



Snappy Dance Theater celebrates its 10th anniversary with the world premiere of "String Beings." (Michele McDonald/Globe Staff)

DANCE REVIEW

Mesmerizing 'String' explores the ties that bind

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By Thea Singer, Globe Correspondent | June 1, 2007

Snappy Dance Theater's "String Beings" takes disparate elements -- edgy and acrobatic movement, computer-generated animations, clanging and heartspun new music -- and unites them to form not so much a mixture but a compound: a chemically bonded substance with qualities of light, shadow, weight, and texture (both tactile and aural) all its own. The world premiere could blow your mind's eye open.

Does the dance, the highlight of the company's 10th-anniversary concert at the Boston Center for the Arts, succeed for its entire 45-minute run? Not quite. Some movement sequences get tedious, as artistic director Martha Mason struggles to fill the music. Certain devices, such as a hanging rectangular sheet that's flung and tangled and used to cast silhouettes, can become overwrought.

But bottom line, this collaboration between Mason, new-media artist Jonathan Bachrach, and composer Michael Rodach is a mesmerizing, brave experiment-cum-creation myth. It launches you into a new world where a raised arm begets a giant Giacometti-like string figure projected on a scrim, and a simple run leaves echoes like traces of foamy surf on sand.

"String Beings" is about the myriad ties that bind us. And its seven dancers, mostly in duets and trios, use various forms of string -- harnesses, ropes, elastic cord on which Bonnie Duncan bounces, stretches, and hangs -- to bring the point home. But literal meaning doesn't matter here. Images do. What drives "String Beings" are the human and technological connections: the metaphorical triangle formed when the movement meets the camera projections meets the sound, the latter often in a physical form as Boston Symphony Orchestra first violinist Lucia Lin appears onstage playing haunting melodies while, say, balancing atop a dancer's shoulders or extending like a ship's figurehead from his thighs.

Indeed, the movement in and of itself isn't all that interesting: A dancer rubs a partner's head, two engage in a pony tail-grabbing tussle, three clutch themselves as if bound by straitjackets or knock together like a line of rag dolls. What's a marvel is the interaction between the physical phrases and the technology. Bachrach, an MIT scientist, has designed computer programs that manipulate live video footage of the dancers, who execute their flops from the waist and spinning lifts behind a scrim hanging from ceiling to floor at the edge of the stage. He then projects the animated images onto the scrim, layering live and virtual performance. One program spews endlessly morphing clogs of squiggles that track the dancers' shifting shapes. Zings of light splinter into New Year's sparklers, all nerve endings and fire. Another creates Jackson Pollock-like blobs and swirls, drips and sprays -- constellations connected by white-hot lines. A third echoes and echoes again a dancer's pulls and reaches, the afterimages cascading like silently falling dominos.

Juxtaposed against the grounded, athletic dancers is violinist Lin, a fragile counterpoint to their heft and exuberance.

Mason has integrated Lin visually into the piece with a lyrical nod and a wink. You're riveted as she sits on the raised feet of a supine dancer, who, remarkably, pushes into a shoulder stand as she calmly continues to play. Another man lifts her and places her atop his shoulders before slipping her over his head and planting her feet on his thighs. Still, her bowing never ceases. I've seen musicians integrated into choreography before, but never this fluidly, and never with Lin's grace. Electric guitarist Michael Bierylo, also at points onstage, doesn't fare so well. He seemed more an appendage than a necessity.

The program, copresented by CRASHarts, also includes five short older works: "Four Fourths" (2006), "Limning Twilight" (1997), "Odd Egg Out" (1997), "Au Lait" (2006), and "Lumen" (2005). It repeats in 12 more performances -- a run essentially unheard of for a Boston modern-dance troupe. But even one viewing will keep you alert: The images thrum like neon. ■

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