

A Vibrant Present (and Presence): DCDC and Evidence perform at ADF

The American Dance Festival's season theme, *Something New, Something Treasured*, was clearly captured by the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company (DCDC) and Ronald K. Brown's company Evidence in a shared program at the Durham Performing Arts Center. Each company presented two works, a mix of classic and newer works, all performed with fervor and dedication. The physicality of the body was front and center, prompting me to think about how meaning is embedded in the body itself; how the body is held and used and trained, how it speaks of dance's history, and its own, and points to its future.

DCDC opened the program with Donald McKayle's classic "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder" (1959), which depicts the harsh life of working on a chain gang. Set to a collection of traditional chain gang songs, the dance is tightly structured, and follows both the rhythm and emotional content of the music. Muscles tense and bound, the six men move together crisply. Their bodies are sledgehammers, powerful and weighted; swung away, but brought down with sharp control and precision. In their exhaustion, a vision of a woman appears to them, alternately a flirtatious sweetheart, a worried mother, and a caring wife. The dancers communicate their passion, anger, perseverance, and despair with a larger-than-life expressivity, leaving no room for ambiguity.

"Vespers" (1986), by Ulysses Dove, was captivating. The first movement--mostly a solo, danced by veteran DCDC dancer Sheri "Sparkle" Williams--is a study in composure and confinement. We see Williams perched on the edge of a chair, knees pressed tightly together, hands resting on knees; she is in a pool of light, but surrounded by the darkness. She stands on the chair, jumps down, points up and out, her body--and composure--nearly collapsing before being caught and held again. In the second movement, Williams' image is multiplied by six, as five other women--also in black dresses and buns--join her to dash between a line of six chairs against the wings and a field of chairs scattered on the other side of the stage. Mikel Rouse's electronic percussion score drums and ticks, a heartbeat gone wild, as the six women wrestle with a tightly controlled grief. In solos and pairs, the women erupt into furious spins, arrow-sharp leaps, and violent backbends, always rushing with scurrying runs back to their chairs, sinking slowly as they sit. As one, they roll onto the floor, placing their pointed toes on the seat of the chair, stretching their skirts to cover their knees. Or, in a striking scene, they snap their heads back in a sharp canon, flinging their heads back and forward in a measured rhythm. In the final moments, the persistent music stops as they are engaged in this motion, so that we can hear their sharp intake of breath as they throw their heads back, a gasping chorus that sounds a lot like weeping.

Ronald K. Brown's company Evidence also presented two works: "Grace," originally created for the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater in 1999, and a new work, "On Earth Together," set to a compilation of Stevie Wonder songs. Both are characterized by Brown's distinctive movement style, a rich blend of West African and contemporary dance, with more than a hint of hip-hop

stylings. The dancers somehow balance a loose, casual attitude--wrists and arms tossed away--with a meticulous exactness. Even the tiniest suggestion of a gesture, a twist of the hips, a flick of an elbow, does not get lost. Despite the depth of the movement vocabulary, the dances themselves feel light on form and meaning. "On Earth Together," which seems to employ a more developed choreographic structure than "Grace," begins to investigate the boundaries and intersections between people--sometimes friendly and relaxed, sometimes underlaid with hesitation and unnamed pain. "Grace," on the other hand, offers no such clues, beyond a distinctly reverent attitude in its opening and closing sections; the middle of the work is a blur of shifting combinations of dancers and dance phrases. Perhaps there is something to be made of the non-stop, energetic pace of the work; the passion and precision with which the dancers give themselves over to the movement seems almost religious.