

Dance performance brilliant, invigorating

Marc Shulgold, Rocky Mountain News

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Three engrossing works, 10 brilliant performers, one endlessly imaginative choreographer.

If an evening of contemporary dance could offer more, we'd happily drive anywhere to watch it. Saturday's appearance by Doug Varone and Dancers (and yes, Varone *did* appear) served as a welcome reminder of how tremendously talented this dance-maker has been through the years.

Until this weekend, Denver audiences had only seen his work in, of all things, opera: He's directed two stagings by Opera Colorado but, curiously, had never brought his company to town.

For an ecstatic audience, the wait was worth it. Three major works showcased Varone's fluid choreographic style as they displayed the remarkable consistency of his troupe.

Not to brush aside the other two pieces, but *Boats Leaving* (from 2006) emerged as the evening's most stunning achievement. For starters, Varone utilized the powerfully spiritual, unendingly beautiful *Te Deum* of Arvo Pärt as soundtrack while bathing the stage in soft lighting and, on occasion, heavy smoke.

Yet even if the dancing were done in silence on a brightly lit stage, the impact would have been the same. The ensemble interacted in dramatically contrasting ways - tender and supportive one minute, isolated and fearful the next. It became evident that the departing boats of the title were bound for the afterlife. At last, each dancer made that final exit - some willingly, some with resistance. The effect was unforgettable.

Boats proved quite a change from the opening work of two years earlier, *Castles*. Where the former offered numerous moments of repose and freeze-frame poses, *Castles* unfolded as an eye-catching exercise in perpetual motion - propelled by the infectious three-four pulse of Prokofiev's *Waltz Suite*. Particularly effective were the two unconventional pas de deux for Natalie Desch and Ryan Corrison, and for John Beasant III and Daniel Charon. The latter duet subtly and tastefully explored the relationship of two men in endlessly fascinating ways.

Those two works offered a night-and-day contrast - but Varone had yet another side of his choreographic art to show us. In the concluding *Lux* (created last year to Philip Glass' similarly titled *The Light*).

Saturday's audience watched a slowly unfolding display of virtuosic dancing that grew increasingly faster as the music gained in momentum. While a small, moonlike disc projected on the rear curtain rose above the stage, the energy and controlled mayhem seemed to increase to the point of mind-boggling, blurring speed - never losing its focus or its discipline.

Here, Varone joined the proceedings - shaking a mean leg for a guy who's probably twice the age of his dancers, kicking things off with a wonderful solo. As in the earlier pieces, his effervescent choreography showed a level of musicality rarely found in contemporary dance.

Couple that keen ear and glowing imagination with the extraordinary athleticism of the dancers, and you end up with one spectacular, invigorating night of dance.

Doug Varone and Dancers

• **Grade:** A

• **When and where:** Saturday in Gates Concert Hall

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