



## Stage review: Philadanco's "Risky Business" a stunner

Bill Chenevert - December 15, 2014

Witnessing Philadanco at the Perelman Theater inside the Kimmel Center felt like a night of firsts: my first time seeing the legendary, 45-year-old company, my first time in the gorgeous cocoon-like Perelman, and my first experience with fancy dance in Philly where audience members clap and applaud mid-number. That is to say, PA Ballet, BalletX and Koresh Dance Company have a certain sense of ultra-seriousness that seemed absent on Friday night. And if audience members couldn't contain a "YES!" or "WOW!" before their bow for applause, there's no shade from me. This company is a Philadelphia treasure for a reason: They slayed.

*Risky Business* was performed as a collection, really: two numbers before an intermission and three as a second act, including a simple yet stunning short piece called "Ghettoscape with Ladder," set to Natalie Cole and starring guest artist Deborah Manning St. Charles. All of them are completely disparate but no less powerful, sewn and pulled together by an awe-inspiringly capable cast of dancers.

"Pulse" set it off with a bang. Daniel Ezralow's choreography is inspired by and utilizes a sliding technique, where dancers glide mysteriously effortlessly across the stage with running bursts of momentum followed by long, graceful slides across the stage. The mystery is in the physics: *How are they doing this?* Is it a salted or powdered stage? Frictionless socks or invisible pads on the bottom of their feet? No matter. It was completely mesmerizing. And I can't say enough about Jackson Lowell's costumes. They were gorgeous and complimented their wearers well, even adding to the dance: not-quite sheer with a metallic, sparkly patina; red in some light and blue in others; perfectly tailored and genderless with similar structured shapes for both sexes and by no means a distraction. Set to David Lang's original music, this modern contemporary piece was an incredible manifestation of what the visceral joy of watching incredible dance can capture.

A dance for five, "White Dragon," followed with a vaguely far-east feel, mostly because of the Glenn Branca score and Perucho Vails' kimono-meets-sumo costuming. Branca's score felt punctuated by staggered, staccato pings of gong-like percussion that reminded me of the showdown scene between O-Ren Ishii and the Bride in *Kill Bill Vol. 1*: taut, violent, loaded with tension and dramatically spare.

I will admit to a little suspicion before "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner," prompted primarily by a rich, dense explanation of the piece in the program. But Ray Mercer did a great job crafting choreography that uses the concept of a dinner table (and dinner party) to explore energy dynamics between guests, partners, family and friends. Adryan Moorefield and Janine Beckles were a completely dazzling pair. They stole this number, exhibiting an easy physical chemistry that can only be captured with hard work *and* personal trust. Beckles left from the table a number of times, and Moorefield caught her with such effortless (but, really, Moorefield looks like he's 6'3" and 200 pounds of pure power). Though I wouldn't say a very clear narrative or story presents itself, it was a delight to see what Mercer could do with a sturdy, maybe four-or-five-foot-tall table somehow anchored to the stage.

Manning St. Charles was arresting as the only female in the five-person "Ghettoscape." But what really smacked you over the head was, if you read her bio, that she's no spring chicken. She joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1981, so I believe it's safe to say that she's older than 40. Still, she hasn't lost any of her flexibility, physical ability or

grace. With flawless splits and extensions, she's pretty much an inspiration in terms of what our bodies are capable of in this lifetime.

"Latched" was primarily wonderful because of its score: choreographer Christopher L. Huggins brilliantly employs SOHN, a British-born electronic music composer and songwriter whose 4AD-issued *Tremors* proves a revelatory inspiration. "Vibration of tremors that shook long ago / Tear holes in the fabric of all that we know," from the title track, becomes a refrain. A *pas de six*, this one explores ways in which we latch on to other people, bodies, personalities—so it's full of power struggles and physically-rigorous efforts both to bond and break.

Overall, I was struck by the innovative lighting and costuming of the night. Both felt fresh and modern, especially how different lighting designers effectively used both sides of the stage. Nothing wasn't tight on this night. A few pieces I preferred over others; with some, I struggled to find the intention and narrative hinted at in program notes, but when the dancing is so stunningly strong and the overall visual presentation is flaw free, who cares? Philadanco is this brilliant melting pot of modern, contemporary, jazz, ballet and lyrical dance, and we're lucky Joan Myers Brown's company is Philly's, too.

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