

Dance pieces combine in powerful alchemy

By Mark Kanny

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Three strong pieces combined to form **an exemplary evening of dance** -- touching, exuberant and thought-provoking -- on Saturday night when Pittsburgh Dance Council presented **Doug Varone and Dancers**.

Varone, 52, who formed his troupe in 1986, is a choreographer who can achieve a symbiotic relationship between dance and music. His good ears make it understandable that he also has enjoyed success staging operas, including at America's premiere opera house, the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

All three pieces seen Saturday at the Byham Theater, Downtown, are from the current decade. The show opened with the earliest, "**Tomorrow**," which dates from 2000. Songs of bittersweet poise by Reynaldo Hahn were a perfect choice for a ballet about self-frustrating attempts at partnering. Varone's steps and gestures conveyed hesitancy, doubt and self-preoccupation in various combinations of the six dancers.

"**Lux**" was written in 2006 to "The Light" by American composer Philip Glass. **It is a physically exuberant, and in fact, breathtaking, expression of the energy of feeling free.** Eddie Taketa set the tone right from the start, fairly gobbling up the space in which he performed.

If the dancers in "Tomorrow" inhabit an over-sophisticated world in shaded tints that brings little joy, all in "Lux" is powerful primary colors and uncomplicated emotion. Another contrast was in the way Varone used his scores. In "Tomorrow," he was sensitive to the melodic shape and feeling. In "Lux," Varone used changes in harmony for structure.

After intermission, Varone's newest work gave viewers plenty to think about. "**Alchemy**" premiered only two months ago. It is a meditation in movement about the fate of Wall Street Journal writer Daniel Pearl, who was killed by terrorists in Pakistan shortly after 9/11. Varone ran with the broadened perspective of composer Steve Reich in his "Daniel Variations," which alternates movements based on the book of Daniel in the Bible with words of Daniel Pearl.

The vocabulary included obvious references to captivity -- such as seeing four of the dancers on their knees with their hands behind their necks -- but "Alchemy" is non-narrative. Eternal conflicts between anger and hope, aggression and healing, are explored at length. **Varone says his title is about creating something good out of something bad, and in "Alchemy" his optimism is expressed with persuasive nuance.**

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