by a few key moments of slapping and clapping. At one point, there was almost-maniacal laughter juxtaposed against a precious score of balletic music-box tunes. But overall, this was a very physical piece, and within that lens it was wonderful.

Full Circle Dance Company presented “...skinned deep,” the most ambitious performance of the evening. The dancers were divided by race, with white bodies in long white tulle skirts and black bodies in tight black biketards with collars around their necks. The score included a selection of Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*, though it was difficult to follow the text on account of poor sound mixing. Regardless, the performance itself was a fascinating exploration of in-group dynamics, assimilation, and resistance as the black dancers joined in group work with the white dancers, then separated again. While not the cleanest of the works, I truly appreciated its timely message and the scale at which it achieved.

Mari Meade Dance Company’s “dialogue: a trio” was upbeat, light, and accessible. Three male dancers, each in suit and tie, were accompanied by a frantic [score of Indian scat singing](#). The score and the mimetic sequences brought some easy laughs in a light, modern, and frantic piece. The three men deftly worked together in a constant, high-tempo flow, grabbing and flinging each other with abandon. However, I was left with a lingering sense that the non-Western score was as much a comedic element as it was an artistic one, and I’m still thinking through questions of cultural appropriation, tact, and intent.

These questions were in part guided by the inclusion of a traditional Bharatanatyam performance. Mandala Arts & Culture Society’s solo, “Pushpanjali,” performed by Kiruthika Rathanaswami, was equal parts virtuosic and joyful. The first half was all legwork—Rathanaswami kept her arms, holding a flower, in front of her and quite still as her legs, adorned with bells to accentuate the rhythms and polyrhythms, worked and reworked a series of increasingly intricate combinations. At one point, the syncopation of bells and score was so dense that I wasn’t able to track either dancer or score. It was a brief, transcendent moment, and overall her performance was both subtle and fully expressive.

(A note here on the Gordon Center: Multiple performances were marred by woefully bad stage managing. Cues were off all night, the house lights came on in the middle of the Mandala solo, and at one point backstage lights were left on during a performance. The ushers continuously seated late patrons—even after the intermission—in a highly disruptive manner. The audience deserved better, and the performers deserve an apology.)

Each year, The Collective hosts what is called The Community Project, wherein a company member choreographs a large group work for dancers and dance enthusiasts alike from the greater community. The result is unfailingly wonderful, year after year. This year’s choreographer, Caitlin McAfee, made full use of the large number of dancers and the ample stage space to create a sprawling and energetic group work. The dancers formed a single-file line that snaked around the stage; smaller groups formed, each had its own game of sorts and then dissolved back into cohesion. I was particularly drawn in by the evident reality that everyone on stage was seriously enjoying themselves. The movement vocabulary was ultimately quite limited, but it was developed patiently, and the large scale (15 or so dancers) made for a crowded, momentous quality.

As far as BDI goes, this wasn’t its best year in terms of variation and experimentation. The curation was narrow and created a relatively homogenous evening. Nonetheless, there was much to enjoy. The audience stayed till the very end, cheering on each performance. There was even a moment, in the final duet of the evening, (“Between Us,” by URBAN/TRIBE) where the crowd cheered a particularly acrobatic lift, and it felt like the spirit of the Olympics pervaded the venue. The good, warm-hearted feeling was a perfect note to bring the evening to a close.

*My partner, Lynne Price, is a member of The Collective.

The Baltimore Dance Invitational, [The Gordon Center](#), February 15.

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