

THE BACKSTAGE BEAT®

West Coast Dance Visits Atlanta

By Amy Howton on February 11, 2014



On February 7 and 8, the Ferst Center for the Arts at Georgia Tech gave Atlanta two experimental evenings of dance featuring San Francisco's Push Dance Company. When ticket-holders arrived, they bypassed the theatre seating and were ushered onto the stage, which was ringed with chairs. Seating the audience onstage with the dancers gave theatre-goers the opportunity to be a part of the action to see the flying sweat, watch the muscles work, and communicate closely with performers dancing only a foot or two away. Artistic Director Raissa Simpson commented that she likes to bring dance to the people. "Dance is often so far away from the audience," she commented, pointing to the empty house.

Most of the time, we get companies from the East Coast, so having a West Coast ensemble in our town is a treat. The company of six dancers is young and enthusiastic. They do not have stereotypical dancer bodies or a company standard; each dancer is built very differently and has an individual way of moving. The choreographer uses their individuality to advantage. Although there were three men and three women dancing in Atlanta, the dances were rarely symmetrical. The dancers are technically strong, but they do not indulge in pyrotechnics. The movement is simple and grounded. The choreography draws from various dance styles and fuses them into a unique language used consistently throughout the six works we saw February 8. The approximately 70 people in the audience were seated on 3 sides of the stage; depending where each person was seated, the performance was a different one. It was a new take on "chance dance." It would be interesting to revisit the performance from a different seat.

The concert opened with "In the Same Place," a series of solo dances performed in center stage. The piece was based on thematic variations that continued across the segments, with a repetitive musical score underpinning the movement. Each of the solos faced a different portion of the audience, a choreographic device used specifically for this performance and this space. The company often performs installations in unusual locations for dance. Next, the dancers will be in a three-story art museum, utilizing its stairways and performing at a distance from the audience. The choreography will have to be re-shaped for the new arena. While all live performance art is unique, the dance we saw will absolutely never be the same again.



My favorite piece was "Bitter Melon," a work that explores the parallels between the experiences of the Filipino community during the Philippine-American War and the African-American community in the 1927 Great Flood of Mississippi. The dancers, clothed in blue, began by creating visual waves. At times the whole ensemble moved

together, at other times each dancer was seeking out his or her own interpretation of the events. This was the evening's most polished piece, and, I thought, the most intentional.

There were no sets, although the company does use them for other pieces. Costuming was minimal. We were so close we could see body piercings under shirts and tiny wrinkles in hems. Occasionally the costumes distracted from the movement: I sometimes caught myself following the buckle on the back of a vest, a loose end of a belt, or the edge of a pair of shorts under a tunic. But most of the time, they allowed a clear view of the bodies and did not seem to interfere with the dancers' abilities to move.

None of the pieces had a true conclusion. Instead, they trailed off into darkness or stillness. Even the music seemed to just fade rather than achieving closure. At first, the lack of endings bothered me, but, as the evening progressed, I began to see this device as a way to allow the dance to stay with the audience. We were permitted to choose our own ending, in a way. We could determine that the dance was finished at the point the music and lights faded, or we could imagine it continuing in the way one might design an ending to a dream after waking up in the middle. Combined with the improvisational elements present in each dance, this contrived to make the dances seem like living entities instead of historical reproductions.

I have only two real complaints about dance concerts at the Ferst Center. There are never enough of them. And they are rarely well enough attended. Come on, Atlanta! Pilobolus will be returning to the Ferst Center in April, and the company is always thrilling.