

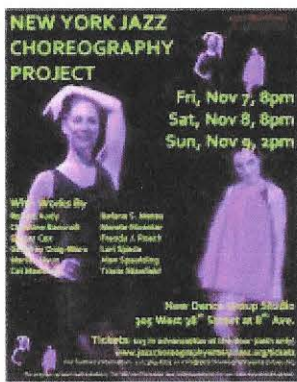
Jazz Dance E-News

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Vol.1, #3

November 2008

Bob Boross - Review The NY Jazz Dance Choreography Project



Performances that highlight choreographic creativity in jazz dance are few and far between, particularly in New York City. I can remember some evenings of jazz dance presented in the 1990s through the sponsorship of Lynn Simonson and DanceSpace, but since then, a concerted effort to present and promote jazz dance has been notably absent.

And that is why it's nice to report that Jazz Choreography Enterprises, Inc, headed by President Marian Hyun, has adopted the mission of presenting the live performance of jazz dance choreography in New York. Three successful sampler concerts have been presented under the name NY Jazz Choreography Project at the New Dance Group Arts Center in NYC, most recently in three sold out shows from November 7-9, 2008. The concerts are designed to showcase the work of choreographers of various abilities and experience, and this concert fulfilled this aspect of JCE's mission. Jazz dance, in its many styles and offshoots, were seen – some stunning in their creativity and others not so. But overall, the showing was a tribute to the dedication of the art of jazz dance by the organizers, choreographers, and dancers.

It seems that any discussion of jazz dance must first stem from a definition of just what jazz dance is – or what the speaker means when using the term. Jazz as the vernacular, jazz as the hybrid with ballet and modern dance that still reflects jazz values, and now jazz as a hybrid with contemporary lyrical and hip hop music that reflects less of the core jazz values of dancing in plie, isolation, dynamic impulse, movement emanating from the hips, soul feeling, relaxation, etc. This adjudicated concert adopted an eclectic approach, accepting pieces from many divergent jazz approaches. It's possible to say that from the purest angle, there was little of the traditional jazz approach. This discussion is one that is ongoing in the jazz world (as evidenced in the report of Patty Karagozian from the recent Fifth International Jazz Dance Forum in Paris), and is also one that JCE is addressing. Rather than haggle over the semantics of jazz dance, I'll limit my remarks to the choreographic approaches seen in this concert.

The work on the concert could be separated into four categories – conceptual, musical theater, lyrical, and novelty. As Hyun elaborated on in her pre-show speech, the mission of the group is to present choreographers of varying levels of experience, and some categories seemed to have more of the share of less experienced choreographic work than others. As in the novelty group, Christine Bancroft's holiday-themed "Nuts About Bells" and Cat Maturuk's hip hop/acro dance "Decibel" (yet another dance inspired by listening to an iPod) mainly displayed fun feelings. More elaborately structured, an excerpt from "3 More 3's" by Geoffrey Doig-Marx was a whimsical take on undercover detectives (featuring the luminescent smile of Tricia Arenson), while Merete Muentzer's "Trinity Undercover" favored a Charlie's Angels theme that displayed more attention to choreographic complexity and movement invention. Less successful was Bancroft's second piece, "Chica Chica Boom Chic," as was Maturuk's second piece, the techno-inspired "Freeway."

Lyrical jazz styles prevailed, and here the limitations of this particular approach were once again seen. Lori Marie Spada's two pieces "These Arms of Mine" and "Silence" rehashed the overwrought pleadings of the popular competition lyrical dance form. Banafa S. Matea, with "Anyanu Speaks," found more success in a solo tastefully danced by Amanda Gavan, but the second half of the piece did not build upon the promise of its initial phrasing.

My definition of the musical theatre category is wide here, to include ballroom and the vernacular. Marian Hyun's "Change Partners...and Then?" featured accomplished lyrical partnering in the Astaire/Rogers format, while Alan Spaulding's "My Walking Stick," danced by Spaulding and Hyun, identified more closely than any piece in the concert with an authentic expression of jazz dance. Performed to the Irving Berlin song as sung by Louis Armstrong and the Mills Brothers, the dancers adopted the playful cane twirling personalities of the 1930s erudite hipster, not quite on the acrobatic level of the Berry Brothers but replete with relaxed shagging steps and brightly expressive faces. This category was further explored in a solo choreographed by noted jazz and tap teacher Bob Audy, to the overture from *Sweet Charity*. An exercise in the authentic and varied styles of classic musical theatre dance, the piece was elegantly performed by Isabel Glasser Confino. The only limiting factor was the structure of the music's overture format – by changing often from one melody and tempo to another, the piece was not able to develop a dramatic build, and the sum of the styles was not greater than its individual parts.

Although not purely a musical theatre style, it was nice to see "Jazz Project" choreographed by Francis J. Roach in the style of his mentor, the great Luigi. Masterfully danced by three devotees, the piece was simultaneously a pure example of the Luigi jazz method, and a jazz dance history lesson (the piece would have been most comfortably at home in an early 1960s club act). Although the dancers' appearance was dated compared to today's jazz dance world (danced in skin tight spandex flared jazz pants), the piece nevertheless revealed an oft-missing attention to style and fluidity.

The greatest exploration of the choreographic voice within jazz dance was seen in the work of Ginger Cox and Tracie Stanfield. Cox presented two pieces of contrasting approaches. The first, "Manouche," was a deconstruction of jazz vocabulary for a quartet and a table. Cox's inventive skill in creating solos and duets within her group piece, while utilizing the table in many positions, was engrossing. The atmospheric and definitely non-jazz score by Joel Futterman/Ike Levin Trio combined with the segmented movements to create an absorbing, eerie feeling. Cox's second piece, "Fashion Funk," revealed a similar yet more amusing creativity, as her repeat quartet of dancers explored issues of female appearance through comic depictions of daily wardrobe choices.

The most stylistically dominant piece on the concert was Tracie Stanfield's "Ave de Mayo." Here the choreographer made use of a sensual tango flavored lyrical dance form, performed strikingly by a dynamic quartet of female dancers in red dresses. The object of attention was a black shawl the dancers either loved, hated, desired, or reviled. Stanfield's movement vocabulary was notable for moving beyond the typical of lyrical dance, and melding to it the slow, tension of the tango expression. The piece was powerful in its ability to hold the viewer's attention through the dancer's smaller, more interiorly felt movements, rather than by outward athletic display. The dancers' skill in releasing the formidable intensity of powerful emotions with the lightest of touch made for a magnetic, dynamic, and well conceived piece – one that demonstrated an innovative voice in expanding the jazz dance form.

Overall, the question of "what is jazz?" arises. This question is important, yet its very stickiness threatens to destroy jazz dance's current state and fragment the field. It is admirable that Jazz Choreography Enterprises has chosen to see the presentation of work as the primary need in today's jazz dance world, even more important than carving out a definition and then strictly defending its borders. JCE is devoted to showing all aspects and levels of jazz dance. Let's hope that in the future all of the choreographers will continue to work and improve in their craft, and those who demonstrated superior skills will have the opportunity to further explore their excellent work in larger and longer formats. Jazz Choreography Enterprises is committed to the art of jazz dance choreography in concerts and in educational workshops, and their singular presence in New York City is welcomed.

For more information on Jazz Choreography Enterprises, visit their website at: www.jazzchoreographyenterprises.org.

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