

Sunday, February 7, 2010

Dance Review: STRIPPED with Doug Varone and Dancers at the 92nd Street Y

It is a rare occasion that the audience gets to watch a company showcase works that are in the making. STRIPPED is just that; stripped of lighting, costumes, programs, and a formal theater. The company showcases works both old and new, unfinished works wearing rehearsal clothes and dancing in a performance space where half the audience sits floor level with the dancers. If you have ever sat so close in a rehearsal with dancers whirling past and stopping within an inch of your nose, then you know what a gem of an opportunity this is. Varone says that his mind is weighted on the physical and gestured, so he opens the showcase with two finished pieces from his repertoire. These pieces are the inspiration for his newer works later in the evening.

The first piece, *RISE*, gives Varone the challenge of exploring another way to create dance. New York audiences are seeing it for the first time since 2004 when it last performed here. The dance begins with the long-limbed Julia Burrer, who graces the space around her with smooth transitions from one horizontal shifting leg movement to a shoulder roll leading into the next step. Never once does she falter or pause to break the confident flow of twists and jumps. The rest of the dancers enter individually or coupled. Movement is loose, thrown, and daring. Each dancer has a plié so deep it seems they could drop their center of gravity down to the basement before bringing it back up in an instant to leap through the air. My focus often goes to Natalie Desch because her landings are so malleable that she makes me question my preconceived notion of the hard dance floor. Rolling through her feet toe to heel, heel to toe, or even diagonally, the floor seemingly takes on a gooey texture. I've found that this requires a lot of ankle strength and maintenance on the lower legs since I struggle with such landing versatility myself (it's a trend in contemporary works and can also be seen in the way Batsheva dancers use their feet and ankles).

There are instant WOW moments that make you not want to blink so as not to miss any more. The spatial awareness that the company has as a whole is more powerful than the awareness that most of us even have with the back of our own hand. There are so many weaving and winding moments in the group choreography, all requiring skilled dancers that work well together.

The second piece of the evening is *HOME*, a dramatic storytelling piece that distills movement to the bare minimum. Varone describes it as a "crystallization of time." Two former company members perform it for us. The piece is about love between a man and a woman, yet not the happily-ever-after moments. The choreography gets to the root of gestures expressing love or discontent to an audience full of young and old, single and married. A powerful moment happens when the two dancers lie beside each other and the man, embracing her, moves his hand to hold hers. This simple gesture does me in. If HOME could be made into a film with the same performers, there would be Oscar nominations for sure. This dance is perfect for an intimate theater space where you can see the facial expressions and gestured details.

What follows are excerpts in the making from Varone's new piece *CHAPTERS FROM BROKEN NOVELS*. Each section, based on a quote or something Varone heard in passing, is entirely different from the next. These works can be presented together as a full-length evening show or standing alone separately. Natalie Desch's solo, based on a quote from "The Hours" is haunting

and serious. Then, a comedic solo, based on something heard in passing, showcases the quirky virtuosity of Erin Owen. Now, imagine the scope of comedy in this piece knowing that the quote the piece is based on is this: “What do you really think is going on when a child is locked in the bathroom for an hour and the water is running and he says he’s doing nothing.”

The final piece of the evening, created merely a few rehearsals in advance just for this edition of STRIPPED, is a staging of *Da Tempeste* from Handels’s “Gulio Cesare.” The piece features Metropolitan Opera star Elizabeth Futral with pianist Kevin Murphy. This joyful and upbeat piece fits the music very well, using musical accents to guide comedic timing strewn throughout. Definitely a great way to end the show.

Varone’s style is unique yet clearly lovable and accessible. His choreographic genius shows true creativity and fine-tuning skills from years of practice. He definitely speaks through movement and his dancers are great interpreters.

The fifth edition of STRIPPED performs April 23rd, 8pm at the same place. There is limited seating so buy your tickets in advance because this show is not to be missed! For more details about the next STRIPPED and the company, go to www.DougVaroneAndDancers.org.



iDANZ Critix Corner

Official Dance Review by [Jessica Shahinian](#)

Performance: Stripped

Choreographer: Doug Varone

Venue: Buittenweiser Hall, 92nd Street Y

Show Date: January 29th, 2010