

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: David DeSilva

LEVYdance's Romp: Fun = Exhausting and Exhilarating

by Christina Gesualdi

I entered Temple's Conwell Dance Theater to see about 60 chairs dispersed across the stage with the patterned logic of a geometric ant farm. A student usher warmly directed me to a seat in a corner cluster. She encouraged me to push my bag "all the way" underneath my chair and seemed privy to and excited about the dance event that was about to unfold before, between, through, under, and around us.

Ben Levy was excited too. Looking like a bright eyed exec. of a forward-thinking marketing firm, the ring leader of LEVYdance stood up on a chair and delivered the pre-show announcement. I expected the usual rigamarole, but through the distortion of a hand-held megaphone, Ben caught me off guard. He encouraged us to leave our cell phones on (sans ringers) so that we could take pictures or videos of the piece, and to post them to LEVYdance's facebook page. His final directive: "Have Fun!!!!!" I realized that the show had already begun.

Romp is indeed a quick-paced 45 minutes of fun. In the first section, all twelve dancers dash on stage to the blaring brass of a Balkan tune. At times, they plant their shaking bodies smack dab in front of me or wriggle and roll by my feet. They execute jazzy arm flicks and speedy level changes perfectly on beat. Meanwhile the onstage audience performs as well: we smile, tap our feet, and crane our necks to catch as much action as possible. The nine exuberant Temple student dancers slow down. Our attention zooms in on LEVYdance's performers: Melodie Casta, Benjamin Levy, and Scott Marlowe. The three gesture and interact, and thankfully, as soon as I sense a glimmer of trite narrative (love triangle), it playfully evaporates into the second section of the piece.

As a sweet love song by The Platters plays, the dancers engage in a slow dance with (yes...) every audience member in turn, relocating each new-found friend's seat to the perimeter. The audience's participation mixes awkwardness with sincerity, spawning endearing moments. One audience member takes control of his slow dance by elegantly spinning Marlowe twice before taking his new seat. A

real life couple feels compelled to stand back up and slow dance. The magic of intimacy and spontaneity instantly deflates when a dancer politely gestures to them to sit down. I sense that the show (and the fun) must go on. The piece keeps rolling. On to section three.

Now that we sit in a rectangle around the space, we are positioned to watch Casta, Levy, and Marlowe really move. Trios, duets, and solos unfold. I enjoy digesting the movement vocabulary of this San Francisco-based company; it is athletic, exciting, and refreshing. Their legs sweep seamlessly through space; their actions are propelled by momentum and rhythmic precision. In a duet between Casta and Levy the two braid into each other; they find places to fit, share weight, and then appear weightless as they cantilever themselves into the surrounding space. Marlowe's solo is perhaps the most memorable. He makes direct eye contact with the audience, without a confrontational or pretentious air. His unaffected manner gives the piece simplicity. He calmly reaches around to touch his tail bone with one hand and the back of his head with the other, and then moves the vertebrae in between like a creature from some other world. But the worlds in *Romp* are constantly a-changing.

Our seats and viewpoints morph yet again, this time with a greater sense of urgency. The dancers come speeding in from off stage carrying extra long cafeteria tables. Like fine banquet hosts they graciously position us around the tables. With a long view down to the other end, I can get used to this new vantage point. And then - cue: lights to black and fog machines on. This is no regular feast. Time slows down a bit as the space fills up with smoke. Lit by only cascading beams of light from hand-held projectors, dancers make sensual solo trajectories down the tables. The illuminated smoke swirls, seeming to have a mysterious logic of its own, in an "oooh-ahhh" moment.

Like opening a new tab to check your facebook profile, *Romp* diverts itself one more time before it concludes. Balkan music matches the intensity of the piece's final moments. The whole ensemble of 12 works the crowd one last time as the dancers sit next to us, pretend to tell us secrets, and bang on the tables. They courageously romp. We eat it up. A table in the center of the space is set for Casta, Levy, and Marlowe. Marlowe flips 2 plates and holds them to his chest. Levy slides across the table and slings himself under and over it. Casta stands up on a chair, makes it tip, and bravely leaps off. We can't take our eyes off of this sweaty crew of risk-takers and are impressed by the dedication of their student counterparts. And as the lights go out, we remember that fun is equally exhausting and exhilarating.

Romp, LEVYdance, presented by Temple Dance in partnership with Philadelphia Dance Projects, Conwell Dance Theater, February 10th. No further performances.

By Christina Gesualdi

February 23, 2012