

Review: ‘Black Grace’

By Clare Croft | Tuesday, February 23, 2010

Unison, the portions of a dance piece where dancers move in perfect synchronicity, can be a powerful choreographic tool.

This is not news to legions of choreographers, but perhaps no company harnesses unison’s power better than Black Grace. The New Zealand-based company, at UT’s Bass Concert Hall Saturday, pushes unison to another level. The dancers inject such intensity into dancing together they achieve oxymoronic status—they are so unified they seem to move with more than unison.



The company’s choreography, by artistic director and company founder Neil Ieremia, invites such unity through sophisticated, sustained simplicity. “Deep Far” employed cyclical repetition to entrancing effect. Four dancers — Tupua Tigafua, David Williams, Abby Crowther, and Zoe Watkins — seamlessly slid around and across a circle. The piece’s layered repetition made the closing moment astonishing. The four dancers interlaced their bodies. Each couple locked their legs together and opened their chests and arms to the soft, still sound of a storm’s first drops. It seemed as though the repeated movement allowed the dancers to open their bodies, not just their mouths, to the falling rain.

Ieremia functioned as the show’s emcee, explaining from center stage how he combines Pacific Islander culture with modern dance to create Black Grace’s repertory. The informative interludes likely made the program more accessible for an audience unfamiliar with Pacific Islander culture. Ieremia’s tone, which bordered on stand-up comedy, undercut some of his more potent political statements.

The collection of six pieces displayed Black Grace’s range of cultural hybridity. *Lausae* (Tapulu Tele) depicted the Samoan tattooing tradition. Men spread themselves across three large stones as other dancers mimed the wiping of blood: a depiction of the intense, full-bodied tattooing process. Screams and the sounds of tapping echoed from the accompanying score.

Such obvious references (at least obvious after Ieremia’s introduction) could be too simple, but they build into a large theatrical and kinetic vision. For much of the piece, the dancers fly across the stage—a choreographic pattern repeated to even more excitement in “Gathering Clouds,” which Ieremia choreographed in response to an economist’s racist publications about Pacific Islanders in New Zealand.

The giant rocks in “Lausaue,” New Zealand’s famous river stones, were one of several stunning design choices. The lighting design for all the pieces (uncredited in the program) shaped large group dancing. At the end of “Pati Pati,” the ensemble moved slowly. Light carved shapes across the dancers’ bare shoulders. Then, the dancers turned toward each other, their repeated reaches skyward seemingly drawing bright yellow light into the center of the circle. As the dancers strode backwards into the wings, the light expanded. This company leaves a trace of light behind them wherever they appear.

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